[*Note to readers: this is an excerpt from* Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students. More information here.]

Chapter 2
Conversations

My topic this chapter, conversations, concerns the subjects that are raised among students and teachers when they talk about how art is taught. It is a kind of finish to the histories of the first chapter, because it is a way of thinking about what current instruction looks like. It might have been possible to write this chapter by drawing on the literature of art education, but I find that literature does not put the issues the way that they occur in classrooms. Rather than saying art education is out of touch, or claiming that day-to-day studio talk has logical precedence over the discipline of art education, I would rather say art education is a different language, one that is aimed at objective knowledge, research, policy review, and curricular development. Art education speaks the language of statistics, of "purpose," "method," "evidence" and "conclusion." Sometimes, to be sure, the art education literature is intimately tied to the conversations that take place in the studios and classrooms, and certainly what I will be saying here is more formal than what is usually said over lunch: but in general, I think that it is important to try to organize and express the ordinary informal conversations of people trying to learn and teach art. By adopting the language of the social sciences, art education enables itself to ask and answer different kinds of questions. When teachers or students sit around a table and talk, they rarely pursue one topic right to its conclusion. The very open-endedness of our normal conversations is centrally important, and I want to acknowledge that here. At the same time, I want to show what might happen if the conversations are pushed a little—if they are kept on one track a bit longer than usual.

Our informal ways of talking, I will argue, are ways of *not* coming to terms with a number of fundamental difficulties. It's polite not to press too hard on an issue, since a lunchtime conversation or a studio chat is not supposed to be a formal debate, and it is also a way of acknowledging that the issues are not easily resolved. This is a healthy attitude to difficult problems—one that the journals of art education often cannot accommodate—and it allows students and teachers to make continuous adjustments to their sense of what art and art instruction are all about. The issues I will be considering in this chapter are "our issues," things that we air, and their irresolution is part and parcel of the experience of teaching art. Wittgenstein

might say that the incomplete nature of the problems is an illusion, caused by seeing them from the point of view of philosophy, and that art world issues *are* truncated issues—that they do not exist as fully worked-out philosophic positions.

It is widely assumed that extensive debates on some issues—such as whether or not political art can work to change society—would be possible, and sometimes desirable, but would end in irresolution. I agree that such subjects can't be solved once and for all, and that they are better treated informally or in parts and pieces: but I think the kind of irresolution that would result from a concerted, prolonged effort to elucidate the subjects would be different from the kind of pluralist lack of concord that might be expected. Instead of a conflict of interpretations—in which one group would argue in favor of political art, and another would oppose it—I think art world issues would end in conflicts that are *internal to each point of view*. Most of the topics discussed in the course of art instruction become entangled in self-contradiction if they are pressed much beyond the places they're usually left.

My purpose is not to show some underlying weakness in art world discourse. I want to show how the level, intensity, and duration of our accustomed conversations provides whatever sense of purpose that we need to carry on—to continue to think that teaching or learning art is a minimally coherent thing to do. By pressing the issues a little unnaturally in this chapter, I want to try to see art instruction as a very different activity, one that sometimes lacks even the minimal or contingent sense that would allow students to speak of learning, or teachers to speak of teaching, at all. This leads on naturally to more pessimistic conclusions, which I'll be introducing in later chapters.

A surprisingly small number of themes come up in discussions about studio art instruction. Those themes gather, I think, around three basic uncertainties: the meaning of academic freedom, the question of what is teachable, and the difference between visual art and other disciplines. I will start with some themes that connect with the previous chapter: the nature of academic art, the survival of the "system of the arts," and the recent question of the core curriculum. Then I will turn to the general question of the place of the art school in society, the issue of teaching mediocre art, and what kinds of art can and cannot be taught in art schools and departments. The chapter closes with a consideration of two more specific issues: the problem of the relation between decoration and fine art, and the social and gender issues involved in drawing from life.

Is Contemporary Art Instruction Academic?

Since the 1960's, the art market has developed an interest in older academic art, and even third-rate student works from the nineteenth century are now admired and exhibited. The people

who like academic art are almost exclusively well-to-do patrons, gallery owners, and curators on the margins of the "serious" avant-garde art world. Journalists love revivals of academic painting because it relieves them of the burden of comtemporary art, and assures them that kitsch and the avant-garde are happily interchangeable. In these debates and misunderstandings (which Clement Greenberg diagnosed over a half-century ago) there is general agreement that academicism isn't a problem in current studio art instruction. (In America, journalists continue to poke fun at sudio art instruction because it isn't grounded in academic values.) There is not much sign of old academic art in *Artforum, Parkett, Flash Art,* or other contemporary journals, and it is usually taken for granted that current art instruction is not academic. But could that conclusion be a little too sanguine? Is there a sense in which contemporary art is academic?

It depends on how "academic" is defined. One study of Baroque and nineteenth-century painting reduces the concept of academic art to four ideas: (1) nature is defective, and must be improved upon; (2) compositions should be inventive, but unified and harmoniously grouped; (3) there is a science of gesture and physiognomy to help artists communicate emotions; and (4) artists should research dress, ornament, religious narrative and myth so that their scenes are appropriate. That list, which is culled from the histories I surveyed in chapter 1, certainly doesn't seem to fit contemporary art instruction.

Other writers have argued that academicism is still around, because the word "academic" can mean anything that "tends to solidify, gain momentum, perpetuate itself and eventually become rigid." If "academic" is whatever is entrenched, stereotyped or unoriginal, then most art movements do become academic. This is what is meant by saying that Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, or Minimalism had academic phases. There's a lot of modern academic art in this sense, but it isn't quite what I am looking for because it pertains to the successors and imitators of earlier styles, and not so much to contemporary instruction.

It has also been suggested that the huge provincial would-be avant-garde is academic. Small art schools and rural liberal arts colleges inevitably lag behind major centers, and inevitably what they produce are patly echoes and imitations of cutting-edge art. This has been true since the beginnings of Western civilization, and it is still true today, though it has gotten harder to recognize as the time lag between the provinces and the centers has narrowed. (The time lag also isn't much publicized or studied: after all, it hurts civic pride to be told that your town or college only makes pallid, slightly out-of-date copies of works done in large cities.) Much of modern art, which is about art and artmaking, is academic in this sense because most people, even in big cities, lag a little behind a minority of innovators. (That's another dynamic Greenberg worked out.) The only problem with defining "academic" as "provincial" is that it is vague and universal, and it doesn't have much to say about the varieties of actual practice.

There are more senses to the word "academic," which apply a little better to what happens in studio art classes. For one thing, academies have a tendency to reimagine the past in a particular way. (Recall the Carracci's rejection of their recent past in favor of the High Renaissance.) Academies emphasize some art and marginalize other art, so that it seems that art develops in a line, leading from the past straight to the present. They think art progresses, an idea modernist historians tend to vigorously reject. Contemporary artists wouldn't usually see themselves as academic in this sense: after all, the art world is full of unclassifiable interests and movements, and they don't progress in a linear fashion from Lascaux to the latest Biennial. Naïve art, advertising, junk, kitsch, and outsider art are valued as much as the Old Masters or the canonical sequence of modernism that runs from Cézanne through Picasso and Pollock. It would almost seem as if contemporary art instruction is as far from academic, in this sense of the word, as it's possible to get. But the art made in colleges and art schools continues to be primarily fine art, much more closely tied to Cézanne than, say, Aboriginal bark painting or the "starving artist" work at the local Holiday Inn. Students may take their forms and subjects often come from popular culture, but their strategies still derive largely from European and American Masters. Though we do not often find reasons to admit it, a great deal of what is made in studio classes is made possible by, and expressed in, the traditions of post-Renaissance Western art. To the extent that students and instructors remain tied to a the canonical Western past, then at least that one thread of academicism is still alive, and our art is academic.

So I think contemporary art instruction is academic in the sense that despite all its wild experimentation, it still owes final allegiance to the canonical sequences of artists who were also valued by the academics of past centuries. (A good example is graffitti, which seems to be detached from the academy and from the art world, but depends on a whole battery of very academic devices: chiaroscuro, perspective, glazing, composition, and even lettering—which as I mentioned was taught in turn of the century American art academies.) Art instruction is also academic in the sense that it depends on the idea that art is a systematic, intellectual pursuit. Renaissance and Baroque academies were based on the theory that theory is important; and although people would no longer say that art has a single coherent theory, it is treated as an intellectual pursuit. MFA programs teach students to deploy a formidable range of interpretive methods, and art criticism cannot be written these days without some acquaintance with feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, queer theory, or postcolonial theory. In comparison to what Piero della Francesca or even Vasari could say about their work, we are monsters of eloquence, and that is testimony to a decidedly academic strain.

A third reason to think academism is still with us is the fact that so many artists have advanced degrees. Artists, like composers, poets, and novelists, are by and large people who have been to college. Many have graduate degrees. It's nearly impossible to get a job teaching art

in a college without an MFA; compare that to the fact that at the end of the nineteenth century, Harvard had 189 professors, of which only 19 had a PhD. This may be the strongest sense in which studio art instruction is an academic pursuit, though I think it is also the least meaningful. The four- and six-year programs that lead to the MFA have little resemblance to the Baroque academies, and the MFA itself is a mid-twentieth century invention. It is unclear whether or not it makes sense to say current art departments are "academic," if that means "like Baroque academies." But certainly MFA programs—and the handful of PhD programs in visual arts and poetry—are academic institutions.

I've listed six meanings of "academic," of which three apply reasonably well to current art instruction. The fourth and the fifth—academic as an unnoticed connection to the Old Master past, and academic as the privileging of theory—are especially problematic. To some critics, "academically taught art has in fact been defeated," but it may be prudent be careful about such claims. A teacher of mine once said that all art is academic, and all that students are taught is "a description of their prison bars." Perhaps the question should really be, "What is *not* academic in modern art?" That's not an unanswerable question, but it cannot be addressed until students and teachers stop resisting the notion that academism is still a strong part of what happens in the classroom.

What is the Relationship Between the Visual Arts?

In a small college, the art department might offer only painting, ceramics, and photography, and in that case the arts wouldn't need to be classified or arranged—there would simply be three choices. In a large art school it becomes necessary to impose some sort of order on the dozens of departments and media. In past centuries the issue was solved by organizing the arts into more and less fundamental media. Drawing typically came first, because it was understood as the basis of other media; but there were many *systems of the arts,* some of which we have seen in chapter 1.

These days people reject such systems. According to one view, there should be no organization whatsoever. Painting should just be on a list of media, in alphabetical order somewhere between Marble and Stained Glass. When dozens of media are taught side by side, they are usually just listed—each one separate and independent of the others. So ceramics, wood, bronze, iron, and aluminum sculpture could all be separate departments in an art school. Borrowing a term used in evolutionary theory, this way of thinking can be called *splitting*. The opposite is *lumping:* put ceramics, aluminum, iron, wood, and bronze together in the Sculpture Department. Of course lumping immediately leads to problems. Should ceramics really be under Sculpture? Is holography 2-D because holograms are pictures, or 3-D because they have strong spatial illusion, or 4-D because they invite viewers to walk around them? Is holography a kind of

picturemaking like painting or photography, or is it ultimately just a kind of installation art? Art schools get more disorganized every time a new department is added. From a student's point of view, the disorganization can be both inspiring and confusing. Small art departments aren't any less confusing, because their relatively small number of classes don't add up to any coherent picture of artmaking.

Today it seems that the number of arts and media are indeterminate. By and large, art schools and departments remain disorganized because postmodern pedagogy has made it seem as if systems of the arts are irrelevant or even pernicious. That has not always been so. Ever since the seven medieval liberal arts, there have been attempts to organize and number the arts, and the habit of thinking up systems still guides people's thinking. In contemporary art schools media-based departments (Sculpture, Photography) mingle with idea- or discipline-based departments (Visual Studies, Criticism, Liberal Arts), making it seem as if the whole idea of classifying the media is outmoded. But it isn't: remnants of the idea that the arts comprise a system still haunt instructors and guide administrators. The arts have become productively disorganized, but they aren't free of all organization. The problem of the system of the arts is relevant because it's the great excluded topic wherever a large faculty has to get along together, pretending everyone else's Department or specialty is just equal and different from their own.

The system of the arts has gone through a number of variations. In the late middle ages, Renaissance, and earlier Baroque, what are now called the "fine arts" were mixed in with what are now called crafts, mechanical arts, and sciences. For example, one seventeenth-century author proposed this scheme for the arts:

Eloquence
Poetry
Music
Architecture
Painting
Sculpture
Optics
Mechanics.

It wasn't until the middle of the eighteenth century that the fine arts were at last separated from crafts and sciences. One important early formulation separated arts that are strictly for pleasure from those that have a use (and the author added a third category for arts that were both pleasureful and useful):

Arts whose purpose is pleasure
- Music
- Poetry
- Painting
- Sculpture
- Gesture or dance

Arts whose purpose is both pleasure and use
- Eloquence
- Architecture.

The eighteenth century codified the idea that there are exactly five fine arts:

- Painting
- Sculpture
- Architecture
- Music
- Poetry.

Once these five seemed graven in stone; now it is difficult to name them from memory. Sometimes other arts were added to this scheme, augmenting but not erasing it:

- Painting
- Sculpture
- Architecture
- Music
- Poetry
- Gardening, including layout, arboriculture, and fountains
- Engraving
- Stucco and the decorative arts
- Military strategy
- Dance and theater
- Opera
- Prose literature.

And occasionally there have been fewer divisions: the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris was divided into two parts, one for architecture and the other for painting and sculpture together.

In the late twentieth century, the five fine arts were overwhelmed by a tide of new entries:

Performance
Video
Film
Photography
Fiber
Weaving
Silkscreen
Ceramics
Interior architecture
Architecture
Industrial design
Fashion
Artists' books
Printmaking
Kinetic sculpture
Computing
Neon
Holography.

And, as I mentioned, the mix is enriched by "academic" departments based on ideas or disciplines imported from universities:

Liberal Arts
Art History
Critical Writing
Visual Studies
Visual Theory
Anthropology
Computer science
Languages.

(Recently it's even become common to find "transdisciplinary" or interdisicplinary initiatives, concentrations, committees, and majors, making the mixtures even more impure. I'm going to concentrate on studio departments, not academic or technical or support departments, because I think the illusion that all fields are potentially equal is rooted in media.)

Studio departments continue to proliferate. All the recent non-studio additions to art curricula only obscure the problem. Now it's taken for granted that art schools will have separate Departments of Film and Photography, but few art schools taught those subjects before the Second World War. When silkscreen was first taught in the 1930's, it was intended for commercial uses (it was a cost-efficient way to make napkins, tablecloths, wallpaper, and toys). Performance Art, as a department, is largely an innovation of the last decade of the twentieth century, though some departments were started in the 1970s. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I teach, did not offer courses in abstract art until 1944. Outside of large cities and outside the West, the profusion of media is still held at bay by the five fine arts. The Academy of Fine Art in Sofia, Bulgaria, still does not teach abstract painting, though it has abstract painters on its faculty. Computer-assisted art is virtually unknown in the Academy in Bucharest, Romania (on a visit in 1999, I saw three old computers in operation). At the School of the Art Institute, we have over one hundred graphics workstations with commercial and proprietary software. Economics and geography influence the growth of media in every college and school—but wherever the budget allows it, new media grow like weeds with no form or limit.

The list of media could be much longer, but not, I think, too much longer. Let's say you are studying at a school with a Neon Art Depatment, and you notice that some students are making wall pieces à la Dan Flavin, and others are using neon in their video installations and performances. Could the Neon Art Department be split into several departments? Perhaps there could be a Department of Free-Standing Neon, a Department of Flat Neon, and a Department of Installation Art Neon. Would the instruction be significantly different in each? If so, then there might be good reason to divide the department. In many studio art departments painting could be divided into any of its styles, so that you could major in all-over painting or hard-edged abstraction. (Or, in an art school there would be a Department of All-Over Painting and a Department of Hard-Edged Abstraction.) This kind of fantasy is useful for showing just how many possibilities each medium seems to have: it is not an infinite number, and in some cases it is not a much greater number than the number of departments that already exist.

Some of the many media I listed above can be lumped together. Performance art goes with theater, and fiber and ceramics seem to have a natural affinity with sculpture. Installation art is a new multiple category that covers several entries on the list. The fact that it's at least conceivable that ceramics goes with sculpture, or performance with theater, shows that we retain

a sense of underlying order—a pale ghost of the Baroque system of the arts. I think a modern system of the arts would look something like this—

Fine arts
- a) Visual arts
  - Painting
  - Sculpture
  - Architecture
  - Film
- b) Music
- c) Writing
  - Poetry
  - Prose

—although we really don't spend much time thinking about it. Contemporary artists and critics don't care very much what is counted as an art and what isn't, and they are likely to accept anything (billboards, miniature golf) as a visual art. If someone says ceramics really belongs under the rubric of sculpture, no one is likely to object except the faculty members who teach sculpture (who might feel their turf is being invaded). Basically, when it comes to ordering the arts, no one seems to care.

The pluralist notion is divided between two alternatives that I think are nearly equally unsupportable. On the one hand, people say that there's no sense in dwelling on classificaitons of the arts, because what's important is how they are used, not what they are. In that view the arts are just separate because they happen to use different technologies, so it is sensible to house them in different rooms and buildings. What matters is entirely different: meaning, production, context, intention, politics. Systems are just outmoded and narrow ways of conceiving the arts. Other people—just as strongly pluralist—say that each medium is its own message, unique and incomparable. In that view ever art, every department, is importan in its own way, and comparisons are unfair or incoherent.

I think there's truth to both versions of pluralism, but both go on the assumption that the centuries-old impetus to compare and classify the arts has simply vanished. Even today students in the visual arts tend not to know about the histories of their "sister arts." That in itself is evidence for the lingering effect of the system of the fine arts, and it's especially telling when it comes to the *kinds* of information students have about other arts. In my experience music students are not taught much about contemporary visual art, and few painters and sculptors that I have taught have known names like Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Elliott Carter—

among the most famous late twentieth-century composers. Fewer still recognize the name Paul Celan, arguably the greatest poet of the second half of the century. Composers such as Carter and poets such as Celan work with forms that are disjunct, dissonant, and fragmentary, much like the forms of some contemporary art. Yet the contemporary art world remains more connected to popular music: far more art students know the current bands than the current composers (with a few exceptions, like Phillip Glass). Naturally it is difficult to sustain an argument at this level of generality, but I think that by and large, students who study painting know contemporary popular music, and those who study poetry know older painting. That's odd simply because songwriters like Madonna are in many ways more strongly tied to late Romantic theater than to contemporary visual arts culture. There are separate subcultures for painting, poetry, and music—a deeply entrenched remnant of the system of the arts.

There are other signs that we are living among the invisible ruins of the five fine arts. Curricula are still organized as if music is separate from painting and poetry. Despite the fact that visual artists work with sound (in video, in film, and in sound installations) music departments are still separate from studio art departments. Architecture, too, is often a separate department or even a separate school. The five fine arts are still largely distinct: painting and sculpture are usually together, but music, architecture, and poetry are off in the Music, Architecture, and English Departments.

Certainly artists mix and match indiscriminately, so much so that it is said multimedia art is a principal direction of postmodernism. But the postmodernist's fascination with multimedia art is the exception that proves the rule. Students go from department to department in an art school, but they still have to leave one department to get to another: that is, the classifications remain in place. Only a few departments, such as Time Arts, Media Studies, or Art and Technology, are interdisciplinary from the outset. Universities try to solve this problem by allowing interdisciplinary majors and PhD dissertations, but it's up to the individual students to build their own bridges.

It follows that the current way of thinking about the arts is self-contradictory, since we believe both in systems and in mobile or unorganized lists of co-equal arts. The principal dangers of not acknowledging our investment in classifications, and the reasons why I think that the systems of the arts is an important subject, are the two limit-cases of pluralism I mentioned earlier. Either we come to think that the very idea of talking about differences between departments is a relic, and tha it should be replaced by more radical transdisicplinary concepts of making and thinking, or we say that each department has its own "language," its own way of dealing with its particular medium. The problem with the first is that is smears historically grounded differences in the name of a theory that has no historical grip—a theory that tends to weaken as the traditional media continue on their largely separate paths.

The problem with the second approach—in which its said that each medium has its own language—is that it may be based on withsful thinking. It's tempting to think that any imaginable medium has its own language, but I suspect there are only a few basic ways of thinking about media. In the nineteenth century, photographs were hard to reproduce and so publishers who needed illustrations had photographs copied as wood engravings. (The lines of the engravings were easier to print than the grain of the photographs.) So the first generations of wood engravers did not pay attention to their medium. Instead they were thinking of photography and trying to reproduce the look of photographs. In the twentieth century, wood engraving "came into its own," and now it has a "look," meaning recognizable conventions that spring from the quality of the ink, the boxwood, and the specialized wood engraver's tools. Early wood engraving therefore had photography as its *ideal method*.

Many other media originally borrowed their ideal methods from pre-existing media, until artists discovered their medium's specific "language" or "intrinsic potential." The ideal method of early etching was engraving, because etchers based their techniques on the known conventions of engraving. The ideal method of Japanese woodblock was ink drawing, and the ideal method of Michelangelo's early pen drawing was marble sculpting. My point is that this is the normal state of things: there are only a few ideal methods, and all the dozens of techniques look to them for guidance. Now that there are so many media, artists can be seduced into thinking that each medium is independent of its predecessors, when it may take decades for that to happen.

Teachers may turn their backs on their medium's ideal methods, in order to concentrate on what seems unique and fruitful about their chosen medium. Yet in doing so, they lose sight of thei medium's ideal methods, and they don't get taught. Students can end up in departments that are intellectually cut off from their originating ideas. If you're a student, this means it is good to be careful that the right people are advising you. In a Department of Computer Graphics, it is very likely that the ideal method is still painting or photography. Photoshop and other software tools descend directly from styles and strategies that were originally applied to painting, drawing, and photography. The palettes and the filters were all inspired by effects in other media. Though it is often said that drawing on a computer is different from drawing by hand, it is far from clear what that difference might be. Most of the things that happen differently on computers are simply a matter of greater efficiency and ease. David Hockney noted that it is possible to cover a blue field with a red stroke on a computer, and have the blue entirely effaced. But the same is possible in oil or tempera, if you have enough time and patience. Large rectangular pixels are a trademark of computer illustration, but they are arranged and printed in ways that depend on the history of painting, and especially cubist painting. It is not easy, I think, to point to something in computers that is different from painting in kind rather than in degree. Hence it makes sense to have a painter or a photographer advise you, because computer graphics' ideal

method is still very much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century painting. Otherwise you may get only technical advice about Photoshop or your paticular computer configuration.

The same holds true in holography, video, and other new media. A student in my fictional Department of Flat Neon might be best off choosing her advisor from the Department of Hard-Edge Abstraction, since her neon work might lean on that kind of painting for its strategies. Some media are on the verge of developing their own ideal methods: screenprinting and ceramics come to mind, because each has some strategies and interpretive methods that belong to it alone, and each also borrows heavily from the aesthetics of neighboring media. Other media are so new that virtually everything they do, except the technical components, is borrowed without acknowledgment from other media. (Here I think of virtual reality and cyberspace, which are almost entirely dependent on earlier histories of immersion and bodily dispersion. They are as entrancing as they are pedagogically narrow, because teachers have to concentrate almost exclusively on technical issues.) From the teacher's standpoint, the paucity of ideal methods means that all departments are not created equal, and that some thought should be given to the very old-fashioned sounding idea of putting painting, drawing, sculpture, and architecture instructors on every student's critique panels and advisory boards. In this way especially, the five fine arts are still with us.

I think there are only a half-dozen ideal methods, perhaps fewer, and they determine the number of ways artists can deal with objects. Hence all departments are not created equal, nor is every medium a message. And given that, it pays to think seriously about the systems of the arts, and decide how you think they are related. Is drawing really fundamental? Do 3-D arts depend on 2-D arts? Should ceramics be in the Sculpture Department? Those are questions for each student and teacher to decide.

The Core Curriculum Problem

What should be taught in an art school aside from visual arts? Do artists need a core curriculum of classics, like the courses student have to take in large universities? Or is visual art important enough, and different enough, to warrant four years of undergraduate study? The same questions can be asked of students who are majoring in studio art in college: How many non-art courses should they take? What beside art is necessary?

It is helpful to compare this issue with the core curriculum debates current in liberal arts colleges. Core literacy problems were not new to the second half of the twentieth century, although they were often presented as if they were. They came from concepts of academic freedom that were current in German universities in the late nineteenth century. "Freedom of learning" and "freedom of teaching" were the mottos of the day, because German educators wanted to replace classicizing and medievalizing courses with more "modern," Romantic

curricula. The German reforms influenced American universities, which in turn influenced American art schools. Beginning in the 1960s, core curriculum debates have focused on ethnocentrism and gender issues. For example, some people hold that Plato and Aristotle are dispensable, that Western white males have been given their say, and alternate traditions need to be put in their place. The fact that faculty members concerned with the core curriculum in universities spend much of their time talking about gender and political issues is only the most recent form of revisionism.

The core curriculum debate suffers somewhat from a lack of attention to its history, but it is also less coherent than it might be since it does not draw on several underlying philosophic issues. One is the difference between absolutist and relativist theories of education. The former holds that education should be the same for all people—or all Western people—and the latter that eduation needs to be relative to each decade or social group. The Great Books program at the University of Chicago was an example of the absolutist approach. Robert Maynard Hutchins, one of its developers, thought that all universities should have three "faculties": metaphysics, social science, and natural science. Metaphysics comprised many of the subjects of the medieval *trivium:* logic, dialectic, grammar, and mathematics (meaning principally Euclid), with the addition of the Great Books. Anything that did not fit in with that scheme was to be banished to "technical schools." Hutchins's scheme was absolutist, and it was also a return to the middle ages, which provided Hutchins with his best model of institutionalized learning.

Relativist learning, in contrast, would seek to revise the curriculum every so often in order to keep it responsive to the surrounding culture. Democritus, Isocrates, or Cicero, orators who addressed issues specific to their cultures, might be replaced by Vaclav Havel, Malcolm X, or Martin Luther King, who addressed issues specific to ours. It might be argued that art schools are among the least absolutist of institutions of higher learning, and their lack of absolutist theory should be food for thought. Curricula in art schools are radically relativist: classes are changed as quickly as possible, to reflect each change in the art world's fashions. What is missing in art schools and studio classes is the conversation between relativism and absolutism that energizes so many universities.

A second issue that can help clarify core curriculum debates is what the philosopher John Dewey called "the case of Child v. Curriculum": whether or not the students' interests should determine the methods and content of the instruction. Educators who take the Child's side try to adjust teaching at all levels in order to let children be children and adolescents be adolescents. From the Curriculum's point of view it is a question of when educators should listen to students' demands. The same argument (without Dewey's title) has also been applied to gender difference: it has been urged that teachers should listen to their female students in order to learn what kind of instruction suits them best.

The case of Child v. Curriculum especially relevant to art schools, because teachers sometimes scramble to adjust what is taught to fit the special requirements of art students. A large fraction of full-time art students is dislexic, and in my experience many believe in right-brain/left-brain differences, despite growing scientific evidence against the popularized versions of that idea. Should such students be taught differently? Should they have a version of art history or liberal arts tailored to their needs? In general, the Child wins out in art schools, and the Curriculum is adjusted to fit. That makes sense if the school's purpose is to help inspire students to make new art, but it doesn't make sense if interesting art depends on an awareness of the deeper history or wider culture that is found, ideally, in the core curriculum. It's not an easy question to decide. In the last decade of the twentieth century, many students felt they couldn't make interesting art without knowing how to make virtual environments or do real-time video editing. Where I teach there was high demand for courses on Lacan, film theory, and Photoshop. A few people went on teaching pre-modern art, literature, and philosophy. Were those teachers right, or should they have followed the Child's lead and abandoned deeper history in favor of the subjects the students felt they needed?

These two principles—absolutism versus relativism, and the Child v. the Curriculum, can help clarify some disagreements about the core curriculum. The debate in art schools is arguably more complex than in liberal arts colleges, since since are three distinct senses in which the concept of core curriculum applies to studio art. The first, which I have already introduced, concerns the question of which classics ought to be read by art students. Should artists know about Dante's "visual imagination," or about written works that are "nonvisual," such as Joyce's *Ulysses* or Aristotle's *Poetics?* The second pertains to which classics of visual art ought to be seen by art students: do art students need Michelangelo or Picasso? And the third asks which techniques and media should count as classics: that is, which procedures, concepts and materials are indispensable to a basic education as an artist? I'll consider required reading, seeing, and making in reverse order.

The idea that some techniques are indispensable is the commonest concern of core curricula in studio art. The "canon of techniques" usually takes the form of a first-year program or a series of introductory courses with titles such as "Concepts of Space and Light." As we saw in considering the Bauhaus first-year curriculum, there is little agreement about the content or the purpose of such programs. But this kind of core is fundamentally different from the other two. It does not teach "classics" in any sense: instead it is more like grammar. A college English department does not teach spelling or grammar. Instead it teaches what can be accomplished once the basics are mastered—that is, everything from Parmenides to Pynchon. So although it is important for teachers and students to discuss which techniques are essential, the problems of a core curriculum of techniques or media isn't on a par with the other two kinds of core curricula

(those pertaining to texts and artworks). Both philosophically and in terms of teaching the choice of essential media comes before the choices of classics, visual or otherwise.

The second sense of core curriculum, concerning which "classics" of visual art should be seen, is no less problematic. At first it may seem that studio art instruction has entirely abandoned the classics of visual art. Studio art teachers don't introduce Praxiteles, Raphael and Rembrandt in their elementary studio classes. The architecture and interior design departments no longer begin with the five orders of architecture (Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite). The terms and achievements of Greco-Roman sculpture are largely absent from introductory classes. If there is a visual core curriculum at all it is the art history survey, which is usually required in colleges and art schools. But that is a curious kind of core, since it is not about indispensable classics but about everything that can be packed into one year's course. The survey implies that an aggregate of people and works is indispensable. It's not a matter of choosing bell hooks over Plato, or *Tom Sawyer* over *Paradise Lost,* but of trying to mention as many works as possible. The large art history survey books are like E. D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy" dictionaries, which also have thousands of entries. So the question of the canon never really comes up. No one in studio art has to worry whether there is a short list of essential works, "masterpieces" that must be in all students' imaginations in order for them to be able to create. In this sense, studio art instruction is weirdly free of the problem of the core curriculum.

By comparison with other departments in a university, studio art is astonishingly free of interest in its essential cultural heritage. English and Comparative Literature departments teach the latest literary theory, but they also offer courses in the standard classics—Chaucer, Ariosto, Cervantes, Milton, Keats. Even architecture departments teach the classics—Vitruvius, Alberti, Serlio, Palladio, and so on. There is a similarity between the way studio art instructors deal with Old Masters and the way that Mendeleev and Mendel are brought into instrodutory chemistry and biology courses: the Old Masters are treated as venerable curiosities or sidelights. The newer science textbooks mention history in "boxes" (that is, typographically isolated paragraphs), and the main story winds its way past with a brief nod in their direction. In studio art instruction, the Old Masters—Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo, Raphael, Bernini, Tiepolo, and so forth—may be mentioned in passing, but only inconsistently and only as illustrations. Studio art is not centered on the Old Masters any more than physics is centered on Galileo or Newton, or mathematics on Euler and Gauss. But of course the parallel to science isn't exact. Within the humanities, no departments are as radical, as far removed from the common concern with classics, as studio departments.

So much for the core curriculum of essential techniques, and the core curriculum of essential visual works. There remains the original sense of "core curriculum": the *written* material that might be essential for every person's education. In this respect it is instructive to

look at an especially extensive core curriculum, the one required at St. John's College in Annapolis and Santa Fe. The 1990-1991 catalogue listed the following books that Freshmen were to read in whole or in part:

Homer	*Iliad, Odyssey*
Aeschylus	*Agamemnon, Chorphoroe, Eumenides, Prometheus Bound*
Sophocles	*Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonnus, Antigone, Philoctetes*
Thucydides	*Peloponnesian War*
Euripides	*Hippolytus, Bacchæ*
Herodotus	*Histories*
Aristophanes	*Clouds*
Plato	*Meno, Gorgias, Republic, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Symposium, Parmenides, Theatetus, Sophist, Timæus, Phædrus*
Aristotle	*Poetics, Physics, Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics, On Generation and Corruption, The Politics, Parts of Animals, Generation of Animals*
Euclid	*Elements*
Lucretius	*On the Nature of Things*
Plutarch	*"Pericles," "Alcibiades," "Lycurgus," "Solon"*
Nicomachus	*Arithmetic*
Lavoisier	*Elements of Chemistry*
Essays by:	Achimedes, Torricelli, Pascal, Fahrenheit, Black, Avogadro, Cannizzaro
Harvey	*Motion of the Heart and Blood*

Freshman reading list, St. John's College.

Things continued at this pace through the next three years and into graduate study. On the other end of the scale are universities that have made substitute lists. In Stanford in 1990, a student could also learn about Chinese, Japanese, African, and South American literature, as well as poststructuralism, lesbianism, and "pornographic culture."

From a studio art standpoint, the choice between St. John's commitment to the classics and Stanford's revisionism is curiously irrelevant. The issue in the visual arts is not: Should we teach non-White, non-Western, non-male authors?—but rather: Should we teach writers at all? In

a curriculum like St. John's or Stanford's, as in any liberal art college, studio art is surrounded by, informed by, and based on a program of broader cultural readings. The situation is different in art schools, where liberal arts departments are small or absent. (In studio departments, the liberal arts and art history requirements are similarly minor.)

There are two opposed possibilities: either studio art majors could study the humanities (liberal arts, English, art history), and take a minority of studio courses; or they could take mainly studio art courses, and have minor liberal arts and art history requirements. The second possibility is quite common: think of any small art school, with its minimal complement of art history and liberal arts. Such a case is the opposite of what happens in colleges, where the humanities and other requirements take most of the credit hours, and studio is in the minority. But what's best for a studio art major: to be grounded in studio practice, with some help from the humanities?—or to be grounded in the humanities, and let them illuminate a smaller selection of studio courses? Which is the core, the studio courses or the classes that study texts?

Perhaps I am proposing a false choice, and the two sides should be balanced, and play against one another. Dante might help a student who wants to paint Hell; or it might be that the experience of painting Hell helps in reading Dante. Teachers in literature, languages, philosophy, anthropology, history, art history, and other "support" disciplines could tailor their own classics to fit the needs of artmaking. But if mutual help is the goal, and if disciplines are watered down to let them speak to studio art, *then* where is the core curriculum? It seems to me that the coherence of any claim for a core curriculum rests in part on the idea that the core curriculum is the *foundation,* the place where knowledge begins. The idea is basically that knowledge and ideas begin from one place and proceed to another. You learn to think about concepts by reading the original texts of Aristotle or Heidegger, and learn to think about mathematics by reading Euclid or Frege. Then, so the assumption goes, you can be a citizen in the fullest sense, and let your participation in the world inform your artmaking. The opposite claim would be that reading Aristotle and Euclid might not ever help you make your art, and teaching them takes up valuable credit hours that could be filled by texts with proven bearing on modern art production. Disciplines, on other words, should be bent and even broken a little so they can enter into dialogue with artmaking. The price that's paid for diluting disciplinary boundaries is that the core curriculum of indispensable classics quickly vanishes. In the 1990s, for example, Lacan, Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger, Deleuze, Irigaray, Fanon, Benjamin, Hélène Cixous, bell hooks, Judith Butler, Martin Jay, Rosalind Krauss, and Hal Foster would replace Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristotle, Plato, Euclid, Dante, Boccaaccio, Chaucer, Ariosto, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, Lavoisier, Pope, Kant, Keats, Frege, Joyce, and even Pynchon. The core, as students in colleges and universities know it, would vanish like last year's snow.

These are three options: humanities could take the majority of a student's time, or the minority, or they could be balanced and blended with studio classes. There is one other possibility, more radical than the first three. Art schools could choose teach no liberal arts at all, so that there would be no core curriculum of texts. (Some would argue that art schools, and even some colleges, essentially do that anyway by requiring so little reading that it is negligible.) It could be urged that there is so much to be learned in visual arts that even artists with MFA degrees need more visual education. There's a comparison to be made with law and medicine, which have demanded the full attention of their students—that is, no liberal electives—since the twelfth century. The same could be said of a typical graduate education, in science or in the humanities: the 4- or 6-year PhD is a cloistered, specialized activity with little room for comparison shopping. Art schools aren't really that different from medical schools, law schools, and PhD programs, because they also virtually exclude the humanities. (Less strictly, to be sure.) In doing so art schools are essentially saying that studio art is nearly broad and deep enough to require full-time study. Hence by teaching a relatively small amount of academic "supporting" courses, art schools involve themselves in a contradiction: they imply that studio practice is *nearly* self-sufficient, but that there is a need for some of the distribution requirements and core curriculum typical of universities. Why not just omit humanities courses altogether and concentrate exclusively on visual art?

It seems to me that studio art is in a radical, almost ahistorical position in regard to the questions of the core curriculum. I am not arguing that there needs to be core curricula of techniques, texts, or visual materials—I do not agree in this respect with the agendas of writers such as Allan Bloom or E. D. Hirsch. And I'm not at all sure that artists need rigorous or thorough understanding of fields outside their own. I just mean to say that questions surrounding the core are even more interesting and difficult in studio art than they are in the much more widely publicized cases of large research universities like Stanford. As in so many other respects, studio art is at the very edge of college life: the edge of educational theory, the edge of historical awareness, the edge of incoherence.

Does Art Reflect the Society in Which It Is Made?

Art students naturally wonder about the education they are receiving: about the difference between an art major and a physics major, or between art schools and liberal arts colleges. A good way of resolving those doubts is by getting to know people from outside the art world. Artists I know who also know lawyers and business people tend to say there are no real differences between art-world people and peole outside the art world. the more it seems there is no significant difference between the two groups. But the question nags: the doctors, lawyers, and business people had four years of distribution requirements in subjects like biology,

chemistry, math, physics, anthropology, sociology, polysci, English, French, and history. Does their education make them different from people with BFAs, MFAs, and Bas in studio art? In other words, does the core curriculum make a difference?

At the core of the art world there's an assumption that art is somehow universal: that it expresses the society in which it's made, even if it is not intended to, and even if the wider society outsid the art world seems not to understand it. If any question is troubled, this one is. To begin, it sounds like an echo of the old Hegelian *Zeitgeist,* the idea that a culture is unified, so that the society hangs together like the spokes of a wheel. One spoke is art, another is religion, another is politics, and they are all attached to the hub, which is the spirit of the times. In Hegel's model, artists do reflect their entire society, even if they try not to. Most people don't mean anything so specific when they say that art expresses its surrounding society. No one would claim that early twenty-first century American society is a unity, but I think artists often behave as if the society were at least coherent enough so that art can have a broad significance outside the world of galleries and openings. On the one hand students and teachers have a stake in the significance of what they do, but on the other hand they don't sit down, as Hegel did, and work out how the connection between artists and their society actually works. I haven't heard a student say, "I want this to express the spirit of contemporary America," but I have heard students say, "I want this to express a kind of American feeling." Either way—explicitly or inexplicitly—the idea is that products of the art worls can speak to a very broad public who might not even be aware of what's happening in the art world.

Behind this assumption is the idea that what artists do is different in kind from what electrical engineers or physicists do: in theory everyone can understand art, but only some people can understand engineering or physics. And in the end, everyone *needs* art, while only some people could be said to need the expertise of an electrical engineer or a physicist. Art is ideally or potentially universal: it has to do with the peoples' feelings and inner lives, and so it isn't a specialty known only to a few people.

If you believe some version of these ideas—and in my experience, eveyone in the art world does—then it's sobering to recall what people who have no traffic with art think of artists. There is certainly a feeling among the non-art public that artists are a little nuts. They are likely to be liberal, anarchic, undependable, or mentally unstable. If they are great artists, then they are also incomprehensible and gifted, worthy of a reverent trip to the museum. There are dozens of ways of describing this. Sometimes people think artists are likely to be manic-depressive, or learning-disabled, or homosexual. Much has changed since the Renaissance, when artists were first thought of as a special kind of person, a little mad, prone to melancholy and flights of imagination denied to ordinary people. Michelangelo and the mannerists acknowledged and sometimes cultivated the idea that they were "geniuses." In early modernism, people like Kurt

Schwitters, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Duchamp were still cut in that mold: they were considered opaque, infuriating, and even dangerous. Today the situation is significantly different. According to the newspapers, artists are "something of a blemish" on society—or, more strongly, they are parasites on public largesse, or just jerks. The general attitude of the public, as it is reflected in the media, is *annoyance*. Artists are seldom described as geniuses, or even as talented workers. Publicly visible artists, like Jeff Koons, Robert Mapplethorpe, Joel-Peter Witkin, Damien Hirst, Andres Serrano, Richard Serra, and Chris Ofili, are not at all essential members of society, expressing thoughts that everyone can share: they are useless parasites, ticks clinging to their society and drinking public tax money.

There is a gulf between the art world and people outside it, and people inside the art world may sometimes fool themselves about its significance. Public perceptions of artists tend to be described as "misunderstandings," as if journalists and the general public just needed more information or a better education in art to comprehend what is being done. Perhaps—so it's said inside the art world—the public is miseducated to think that art is mostly about money, and artists' works are stunts intended to make a profit. When people in the art world do notice the gap, they tend to think it can be solved by educating the public. The notion is that art *could* reach a larger public, if only more people had taken more art courses in college, and gotten accustomed to going to galleries. Driving those prescriptions is the conviction that art *does* have relevance to the society as a whole, and that artists make expresses our time and our culture. It's only a matter of adjusting peoples' educations so they can appreciate the best art.

These, I think, are dangerous mistakes. It may be that people in the art world make them because they do not want to think about another possibility. Let me put it in the boldest possible terms: it may be that the community of art students and teachers is genuinely, importantly different from the communities of business students, pre-med students, and pre-law students. And if that is true—no matter how it is true, or why it's true—then what gets made in art school and afterward may only express the minority community of artists, teachers, students, gallerists, critics, and consumers. In that case, art could no longer be said to expess out culture. Even the word "our" would be suspect.

This theory also explains why the public sometimes finds artists annoying rather than intriguing, and why the expressive content of some art is invisible to the press. It's not because the public isn't educated. It is because *we* aren't educated. Artists are educated differently, typically with fewer non-art subjects, and that contributes to the fact that artists make art that expresses their own minority subculture and not the culture as a whole. In the opening chapter I suggested medieval artists were "cut off from the inellectual life of their time" because their education was so different from that of doctors, philosophers, lawyers, and clerics. Even if it could have made sense for a medieval artist to address the intellectual concerns of the time, it

wouldn't have been possible. Medieval artists formed a separate class outside of educated people, and to a lesser degree that is what is happening today.

Needless to say, this isn't a popular topic among art teachers. As long as I've pursued it this far, let me also suggest that there may be measurable differences between "types" of people who end up in colleges and in art schools. I once had an opportunity to teach in an exclusive private high school, and I noticed the split of the type I'm describing here. It is not that the students interested in art careers were always poorer at academics, it is that students interested in science and mathematics were bright in a different way. They were quick thinkers, but not always patient thinkers. Their particular kind of brilliance and inquisitiveness, which every science and mathematics teacher knows, is exceedingly rare in art, art criticism, and art history. Whether by proclivity or choice, my students were already receiving very different kinds of education. The French theorist Michel Serres describes those who belong to disempowered "literature," as opposed to the exact sciences, in the same way: "such a person does not know how to demonstrate, measure or count, does not know how to manipulate, does not speak the right languages, does not present credentials to any power whatsoever. Reason has no need of paupers; power has no need of songs." It's a power difference, but it's also a temperament difference. In my high school class, and when I was an undergraduate student at Cornell University, the distinction between arts people and science people was immediately obvious. I've scarcely seen the science-types since my years as an undergraduate student, and people who have spent their entire lives in the art world tend to doubt the distinction: I've been told it's just a prejudice of mine.

I won't push this any further. Volumes are written about educational aptitudes and learning types, just as volumes have been written about the stereotypes of artists from the Greeks onward. Both kinds of evidence, I think, support to the hypothesis that artists create only for a small portion of their society. I do not think it is possible to take this too seriously. We continue to believe that art is universal in a way that tax accounting or pig farming are not. Art is still said to expresses things of general human interest. And it is still thought that art schools and art departments train people to do things everyone might be interested in, while technical schools train specialists. The oscilloscope repairman still needs some sort of art, but artists don't need to know how to repair oscilloscopes. What if these notions are aren't true? In that case, studio art students are being trained to live in intellectual ghettos.

The disconnection between art students and their society also emerges when students set out to make political art. The results, which are often scandalous, tend to prompt educators to say that art students should be trained to make more responsible, effective, interesting political art. Politically charged art, like Andres Serrano's, Komar and Melamid's, or Hans Haacke's, can appear awkward or strident. In response, there are intermittent calls for renewed integration of

artists and their society, and critiques of the ways artists fail to handle political issues except as radical polemicists. The assumption in such writing is often that the solution entails improved education: artists must know the history of political art, and they must be taught politics and economics. But it is possible that the situation is bleaker than that. It may be that the retreat of the arts into the ivory tower is a deeply rooted and prevasive phenomenon, one that cannot be cured by improving artists' educations. I argued in chapter 1 that the separation of artists and society began in early Romanticism, and it has been increasing for almost two hundred years. Seen in historical perspective, artists and their society are widely divergent, and pedagogical initiatives are not likely to have any consistent effect. Historically speaking, the two sides—artists making alienated works, educators bemoaning the artists' isolation—have been in place for some time, and one might argue that it is best to study and understand the phenomenon rather than attempting to change it.

(There's a more subtle question here as well. Art has never been a dependable reflection of its society. In China, the political scene was relatively uneventful during the life of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, one of China's most innovative artists; on the other hand, the transition from the Ming to the Ch'ing Dynasty, one of China's most disruptive events, hardly left a trace in painting. The art historian E.H. Gombrich has pointed out that in the West, "both Mannerism and the Baroque have been claimed to express the spirit of the Counter Reformation but neither claim is easy to substantiate." It seems that important art has seldom expressed its immediate political surroundings, which makes it even more difficult to know how to train artists to make interesting political art.)

Does contemporary art reflect its society? Yes, in all sorts of ways. But there is also a fraction of artists who have been educated in relative isolation from people in other professions. The general lack of understanding of science, business, law, medicine, and other fields is clear in such art, and it may be best not to assume that such art expresses the lives and feelings of the society in general.

Teaching and Learning Mediocre Art

Out of a thousand art students, maybe five will make a living off their art, and perhaps one will be known outside her city. That's not a condemnation. It's the nature of fame, real quality, and genuine influence to be rare. In addition the mechanisms of fame are strongly random. Many interesting artists don't make their work at the right moment, or show it to the right people. A bad critique, or bad weather on opening night, can be enough to topple a career. No one will agree on what's great or important or worthwhile, and in the second half of the twentieth century the avant-garde became notoriously evanescent and hard to locate.

Yet beyond those problems of luck and history, it is still true that most artists do not make interesting art. And it follows that most art students do not make the kind of art that they study and admire. Some people would say they make art that imitates "better" art, so that art schools at any given time are filled with people making art that is roughly emulating more successful art being made elsewhere. The graduation shows at art schools can look impressively diverse, as if each student were pioneering an art unique in history. Seeing such shows, it can seem as if virtually all the art has value, and only the vicissitudes of the market stop each artist from being successful. A look at older graduation exhibitions belies that assumption.. Art school catalogues from the turn of the century are filled with reprodutions of student paintings that look like slavish copies of John Singer Sargeant or Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and exhibition catalogues from the 1950s show hundreds of students works that emukate Abstract Expressionism. The lesson I draw from looking older art school catalogues and graduation exhibitions is that fifty years from now even the most diverse-looking work will begin to seem quite homogneous. Works that seemed new or promising will fade into what they really are: average works, mediocre attempts to emulate the styles of the day. That's depressing, I know: but it's what history teaches. (If you doubt it, you need only find a large library that collects the catalogues from institutions like the Royal Academy in London. In the oldest catalogues the students' work seems to be all done by one person, and in the newest each student seems to be a lone innovator. The passage of time smoothes differences down to uniformity.)

The impending mediocrity I am describing is invisible in the present. If you're an art student now, you may not even be aware of the influences on your art. The overwhelming similarity that will become apparent to later generations is hidden. For that reason it wouldn't be right to call contemporary works pastiches or pale imitations: they aren't perceived that way, either by students or teachers. That's a happy fact, but it doesn't doesn't mean that your work won't eventually *become* a pale echo of someone else's work. The majority of artworks, like the majority of works in any field, are average and uninventive.

At the same time that art classes continue to produce normal, average works, museums continue to privilege unusual, adventurous, strong, challenging work. The National Gallery in Washington tends to exhibit works that are large in scale as well as ambition: in the eary 1990s they were hanging Rauschenbergs, large Diebenkorns and Pollocks and Gottliebs and Rothkos, and there was a room dedicated to Anselm Kiefer's *Zimzum,* a gigantic painting on lead sheets. Among the few smaller works were Jasper Johns's flag and target pieces, though they were also strong, challenging, and adventurous. The large scale of many of the paintings was typical of Abstract Expressionism, which the museum—as America's "national" museum—wanted to showcase. (A museum featuring Surrealism would have had much smaller works.) Overall,

however, what stays in museums is powerful, aggressive, uncompromisingly avant-garde, and statistically unusual. It's the cream of the crop, no matter how it's chosen.

It's a very simple contrast that I am drawing here. Average people—average art students—are not innovative, challenging, aggressive, adventurous, or strong. Most art students do not spend their lives in intense dialogue with their work, and few are reliably challenging or provocative. Whether or not you care about the criteria that museums like the National Gallery promote, the fact is that most work produced in most studio art classes is bound to be utterly normal and low-energy. Few of us master the cutting edge, or come to terms with the most radical work in our field.

Average people have average energy, and that means they may be significantly different from those few that find a voice for more urgent, passionate, timely, "essential," or "profound" thoughts. This is only melancholy if every artist wants those qualities. The very fact that most art students are not depressed shows this is not so, and there are writers who critique museums for their historical and gender-related biases. (The National Gallery, for example, tends to favor dead white males who had world-scale ambitions and a penchant for huge canvases.) Most of us are relatively contented with our level of energy and our mastery. Everyone is a little discontented, but few people are *strongly* discontented. Most of us are not profound and we have obvious limitations. We may not feel anything too deeply, and we may not be capable of creating work that has intense feeling or striking intellect.

Average art students produce art with different values than the art they admire or are taught. Average art is less challenging, less aggressive, more conciliatory and inviting, more immediately comprehensible, and less troubling than exceptional, historically important art. What is done in art classes is *necessarily, unavoidably* more complacent, retiring, and even timid than the "monuments" of culture and the "masterpieces" of art history survey texts. And this finally brings me to what I want to say: teachers should consider teaching average kind of art in addition to the famous models that are always taught. It would be both realistic and honest to teach studio art without emphasizing artists or qualities that are rare in school settings.

What's needed is a way to talk about common, everyday virtues in a positive fashion. Some people are timid, and teachers would have to try to speak about timidity as a positive achievement. Other people are retiring, and they want their art to show the distance between themselves and the world; they would have to be praised and encouraged not to emulate well-known artists. The problem is that the languages of art criticism and art history are deeply biased against timid and retiring art. "That's a beautifully timid piece!" sounds sarcastic, and "That piece is quite successful in its unadventurous way" sounds condescending. At times, "timid" can be an outright accusation. (Perhaps "intimate" could serve as a more productive synonym.) Words like kitsch, failure, boredom, and mediocrity would have to be rethought.

I am not saying weakness is necessarily less interesting than strength: on the contrary, I find derivative, provincial, incompetent, and outdated art very interesting. Most artists are not Rembrandts or Kiefers, and I don't know any artists who want to be pale echoes of Rembrandt or Kiefer. One of the ways to avoid being a pale echo is to begin to see virtue in what is average: to admit to mediocrity, and try to comprehend its particular nature.

Of course not all mediocre art is timid, unadventurous, retiring, unoriginal, safe or easy. But a teacher can either inspire students to do "better," or she can appreciate students' works for that they are. Some teachers try to help students by naming famous artists, and one often hears their names in art classes. Instructors may question the choice of artists to emulate or critique, and they may try to suggest alternates if they think a student has picked the wrong model. All teachers try to change their students' art in various ways: that's purpose of teaching. But consider what teaching would be like if its purpose were not to improve or even change the student's art, but to appreciate it and help students to understand what they already do. This kind of teaching would have *self-awareness* as its goal rather than change of any sort. It would accept the fact that mediocre art has its own virtues, and it would not seek to change mediocre art into something that it is not. Later in the book I will revisit this idea, describing it as the difference between *descriptive criticism,* which seeks to understand what has been made, and *judicative criticism,* which seeks to expand, improve, and advise.

I like the idea of trying to be realistic about what actually takes places in ordinary classrooms, and I am especially attracted to the strange conversations that result when teachers and students try to work on everyday, mediocre qualities. Here is such a conversation, between a student and a teacher who is thinking of the virtues of mediocrity:

— That's a very nice, timid drawing. It repeats a lot of what you've done in the past, and it looks pretty much like the work you did last year.

— Do you think that's bad?

— No, no: I think you should do more of the same. I mean it shows you think of the same set of ideas, almost like you're swimming in them. It's nice… it's friendly to see the same things again.

— Here I was trying to draw the books more accurately. I think they are a little weightless.

— They don't seem to be really part of your imagination, or at least not so much as the lamp or the pencils.

— No, I guess not.

— Sometimes in your pictures I get the impression that you don't really care, that the pictures like are a kind of daydreaming. You might want to be careful about that: if you start

worrying about that, they might become kind of artificial. They are like dreams, the drawings are like dreams.

— Sometimes I think so.

— Some of your most satisfying pictures are ones that are done without much thinking, like you were looking out the window, or watching TV, while you were drawing.

— Thank you, it's true, I do.

I am not suggesting that this is a good idea for any artist or teacher. I mean the example, which I have partly invented (it comes from fragments of conversations I've had) to sound strange, so that it can throw normal studio conversations into relief. Average art teaching is aimed at something other than average art. It is aimed at improvement, strength, unity, power, challenge, radicality, newness, voice, power, and any number of other common and debatable terms. It's aimed, in short, at the masterpieces that hang in museums. Average student art may be haunted by those ideas, but it seldom achieves them, and doesn't always even aim for them. Mediocre art is what we do. Can we admit that, and still make art instruction a worthwhile experence?

There's also the matter of how well students get along with one another. Very conservative and unambitious students tend to hide their work. Teachers may be more aware than students that most classes harbor some conservative artists. Several times I've had the experience of seeing work in private that would be unacceptable to the majority of other students and teachers: small delicate watercolors, naïve dreamscapes, pastels in the style of Matisse. Some work is too unashamedly or too obviously mediocre to be effectively critiqued in art classes. Perhaps if mediocrity could come out of the closet it would be possible to find new virtues and sources of interest.

What Can You *Not* Learn in Studio Art Classes?

Now that the restrictive Baroque-style academies have virtually disappeared (many still remain, in rural schools and in places like South Korea, Singapore, and eastern Europe), it may seem as though art students can learn virtually any kind of art. If you want to study figurative painting, you probably won't go to UCLA or Cal Arts, and if you want to work on expensive graphics workstations you probably won't enroll in a small liberal arts college. Each department and art school has its special emphases, but with a little shopping around, it appears that you can find a place to make just about any kind of art.

At least that's the self-image of many sudio art programs: art has broken open, and anything is possible. But I am not so sure that studio art education is as catholic as it seems. I can think of nine kinds of art that cannot usually be made in art school. If you're interested in one of these kinds of art, you might be better off learning and working on your own:

1. *Art that involves traditional techniques*. The practices that are now called painting and drawing are entirely different than what they were in past centuries. Painting has died—its central techniques have ben lost—four times in the history of Western art: once when the Greek paintings and textbooks were lost, again in the sixteenth century when Jan Van Eyck's method was lost, again in the late eighteenth century when Venetian Renaissance technique was forgotten, and a fourth time in the early twentieth century when painting *all prima* (wet in wet) definitively replaced the more systematic Baroque techniques. Renaissance painting was done in many stages, with each layer drying before the next coat, and the images were constructed: that is, planned in advance and brought to completion in a more or less systematic and deliberate manner. Different emulsions were used within a single painting (a typical sequence was tempera, followed by oil, and then glazes and varnish). Nowadays artists paint all at once, *all prima,* in a single thick coat. Even Romantic painting, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was definitively different from what is done now. The change happened as early as Manet and the Impressionists.

It does not help to look in old texts, because the Van Eycks kept their methods secret, and there is no Renaissance source that says how Titian executed his glazes. Nor does not help to turn to contemporary chemical analyses, because what is important about the techniques—such as ultra-thin paint layers—cannot be adequately studied in infrared, X-ray, or thin section. Some German texts, written around the turn of this century, record attempts to recapture Renaissance methods—but even they have become hard to read as the traditions of reconstruction have died out. The fact is that oil painting is a lost art several times over, and what we call oil painting bears very little resemblance to what past centuries knew by that name.

It's worth contemplating these losses, because the general feeling is that oil painting is oil painting, and that modern pictures look different from old ones because contemporary painters are interested in different things. Painters these days no longer care about religious narratives or historical pageants or moralizing allegories, and they not as fastidious about realism as the Old Masters were. Modernism and postmodern have certainly brought radical changes, but it wouldn't be prudent to lose wight of the fact that the *technique itself* has also lost, so that what happens, minute by minute, in the classroom, is entirely different from what once happened.

The same applies to drawing, which was also done in stages. The contemporary, post-Bauhaus way of drawing is intuitive, quick and ruleless; by contrast drawing from the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-nineteenth cdntury tended to be rather rigid, and it sometimes had its own sequences of steps and even its own specialized technical vocabulary.

So I think oil painting, in any of the older senses, is something that cannot be learned in studio classes, and so it drawing. Even though art departments advertise courses in "Painting" and "Drawing," what they mean is "Painting since 1850," and "Drawing since 1850." Painting

and drawing belong on a list of lost or nearly-lost techniques—a kind of Sierra Club endangered media list:

> Oil painting (Van Eyck's, Venetian Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic)
> Tempera painting (according to medieval instructions)
> Drawing (Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic)
> Marble sculpting, without the air drill
> Copper engraving and steel engraving
> Wood engraving on Turkish boxwood, and finer woodcuts of all sorts
> Fresco (done with heated lime, not mimicked with plaster)
> Technical photography (the Zone System, and so forth)
> Original lost-wax bronze pouring (Renaissance and Baroque methods, not what's now called "classical investment")
> Older tapestry methods

It is rightly said that there is no good reason to try to return to previous centuries' styles. But that does not mean that older *methods* might not be of interest. Most items on this list take time, and they involve tedious and repetitive mechanical actions. The methods that are taught these days tend to produce faster results, and have less complicated techniques. These days artists are impatient, and they won't normally put up with the time-consuming layers of Renaissance painting, or the demanding rules of Baroque academic drawing· Even so, the demanding techniques which contributed to the forgetting of the older methods might also be a reason to become interested in them again: tedium, discipline, and repetition can even be attractive in their own right. I know several artists who make wood engravings, and their results are bent in curious ways by the unusual demands of their medium. I haven't met any artists who make steel engravings, but I'd like to.

The older oil painting methods are like extinct birds; there is no way to bring them back. But there is no reason why "endagered" media can't be revived. It's just that they aren't usually taught, so they count as things that cannot be learned in studio art classes. With the giddy growth in new media, is might seem that the items on my list are obscure or trivial. On the contrary: they were the central techniques of centuries of art production. In that respect, it's *contemporary* practice that's impoverished, not older practice.

2. *Art that takes time*. Another kind of art that cannot be easily made in modern art schools is whatever takes more than a few months to complete. It took Seurat two years to paint the *Grande Jatte,* which was not an unusual amount of time for a major painting in Renaissance

and academic practice. Imagine, though, what would have happened to Seurat if he had been in a contemporary studio critique. (Here I'm imagining Seurat talking to his painting teachers.)

—Well, Georges, I see that you're still working on the same piece we saw last semester.

—Yes.

—It looks about the same.

—Well, I changed some figures a little, and I'm working on the color balance according to my theory of—

—Yes, well, whatever theories you use are up to you. Whatever makes the art work. But I don't see anything *else*.

—I finished my last oil sketch last year.

—I think we need to see much more. More drawings, more "oil sketches," maybe even a sculpture. Let yourself go. Experiment. Try quick studies, draw from the model. Your figures look frozen.

—I'm interested in that kind of static look.

—Well, I like the awkward quality, but you're bogged down. You've been looking at *the same painting* for over a year!

—Yes.

If Seurat were a contemporary student, his painting might be admired for its strangeness, but it is difficult to imagine him getting good critiques for two consecutive years of work on a single canvas: after all, two years is the entirety of an average MFA program. Studio art instruction just isn't geared for long-term projects.

3. *Work in a single style*. Another kind of art that *seems* to take time is work that is in a single style or format. Student who do only small watercolors, or only sculptures that use a single shape, will be critiqued for lack of variety. Here is an excerpt from a critique in which the student had been doing monochrome figure studies. Someone asked why she hadn't used color:

— I just feel I have enough to worry about without thinking of that.

— But if you throw away color, then… You know, some of these things that people are saying—they might be worth trying. They might work when you don't expect it.

— These arms look like tubes. And it's because light and dark don't make it for that surface. You need to experiment. Embrace a little more. Maybe the work will be out of control, but you might find something.

— Yes, take it to the next step. Destroy it and you may learn something.

It is not easy to develop works in a single style in an art school, because instructors will advocate variety over unity. Sometimes teachers say they want to see different kinds of works just because it is an easy thing to say, and other times they feel confined and uncomfortable when they look at too much of a single thing. But why shouldn't art be limited? And what, I wonder, is wrong with feeling uncomfortable?

4. *Works in too many styles*. Art schools and art departments try to help students develop a "style" (or "voice" or "manner" or "set of concerns"). That seems natural enough, but it also puts constraints on what can be done. Many artists that we call "great" did not have distinctive styles until they were well past the age when most students get their degrees. Rembrandt was still struggling with basic matters of technique. Titian was a virtuoso, but his later styles had not begun to appear. Other arts have similar examples. Robert Frost's first book of poetry appeared when he was thirty-nine, and Wallace Stevens's when he was forty-three. Could anything useful have been said to them when they were eighteen or twenty? In premodern China, the idea of developing a style of one's own was scarcely promulgated at all, and some of the greatest Chinese painters spent their entire lives emulating one predecessor or another.

In part the difficulty that teachers have with students who have many styles is that it seems they can't be taught. If a student is approaching the MFA and is still showing abstract work alongside realist pieces, or doing aluminum sculpture along with prints and holograms, it begins to look as if they haven't learned how to choose. And that is because teachers naturally look for what is called in poetry a "voice": a single identifiable set of concerns or styles, a character or a manner. The ideal student is in between a monomaniac who keeps to one style (as in paragraph number 3, above) and a schizophrenic who can't decide on a personality. A student's work has to be fairly coherent—otherwise it won't seem right.

5. *Styles that require naïveté*. Art that is anarchic and nihilistic, as Dada was, does not *need* to be done in a school; but if it is, there is no particular harm. Even violent, scatological, and sexual performance art has its place in art departments—after all, it is descended from Dada.

But some art is threatened and even destroyed by studio classrooms. A prime example is German Expressionism and the various expressionisms that have developed from it. Around 1909, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the movement *Die Brücke* achieved an angry, crude, sometimes ugly way of making pictures. But it was a delicately balanced achievement, and it depended on *not* thinking about some questions that art students everywhere learn to think about. Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmitt-Rottluff did not study perspective, academic composition, the construction of fictive space, academic color, the history of styles, the rules of portraiture and narrative painting, the current methods of printmaking, or the whole repertoire of realism. That *lack* of interest was essential for their Expressionist style. After World War I, Kirchner continued painting, but he also turned to an increasingly sober and even scholarly

research, looking carefully at various historical styles and at what Picasso was doing. His later works, though they are sometimes admired—historians do not like to say he went downhill—are distinctly softer, and some look like decorative pastiches of Picasso's styles.

German Expressionism, and some other kinds of expressionism, depend on not thinking about the kinds of things that are routinely taught in studio classes. I do not mean that expressionism can't be done in schools and universities. It doesn't really matter if you *know* about art history, printmaking, chiaroscuro, and the rest—it's that sooner or later you begin to *case* about those things, and expressionism depends on not caring. (From a teacher's point of view, it's hard to imagine how to teach such a style to artists except by putting them under hypnosis and asking them to forget everything they know.) So there are some styles that don't work well in schools, and others that are effectively ruined by them. Teachers can often recognize when studio instruction is not doing a student much good, but not many teachers will counsel students to change classes in order to preserve what's good about their art. By the nature of things, as long as the student stays, she'll be leaning more—and that may not be the right thing for someone who cares about expressionism. Years ago, when I was teaching the art history survey, I used to tell the neoexpressionist students to drop out of school. I think I'd still say that if I were teaching the survey today: it's the only honest thing to do.

6. *Art that needs extensive contact with non-art information*. I have suggested that there is a parallel to be drawn between medieval artists shut up in their workshops, and contemporary studio artists secluded in their art schools. Both groups miss out on a large part of the intellectual concerns of their time. College students who major in art get a taste of many other subjects, but art school students get very little besides art. In 1986, a commission calculated that Berkeley's 8,100 courses would take 1,000 years to complete, and large university libraries typically have on the order of 10,000,000 books and subscriptions to 40,000 periodicals. It's not that art students need that much information, but the common topics of college-educated thinking are only available to them in drastically simplified forms.

Some art depends on long-term involvement with subjects that are not taught at most art schools. The art that is produced at art schools draws mostly on other art, on issues within the art world, on current politics and social issues, and on personal experience. Art that uses mathematics (for example Dorothea Rockburne and Sol LeWitt, who have used number theory in their work) and art that involves difficult texts (Joseph Kosuth's, for example) require outside study. Likewise, students who want to make art about history may need more than the single survey of world history—a course that might not even be offered at an art school. If a student becomes deeply interested in some artist from the past, then it may be a good idea to have access to a high level of art history instruction. For each of these concerns the solution is independent study or courses at neighboring colleges. The same applies, to a lesser degree, for art majors in

colleges. I wasn't an art major in my undergraduate college: not because I didn't paint and draw, but because there were too many other things to study.

7. *Art that comes from years of mechanical preparation.* I distinguish this issue from the first ("Art that demands traditional techniques"), because some traditional techniques can be learned quite rapidly. Other techniques are not amenable to art instruction because they are endeavors that take a large portion of a lifetime to master. The practices of the Baroque academies resulted in a kind of art that cannot be made without a number of years of what we would now call drudgery, practicing hatching and other manual skills. There are specialized schools and ateliers that carry on those traditions, but for the most part students are not interested in that kind of skill that seems irrelevant and would eat up all their time in school.

It could be said that subjects like lithography or oil painting take a lifetime to learn, but in such cases there is no fixed course of study that takes more than one year. Instead students learn by a gradual, unplanned accumulation of experience. Persian miniature painting and Eastern icons are other examples of techniques that require a number of years to master. In each case, one year is enough to get a fair degree of competence, but it really takes more. Whenever more than two or three years are required just to learn the fundamentals, the art cannot flourish in contemporary art departments. There is time in a four-year college or art school to take a number of courses on one subject, but those courses seldom build directly on one another the way they did in the Baroque academy. Techniques that require *systematic* progressive guidance are missing from contemporary art curricula.

8. *Whatever is classified as "industrial art" is not taught.* William Morris's shop offered apprenticeship in a variety of houshold crafts. Today it's possible to learn about a wide variety of materials, but art instruction seldom includes the methods of commercial production. Students can easily learn how to make silver earrings, but they can't make silver candelabras or pewter lamps. Art instructors seldom teach porcelain, crystal, or commercial furniture design. Sometimes that's a matter of taste (porcelains aren't popular in the art world), and other times it's a question of technology and knowledge. I don't know any art departments that train their students in plastics, in new kinds of glass, or in stamped, rolled, and pulled metals. Such materials comprise the world around us: cars, boats, furnishings, and appliances. Perhaps art students wouldn't want to make toasters, but it's hard to know unless there are classes in making toasters. Vast realms of material technology are not taught because they are associated with commerical or industrial purposes. Few schools follow the model of the Bauhaus and arrange for industrial apprenticeships. The result is that when students want to make metal lamps or refrigerators, they make strange imitations out of substitute materials—lamps out of papier-maché, refrigerators out of junkyard parts. Even kinetic sculpture, neon, and electronics classes take their materials from outside the studio—no art students I know could manufacture a printed

circuit, a battery, or an electric switch. And of course holography, video, film, photogeaphy, and computer graphics rely heavily on material technologies beyond the reach of art schools.

Since the Industrial Revolution it has been common to use things whose origin and workings we cannot explain. What I mean here is not that artists should also study engineering, but that it is strange that so few art students are given access to the universe of manufactured materials. Lovely things like iridescent mylar and acrylic medium do make their way into art schools, but for the most part artists' constructions are limited to wood, sheet metals, papier-maché, and ceramics: simple things that were promoted by the Arts and Crafts movement rather than the sophisticated materials that actually form the substance of our lives.

Unusual materials can be hard to use because they remind viewers of science fiction, or of high-tech business. Clay, wood, and basic metals have the advantage of being more neutral, so they can "disappear" into the work and serve a variety of expressive purposes. Media such as holography are still plagued with sci-fi associations—it's hard to look at a hologram without thinking of the technology. But it's impossible to know in advance what material might make a good artwork. Why not try making something using tinted boron glass or liquid crystal paint? Why not learn how to make a foam mattress or a mousepad?

9. *Art that isn't serious*. The twentieth century was an unusually humorous century in art history, and it produced a great deal of satirical, ironic, and light-hearted art. Even so, virtually every student and teacher still believes that art is a serious endeavour. Art students are routinely asked whether they "really care" about their work, whether they feel "obsessed" by their inventions or "compelled" to explore them. Artists still lard interviews with the admonition that if a person can do anything *except* paint (or sculpt or film or turn or cast or carve or weld) then they may not be a true artist. Educators and commencement speakers talk about the artist's "calling," the conviction that something inside has to be expressed, the idea that artists are not so by choice, but by inner necessity. Journalists and parents speak of a "gift," a "talent," or a "potential." Students still hear the catchphrases: Do you have "real" enthusiasm? Are you "dedicated" to something "really important"? Is this a "deep" exploration? Do you feel "pasionately" about it? Does it speak to you "on some very important level"? Do you feel that you are being "drawn toward" it?

All of this comes from an originating nexus of ideas that we have inherited from the Greeks and from the Renaissance, and it includes the idea of the artist as genius, melancholic, and sociopath. Postmodern artists have been criticizing those ideas since the 1960s, but it's clear they still have a grip on us because we can hardly imagine art without seriousness.

Why can't an artist paint without involvement? Why not work absentmindedly? Why isn't it possible to conceive of a Sunday painter who is also worthy of being placed with the Masters? Why not paint with rock music blaring (Andy Warhol did, and reported that it helped

him not to think)? Why not let motifs come and go, without trying to "explore" them (Duchamp did)? Why don't faculty members admonish their students to think of art as a pasttime or a hobby? Questions like these sound odd because we still feel that art is at bottom a serious thing to do. When we say that an artwork "contains humor," we betray the assumption that "art" is something serious—serious enough to safely "contain" humor.

The supposed seriousness of art has a widespread effect on teaching. It guides students, often without their being aware of it, toward projects that require a certain seriousness and dedication. Lighthearted, careless work is hard to make in a school environemtn without seeming superficial, annoying, or flippant. A student who makes a joke out of art is likely to seem irresponsible, as if she refuses to recognize art's underlying seriousness. But if you don't try too hard you might make work that is interesting precisely because you refuse to be "committed" or "obsessed" with what you do. If it's true that students sometimes try a little to hard *not* to care, it's also the case that students are prone to being deadly earnest. Both routes are uninteresting. Too much drive and engagement narrows the possibilities of art just as much as an excess of insouciance. Unfortunately studio art instruction nearly always privileges and rewards the deadly serious students over all the others.

It wouldn't be hard to add to this list of things that aren't taught in art classes. My purpose is just to show that contemporary art instruction isn't at all universal or free. Art instruction at the beginning of the twenty-first century pretends to be entirely unbiased and open-minded, but it has its own purposes and dogmas. It isn't easy to say what they are—but they're pervasive. It may be, though I do not know any historical evidence to support it, that students in the seventeenth century academies felt just as free as we do. Looking back at them, we see an astonishingly narrow practice. Perhaps future generations will think the same of us.

The Problem of Decoration

Three kinds of people worry about decoration. Abstract painters have an abiding fear—a gnawing anxiety—that what they make might be "wallpaper" or "mere decoration." Decoration is also a concern for students of Interior Design, Fashion, Visual Design, Visual Communication, and Typography and Layout. For them "decoration" is a bad word, a sign of the lower status of what they do. These days few people in the arts would want to say that making a chair is less *important* than making a painting. But furniture designers know everyone believes it anyway. A third group that is anxious about decoration is administrators, teachers, and people in charge of planning art course. They worry because they do not want their departments or schools to become divided between "design" people and "arts" people. Any number of art schools are effectively split in half between fine artists and "applied" or "decorative" artists, and even within

a single department—like Visual Communications or Fashion Design—some students might be out to make Art, while others might be more interested in making money.

The determination to make money isn't the only thing that separates design students from fine art students. To some degree the two groups draw on different ideas of history. Painters will talk about Kiefer, Pollock or Bosch. Design students mention Nagel, Chanel, and Lacroix. That means painters can find out a tremendous amount from art history classes, but design students need special courses and readings to learn about design history. From an art history teacher's point of view, a large part of the problem is that it is harder to talk about designed objects than about famous artworks. It is fairly easy to lecture on a sculpture or a painting, but more difficult to fill an entire hour with discussions of a chair or rug. (Normally chairs and rugs are studied in quick succession, with a few comments about each. The material and knowledge to go into greater depth are not easily available.) In studios design students need different kinds of criticism. They do not, in general, epxect detailed critiques of meaning or symbolism, but they do require teachers who can speak about "look," syle, and marketing problems. There is also a philosophic divide among design students. Much of design philosophy is told as a story about capitalism and class conflicts. There is another kind of design philosophy, less often encountered, that is closer to the philosophy of fine art. It is seldom brought to bear on the making of objects because it is abstruse and abstract (I am thinking of Heidegger's meditations on the object, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology). Hence the philosophy of design is also divided between teachers who talk about things like bourgeois taste, and those who focus on abstract questions like the nature of objects and things.

I've listed four areas in which design students can differ from fine art students: the value accorded to making money, the kind of history that seems relevant, the kind of studio instruction that seems appropriate, and the kind of philosophy that best explains the practice. They all boil down to one central problem, which has been with us since the early Renaissance: the notion that the crafts are not as important as the arts. Other words can be used instead of "important," and the choice is crucial: in the Renaissance, the choice would have been "noble." Or one might say "interesting" instead, or "intellectual," or "versatile." Each word sounds a little wrong, and there is no satisfactory choice. Our indecision about crafts, decoration, and design suggests that it's a deep-seated inequality, built into Western culture: we just *feel* it is true that chairs have a different value from paintings.

Oddly enough, the differences between a chair and a painting can seem to vanish when it comes to studio instruction. Some artists, critics, and instructors assert that there is no real difference between art and design, or between fine art and decorative art. In large art schools students mix and match chairs and paintings (it was done, literally, by Robert Rauschenberg, Lucas Samaras, David Salle, and others from the 1960s onward). The mixtures are a heritage of

Pop Art, but I do not think it is convincing to conclude that the difference between fine art and decoration has vanished. People who advocate that the difference has vanished tend to give one of two reassons.

First, they point to the influence of non-Western cultures that do not distinguish between fine and applied art, or even between art and other made objects. They stress the popularity of non-Western objects in twentieth-century culture, the contemporary state of world art, the increasing importance of mass media, and the traditional dependence of modernism on non-Western art. All that is true: in the twentieth century art and non-art, Western practices and non-Western practices, were blended as never before. But does that mean that the differences have been erased?

People who want to erase the difference between high art and decoration also say that since the advent of postmodern—say, in the mid-1960s—art and scholarship have been out to deny hierarchies of all sorts. In postmodernism (so it's said) there is no meaningful difference between high art and low art. Postmodern critics replace rigid hierarchies with lists, and central things with objects from the margins of culture, and pure things by hybrids. It wouldn't be postmodern, so the critics imply, to go on insisting that decorative art is "lower" than "high" art.

Yet for all the seductiveness of the idea that high and low have merged, there is little evidence that artists have stopped caring about the avant-garde, or given up trying to avoid bourgeois taste. Modern and postmodern artists have traditionally *taken* from low art, and put bourgeois objects to avant-garde use. (Jeff Koons, for example, got some notoreity for recycling beourgeois porcelain figures as high art; in the same fashion Max Ernst had recycled popular magazine illustrations as high art collages.) But that's different from believing that decoration and fine art have the same value. There were moments in modernism when decoration was a positive value, connoting an honest attitude toward beauty. A decorative work was one that spoke openly about its meanings and the people who had made it. Unfortunately there were also moments in modernism when decoration was the worst thing that could happen to art: it was the end of art, its perdition, its descent into the abyss of vulgarity and bourgeois bad taste.

I suspect the claim that high art has merged with low hart is a frequently kind of wishful thinking: if only they *had* merged, we wouldn't need to keep worrying about history, about value, and about the challenge of trying to make truly powerful avant-garde art.

It is notoriously difficult to construct a theory of all artifacts that does justice to fine art and also to decoration and design. The art historian E. H. Gombrich tried to write a history of decoration under the title *The Sense of Order;* he produced a massive meditation on the psychological impulse to create design, which has the odd effect of making fine art look like the product of some *other* deep instinct. Another scholar divides all man-made things, which he calls "material culture," into five groups:

1	Art (paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, photography)
2	Diversions (books, toys, games, meals, theatrical performances)
3	Adornment (jewelry, clothing, hairstyles, cosmetics, tattooing…)
4	Modifications of the landscape (architecture, town planning, agriculture, mining)
5	Applied arts (furniture, furnishings, receptacles)
6	Devices (machines, vehicles, scientific instruments, musical instruments, implements)

This is an ultimate generalization of the systems of the fine arts that I was considering earlier. This scholar's list is a little awkward, since it puts objects whose expressive power is irrelevant (such as mines or telescopes) in with those whose expressive power is primary (such as gardens or jewelry). Does it make sense to try to force all human artifacts into this kind of democracy? Are all artifacts created equal? Such attempts indicate the lengths to which one has to go to avoid privileging the fine arts over decorative arts. (I might add this list is not entirely successful: "Art" is still first.)

Other people have argued that design is apprehended "not with our minds" but "empathetically" or non-verbally, whereas fine art has nameable meanings. Design and decoration would work in an "intuitive," "sensual," "uncognized" way: fine art means, decorative art emotes. But can that distinction be defended? Surely many things that seem "merely decorative" are symbolic, and—as Gombrich says—there is no firm "distinction between designs and signs."

So far, no theories have managed to encompass decorative and fine-art objects under one rubric, in one classroom or one book of art history. One way to begin is to invest decorative art with as much verbal significance as possible—to talk as long as possible about the chair—and another way is to emphasize the non-verbal meaning of fine art—to bring out the subtle, emotive properties of the painting instead of its history and symbolism. And above all, it helps to remain aware of the problem, so the old differences don't creep in again where they aren't needed.

What Is Going On With Live Models?

Here's a question: Which institutions involve people with clothes on, looking at naked people? I can only think of three: hospitals, the pornography industry, and art schools.

It is a simple, inescapable fact that looking at a live model is a charged experience. No matter how used to it you get—and studio instructors can persuade themselves, over the course of years, that models really are nothing but interesting furniture—it still possesses sexual and social overtones. The model is "objectified," used as an example (as in medical school or hospital rounds—and we might also think of prisoner-of-war camps), and his or her personality is erased or drastically simplified (as in mass-media pornography). The condescension, emotional distancing, and "master-slave" relation are similar in all three institutions.

Now I do not think it makes sense to avoid life classes; live models have been an integral part of art instruction since the fifteenth century. The problem is not the custom itself—surely people do many other things that are worse—but the fact that teachers do not acknowledge the overtones. It has been said that the human figure should be drawn because it is the most perfect object, and if a Renaissance or Baroque student knew the body they could claim to know everything essential about visual art, from figure painting to the principles of industrial design. Though people are no longer quite so dogmatic on the point, it is wiedely held that the human form is a privileged object, something fundamental for drawing in general.

Once I saw a life drawing class in which a black man and a white woman were posed on a bed. Certainly there's nothing wrong with that, but the instructor was behaving as if it were a random configuration—as if he might just as well have put a pear next to an apple. No one mentioned the fact that this particular "configuration" was sexually and racially loaded. Instead the students were critiqued for their use of form and color. A Freudian might have something to say about that class! Yet it's generally true—art instructors treat models as if they were nothing more than objects that are difficult to draw. Surely, though, if the only point of such classes were to train students to draw difficult objects, life-drawing teachers would choose things like toasters or spoons instead—they're just as hard to draw.

Artists are interested in the body for many reasons. Paintings of the body are inevitably about love, sexuality, and relationships, and paintings taken from live models or from nude photographs are *inherently* voyeuristic and objectifying, no matter what genders are involved. These days, sexual and social issues are only addressed when the photographic source material is pornographic (a common enough occurrence in art schools), but they are present as well in ordinary life-drawing sessions even when they are not openly addressed. Sometimes models and students do become sexually aroused (if you're around life drawing classes long enough, you'll see this), and that possibility is only the most obvious sign of the unacknowledged sexual content in day-to-day life drawing.

The historical response to this issue has been to draw a distinction between the "naked," which is said to involve sexuality, and the "nude," which is said to pertain to the world of art. But is there such a thing as a "nude" that does not involve sexual response? Even if you've never been aroused or even titillated by a life-drawing class, the emotions of the situation end up in the work. There is an elaborate process of *not seeing* the gender or the sexuality, of *not thinking* about the problems of objectification, voyeurism, pornography, academic art, the tradition of the sexless nude, and the social repression that's involved. When you're in a life drawing class you are meant to avoid thinking about those problems and concentrate on "formal issues." But can you just turn off all those naturally human responses? I don't think so: inevitably, life-class drawings are infused with submerged feelings about sexuality, voyeurism, embarrassmant, power relations, and so on.

My point here is that it is dishonest and a little silly to look at a naked person for three hours, and talk only about lines and planes. If your drawings are interesting at all it's because you have controlled the sexual and political issues in a complicated but not entirely successful way. The emotions are in the pictures, and they should be critiqued. Here's an example of the kind of conversation that never takes place:

— Hmm. That's a nice drawing. I see that you've given particular attention to the penis, but you haven't drawn in the eyes.

—Well, he was looking at me a lot, and I don't like that. So I was trying to get the body right instead.

—In the drawing, that makes it look like you were very interested in the model's sexuality. Your figure is a little depersonalized, he looks like a sex object.

—Well, there was something about the pose—

—The pose is kind of unlikely, like those *Playgirl* poses. Guys don't sit around naked with their legs spread apart.

—So you think I should put in the eyes?

—In a way, I guess I'd say the drawing looks like it's struggling with itself. One part of it says: This is a good drawing. Another part says: this is a sexual object, a fantasy.

—Is that bad?

—I just mean that it makes the drawing interesting. It could be that if you put in the eyes, or if you erased part of the penis, then your drawing could be less interesting. It would have less tension.

—Actually, the penis is kind of irrelevant, I mean I think I can draw it okay, it's not a problem.

— Yes, you have the light and shade… but sometimes when you look at something very closely, it means that you're not looking at something else. And here, I think you are looking very intently at one thing, maybe in order to avoid looking at something else.

— His eyes.

—Yes, there he is, looking at us.

Notes to Chapter 2

See—among many other examples—Carol Kino, "The Baddest of Bad Art," *The Atlantic Monthly* 285 no. 4 (April 2000): 113-19, concerning the Dahesh Museum in New York City. For background, see Carl Goldstein, "Towards a Definition of Academic Art," *The Art Bulletin* 57 (1975): 102.

This is modified from Goldstein, "Towards a Definition," 103.

E. C. Baker, "Is there a New Academy?" in *The Academy,* 141.

For twentieth-century examples see my review of Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe,* in *The Art Bulletin,* forthcoming.

Hess, "Some Academic Questions," in *The Academy*, 8-10.

For the general idea of linear progress in history, see Frederick John Teggart, *Theory of History* (New Haven, 1925), p. 87 ff., and Teggart, *The Idea of Progress, A Collection of Readings,* edited by George Hildebrand (Berkeley, 1949). One of the most thoughtful essays having to do with art is E. H. Gombrich, "The Leaven of Criticism in Renaissance Art," in *The Heritage of Apelles* (Oxford, 1976), 118.

Marshall Brown, "The Renaissance is the Baroque, on the Principle of Wölfflin's Art History," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (December 1982): 394, is an interesting deconstructive approach to a linear art history.

This is also emphasized by Hess, "Some Academic Questions."

For further reading see my *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University* (New York, 1965), 395.

N. Boothby *et al.,* "The Present Status of the M.F.A. Degree, A Report to the Midwest College Art Conference," *Art Journal* XXIV nr. 3 (spring 1965): 244.

Dempsey, "Some Observations," 569.

This is Charles Perrault, *Le Cabinet des beaux arts* (Paris, 1690), quoted in Kristeller, "Modern System of the Arts," 527.

See the abbé Charles Batteux, *Les Beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris, 1746), quoted in Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," 21.

Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," and Theodore Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* (Princeton, 1940), 35, cited in Kristeller, 497 n. 4.

Robert Zimmerman, *Aesthetik,* part 1, *Geschichte der Aesthetik als philosophischer Wissenschaft* (Vienna, 1865).

See my "Art History and the History of Computer-Generated Images," *Leonardo* Leonardo 27 no. 4 (1994): 335-42.

Elkins, "Why There Are No Philosophic Problems Raised by Virtual Reality," *Computer Graphics* 28 nr. 4 (1994): 250-54.

Rudolph, *The American College and University,* 412. The two operative principles are *Lernfreiheit* and *Lehrfreiheit*.

See for example Tom Venable, *Philosophical Foundations of the Curriculum* (Chicago, 1967).

Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Conflict in Education in a Democratic Society* (New York, 1953).

Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, 1978 [1936]).

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, 1916).

The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at the Emma Willard School, ed. C. Gilligan *et al*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990).

See for example Robert Efron, *The Decline and Fall of Hemispheric Specialization* (Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1990), reviewed in *Science* 251 (1 February 1991): 575-76.

St. John's College, Statement of the St. John's Program 1990-1991 (Annapolis, c. 1990), 23. See also the graduate program: *St. John's College, Graduate Institute in Liberal Education 1991-1992* (Annapolis, c. 1990), 5-8.

For some of the debate about Stanford's curricular changes, including a letter from Carl Shorske, see *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for 13 April, 27 April, and 1 June, 1988.

An article that looks at this from the liberal arts viewpoint is J. D. Morse, "Viewpoints: What about Art among the Liberal Arts?" *American Art Journal* 6 nr. 1 (1974): 72-4.

The image of the wheel is from E. H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford, 1969); for further discussion see my "Art History without Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1988): 354-78.

See my "La Persistance du 'tempérament artistique' comme modèle: Rosso Fiorentino, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine," *Ligeia* 17/18 (October 1995/June
1996): 19-28.

This idea made its way into academia as early as 1956. A report on the visual arts at Harvard argues that artists can be intellectual, and so they do have a place in the university. See *Report of the Committee on the Visual Arts at Harvard University* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956), 44.

Pevsner, author of the study *Academies of Art* that I have been using throughout this book, says he was impelled to write by noticing the way that artists in Dresden were "painfully severed"

from the public. But his concern is principally economic and institutional, and his solution has to do with changes in art school curricula.

Serres, "Literature and the Exact Sciences," *SubStance* XVIII nr. 2 (1989): 4-5.

See Carol Becker's unnamed essay in *New Art Examiner* 18 nr. 6 (1991): 15-17.

Gombrich, "In Search of Cultural History," in *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Value in History and Art* (Oxford, 1979), 190.

Easily best meditation on this problem is T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1999).

The ideas here are the central subject of my *Failure in Twentieth-Century Painting,* work in progress.

See my *What Painting Is* (New York, 1999).

This is explored in my "On Modern Impatience," *Kritische Berichte* 3 (1991): 19-34.

"Academic Planning for 1986-90," Report of the Committee on Academic Planning, Office of the Academic Senate, University of California at Berkeley, 17 June 1986, 45, cited in Charles Sykes, *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (New York, 1988), 154.

Ihab Hassan calls the list a "catena" in "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 503.

For the dynamic of high and low see especially Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*. For an example of a critic who believes that high and low have become entangled, see Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Los Angeles, 197).

See especially Clark, *Farewell to an Idea,* chapter 7.

Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, New York, 1984)

Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, nr. 1 (1982): 3.

These phrases are from Prown's "affective" theory, "Mind in Matter," 5. See also E. Ferguson, "The Mind's Eye: Nonverbal Thought in Technology," *Science* 197 (1977): 827-36.

Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, New York, 1979), 217.

For an account of gender issues, see Marina Sauer, *L'Entrée des femmes à l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts,* trans. (from the German) Marie-France Thivot (Paris, 1990), esp. 42.

For further citations see my *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 48, and especially n. 9.

Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York, 1965 [1956]).