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Being Behind the Times, Being Average

It is normal to be average: not everyone is astonishingly original. And it is common to be a little behind the times: not everyone is bleeding-edge avant-garde. It is also normal, and common, to be unhappy about being average and a little behind the times. Here are some ways to think about that.

A. *Most student work is a bit behind the times.* If you're an art student you're likely—but not definitely!—to be doing work that is unoriginal. In part that's just the way it should be, since you're a student. (No one expects undergraduate physics students to come out with major discoveries. The art world doesn't either, but people always sort of hope it will happen, and sometimes it does.) The bulk of art students practice older styles of art making. Those styles include old-fashioned naturalism, neo-expressionism, late Romantic landscape painting, collage forms derived from Rauschenberg or Bearden or Dada, fantasy art derived from *fin-de-siècle* Symbolism, types of Abstract Expressionism, post-minimalism, late 1970s-style conceptual art, 1990s style installation art, 1990s style institutional critique, and late-Surrealist figural abstractions. In the early 1920's it was the same: art students back then made nineteenth-century style academic figure studies, history paintings, imitations of Toulouse-Lautrec and illustrational art, and works in the style of Picasso's Pink and Blue Periods. Even further back in time, the 1850s, academy students produced works in the eighteenth-century academic style of David and his followers.

There have been time lags between students' works and avant-garde works ever since there were art academies. It's normal: the question is how your instructor handles it, because it isn't usually helpful simply to be told you're behind the times. What matters is how you encounter the earlier art practices, how you put them in new contexts, what you think of them, how you understand them, how you engage them, how you distort and adapt and critique and augment them. As a student, you can ask about those things, and defuse the simple assertion that you're following some older art practice.

B. *Art made in institutions outside major cities is likely to be slightly behind the times.* One thing I have learned from visiting so many art departments in state colleges, liberal arts colleges, and small regional colleges, is that institutions outside

major cities are more likely to have students who are behind the times. Every art institution has some students who like traditional kinds of art, but regional and rural institutions are likely to have more of them.

It's all a matter of degrees, but there's also a tipping point: when most of the faculty is a little out of date—say they're in their thirties or forties, and so they're about ten or twenty years out of their MFAs, and working outside of major cities most of that time—then they are increasingly likely to accept students who are also a little out of date. Eventually a culture forms that is less than cutting edge. All this is relative, of course, and there are plenty of counterexamples. But if you're in a regional institution, measurably far from a major urban center, and if most of your faculty spend most of their time in town, then be aware of the possibility that you may be learning slightly out of date practices.

C. Art made in smaller institutions might also be a little behind the times. Even if your school, college, or academy is in a major city, if it's a small institution it may also have a preponderance of faculty and students who are not engaged with the most recent developments. In the age of the internet, this isn't a matter of *not knowing* what's being made in Tokyo, Berlin, London, and other places: it's a question of your institution's attitude toward the most recent art.

Every major city in Europe and North America has conservative art academies in it. The students and faculty of those academies and schools do not always mix with the wider art world, even though they may be only blocks from the city's main museum, university, or art school. I won't name names here, because conservative institutions like "studio schools," self-styled "academies" in North America, and ateliers naturally resist being described as conservative.

D. Art made in smaller countries might also be a little behind the times. So it's the distance between your institution and a major city, and the size of your department or institution: those two factors have a lot to do with how closely your teachers and fellow students follow what's happening in the international art world. A third factor is the country you're in. If you're in a first world country, then there's usually no issue; but art academies in developing countries can be starkly different from those in the first world. I have been to art schools and academies on four continents, from Paraguay to Kyrgyzstan, from Tibet to Estonia, from Iran to the Republic of Georgia, and even though there are many counterexamples, I am not surprised when I visit a school and find strongly regional styles that are only tenuously connected to the contemporary art world.

(Parenthetically: I don't mean that it's a bad thing to be out of touch, out of date, or to return to a style from the past. In art theory, no return is a pure return anyway; if you're interested in this, you might look at Hal Foster's *Return of the Real*. Returns

and retrenchments are interesting and integral to modernism and postmodernism. I'm pursuing a different idea: practices that are echoes and instances of art from the 1990s or 2000s may need to be revalued in art teaching because they are part of average, non avant-garde art practice. But back to the argument.)

I know points B, C, and D are very contentious. There are some people who say that the world is effectively a single art market now, and that communication is effectively uniform. I don't think that is true.¹ Most countries I have visited have at least one principal art academy that is attuned to the global art world, but any number of countries have smaller academies and schools that are not. Even in the United States and western Europe, regional art academies, and smaller colleges and universities can show a time lag in relation to the larger centers. Just because you're in a first-world country doesn't mean you're current.²

Up to this point I've been saying "average" or "behind the times" because that is how things get talked about. I mean statistically average, in a neutral, statistician's way of thinking, but still the word "average" sounds negative. It sounds too much like "mediocre," which is clearly pejorative. I could have said "normal," but that raises all sorts of questions about standards and social ideals. Or I could have said "ordinary," but even that sounds a little critical. What I am really getting at here is a kind of art that is *unremarkable*: it doesn't seem to call for any special attention, because it is something that your teachers will have seen before. It is not "marked" by properties that no other artwork has. (Thanks to Paul Gladston for suggesting "unremarkable.") Another way to describe this kind of art is that it is unoriginal, or ordinary, or that it is *apparently only moderately interesting*. It's not compelling, amazing, new, bewildering, never-before-seen, avant-garde. It's important to add the qualifier "apparently," because, as I'll argue on the next page, what appears uninteresting or unremarkable to one person might be quite remarkable to another.

E. *Most student work is unremarkable.* As an art student you're likely—but not definitely!—making work that is more or less unoriginal. We're not all Duchamp or Picasso, and that's absolutely normal. In the book *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, I spent several pages wondering about the problem of teaching *average* students. From a teacher's point of view, instruction is always geared to the high points of art: all the terms of criticism, all the points of comparison, are the Mt. Everests of art. As a student, you are continuously encouraged to look at famous artists, and you are given difficult texts by historians and philosophers.

But most of us, students and teachers, are unremarkable. It feels a little painful to say so, but it's true. We're under the main umbrella of the bell curve, not off in the genius range. It's also the case that most of us see average art all the time. In the words of the authors of *The Critique Handbook*, "we are continually being

influenced not by creative interesting [art], but by provincial, second-tier, watered-down examples of art. The result is that we are not influenced to produce highly original inventive work, but rather to make work that resembles what we *think* art should look like” (p. 90).

So I wondered how art instruction might possibly be tuned so it is responsive to ordinary work by ordinarily skilled students, who have some energy but not a huge amount, who are sometimes inspired but more often not, who produce art that is within the ordinary range between utter failure and earth-shaking innovation. It is not an easy problem, and I did not solve it in that book. Our critical language is full of superlatives, and our history textbooks are full of exemplars: it’s a serious issue, and I think no one quite knows how to address it.

This doesn’t mean you should accept being unremarkable. Art is all about experimentation. But it means you should be aware that the languages of criticism, theory, and art history, and therefore the languages of teaching and the critique, are stocked with exceptional artists and practices, and have almost nothing to say about average art production. So you’re surrounded by values and judgments that are based on the idea of endless astonishing innovation.

It’s necessary to be careful and listen to the language that is used to critique your work. Almost always, the concepts and judgments are slanted away from the ordinary, the unremarkable, the moderately interesting, and toward the amazing, the unexpected, the exceptional, the unprecedented. Your work probably has a fair amount of energy, moments of inspiration, certain points of interest, and moderate successes. That’s ordinary practice, in ordinary life. Your provisional achievements are not well described in the demanding, world-historical languages of art history, theory, and criticism.

When I posted a draft of this chapter online, I got an avalanche of comments. No one wants to be unremarkable! Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe wrote: “A moderate amount of originality doesn’t sound like very much originality, it’s like a moderate sex drive. What is that and where does it leave people who are drawn to the immoderate, where are they in relation to an idea of what’s average?” I am all for “bristling,” as one person wrote, against whatever is ordinary or unremarkable. But I suppose I’d say there really shouldn’t be anything wrong with a moderate sex drive. Lurid dreams are part of what we are (as Hollywood is continuously showing us), but I am concerned that the current languages of the art world are so laced with superlatives that as teachers we lack words to help us appreciate average art production, and as students we have no way to tell ourselves that our ordinary drives have their own virtues. And it’s just a fact that most of us are unremarkable in the end. So I’m not advocating mediocrity here, and I’m not suggesting we teach mediocre or unambitious art: I’m proposing that we need to pay more attention to the virtues and qualities of ordinary unremarkable art, and to mismatches between the languages of

art and what we are actually producing.

(I'm also not aligning myself with some critics, such as Dave Hickey, who say that art schools produce die-cut students, all from the same mold, and that artists are better advised to remain independent. It's not that the tens of thousands of MFAs all make similar work—that is a claim that could also have been made against the French Academy in the 18th c., or against any products of widely adopted educational models. The apparently uniform work produced by MFA programs has its own qualities, and they can be as variegated and diverse as the qualities that are valued in internationally successful or art historically significant work. We may miss those qualities because we lack the language, or the interest, to see them.)

In life, none of these things I have listed need to be problems: happily there are many kinds of art to make, many places to make art, many people to see it. But in an art school, it can be a problem when your teachers feel they've seen it all before.

Mira Schor, who has written one of the few essays on this subject, admits that she averts her eyes when it comes to seeing the outmoded styles that she's writing about. When jurors see art in styles they've seen a thousand times before, they put "a zero on their chart," indicating "their absolute lack of interest" in ever seeing work like that again. And yet derivative art, in warmed-over versions of older styles, is ubiquitous. It isn't documented, because art history isn't aimed at unremarkable, average art. But for experienced teachers, gallerists, jurors, and curators, it's everywhere. "These are the bad yet eerily familiar works that form the *déjà-vu*-all-over-again feeling of teaching," she writes. (Her excellent essay has a history of some of these styles, in case you'd like to try to avoid them: "Trite Tropes, Clichés, Or the Persistence of Styles," in her book *A Decade of Negative Thinking*, 2009.)

As an art student I never suspected that an instructor might be less than interested in what I was making, but as a teacher I am familiar with the feeling of walking into a studio and seeing something that reminds me of an endless series of similar works by other artists and by last year's students. I find I can usually become interested in the particularities of the work at hand, but it is not possible to entirely forget that initial judgment. When this happens in critiques the result can be disastrous. It is not uncommon for teachers to find ways to let students know they are being mediocre or unoriginal. I have heard instructors say so bluntly, I guess in hopes that they were doing the students some good. And if your teacher doesn't say anything, you may realize what's going on and wish she would speak. The problem is endemic simply because it is rare for a teacher to encounter something that seems entirely new. (And by the inexorable law of the *avant-garde*, if you really do make something genuinely new, your teachers won't recognize it and they'll usually dislike it.)

Students and teachers both remark on the low energy level of some critique

panels. (Think of the long transcript in chapter 11.) That can happen because the teacher sees work she's seen a thousand times before, and she loses interest. She's been through it so many times that she has set speeches memorized. She has a speech on the problems of continuing to paint, a speech on the limitations of conceptual work, a speech on the problems of effective political critique.

But if your work seems unoriginal, ordinary, mediocre, average, slightly old-fashioned, or just plain familiar and uninspiring, your teacher may just fall silent. Silence can result from either boredom or annoyance, but either way, it usually means your teacher does not think your work is original. (It may also be that your work appears confusing, but in my experience confused teachers usually talk *more* than un-confused teachers.)

In this case you face a double challenge: to admit the possibility that your work might provoke such a reaction, and to find a way to jump-start the depressed or silent teacher. (As a teacher you can think along the same lines: you can ask yourself whether there is a way to talk about the work that can rekindle your interest.)

There is no easy solution to a critique stuck in the doldrums of boredom. It is good to keep in mind that this kind of dissatisfaction might be a hidden subtext throughout a critique. The underlying fact is that if your teacher liked your work without reservation, she would try to make it herself! There is always *some* disapproval—that's only natural. The challenge is to keep enough interest going, and enough honesty, so you can figure out three things:

1. Do I think my work might actually be average, normal, or ordinary?
2. If it might be, do I mind?
3. If I mind, how can I identify the things my teachers think are average, so I can rethink them?

It's always a good policy to be honest, and keep asking your teachers questions about their lack of energy, their silences, their reticence, their evasiveness, until you see exactly why they feel as they do.

