The Deflationary Posture
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Many students of art today are being described as disaffected, disengaged, and indifferent to critical commentary. These students can be said to have adopted a "deflationary posture." But this posture is more than merely an attitude towards criticism, it incorporates cultural practices and philosophical positions. While as a symptom reluctance towards criticism is both comprehendible and common, the deflationary posture is a consequence of the attempt to resolve conflicting positions concerning identity, epistemology, and the practice of art. This essay is an analysis of the engendering conditions and consequences of such a posture. In general, the deflationary posture will not be productive in sustaining the discipline of art making.

It is my contention that such a posture reflects a genuine effort to arrive at a coherent understanding of oneself and the world. Mere laziness or rebelliousness on account of ignorance or rage alone does not characterize this student. The deflationary posture is at different times and for different purposes characterized by anomie, personal preoccupation, anti-authoritarianism, and the lack of a sense of value to history. This essay focuses on the intersection of three influences, within a contemporary art student's realm of experience, that have as a consequence such a posture: the legacy of vanguardism, the rise of participatory media, and the effects of parenting.

The general consensus is that the utopian aspirations of vanguard artists have been exhausted and cultural critique rendered impotent if not epistemologically impossible. However, the consequences of vanguardism as an art making modality continue to affect the student of art as well as the professional. The vanguard values of novelty and

subversiveness continue to exert an influence if not because of their actual effectiveness in the economic system than because of academia.  My argument is not that these values need to be eradicated nor is it that these values directly cause the deflationary posture.  However, art education is experiencing something analogous to the economic environment of stagflation, where the price of goods and services rises while gross domestic product falls.  That is, the academic emphasis on understanding art history and theories from multiple disciplines is rising while the value students place on the current critical model in the studio is falling.  The assumption here is that the critical model while lacking standardization nonetheless is grounded in an understanding of history and theory.

The process of learning to make art as either a graduate or an undergraduate is bewildering.  The discipline of art now requires, in addition to studio knowledge, expertise in no less than five formerly distinct fields of study: philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science, and art history insofar as it has in traditional practice been distinguished from the production of art. The need to know art history and theories of various kinds is legitimate and important because art practice is a public discipline with a history of development.  Artists of the vanguard, the anti-vanguard, and the post-vanguard have pushed the practice of art making into a complicated arena of conflicting beliefs.  The legacy of vanguardism is fully realized in terms of the breadth of theory one must learn in order to understand the current state of the practice.  My point is not that the students under discussion are put-off by the volume and difficulty of this body of work and thereby ignore it altogether, but that the sincere attempt to study it, live and work

within it is a causal factor of the deflationary posture.  The result is better described as an educated indifference.

The GoodWork project at Harvard University is a study of the work (not restricted to any single type) of both individuals and institutions conducted under the Project Zero umbrella.  The GoodWork model "suggests that two main forms of dysfunction threaten the breakdown of professional realms: **anomie**, reflecting the breakdown of norms to the extent that nobody can any longer distinguish the right thing to do, and **alienation**, when norms become rigid and oppressive and nobody desires to do the work that has to be done" (Ting, 7).  Tiffany Ting suggests that critics, historians, and philosophers are experiencing anomie and artists are somewhat alienated.  Her assumption is that alienation occurs because historically, "[vanguard] artists have defined themselves by rejecting prevailing norms and standards, within both the domain of art and in society" (Ting, 7).  It is reasonable to assume that students of art are susceptible to alienation in this respect insofar as they come to identify themselves and their art practice with these vanguard values.  I believe this is the case, however, the more damaging issue is anomie in art practice and the problem of defining oneself in relation to the artworld.

What contributed to the state of anomie in art practice and what effect does this have on art students?  Anomie is defined in The American Heritage Dictionary as social instability, alienation, and purposelessness stemming from the erosion or lack of standards and values ("Anomie", 75).  In relation to the project GoodWork definition we can equate "purposelessness" with "difficulty distinguishing the *right* thing to do."  And yes, project GoodWork has ethical overtones but this expression also refers to the issue of finding a direction.  The first question we need to ask is whether students in fact lack

standards and values or if those standards and values employed are unrecognizable as such. Following Gombrich and Goodman, it doesn't make sense to claim that standards and values are lacking under the assumption that basic perception, as inseparable from conception, imposes structure. Both experience and expression are conditioned in part by preexisting standards or values. To argue that standards are lacking also begs the question that they are simply not the correct or best standards and values. Students do employ in thought and action, as a matter of necessity, standards and values, and what needs to be understood is how these follow from the conflicting positions we call modern and postmodern. The standards and values embraced by these students involve to a strong degree the notions of plurality, fragmentation, constructivism, indeterminacy, and relativism. These beliefs stand in contradistinction to essences or universals, autonomy, certainty, and reductivism.

Has the clash of modern and postmodern paradigms resulted in an absurd field of art practice: A ridiculously incongruous state, where these postmodern ideas are no longer productively liberating in opposition to modern ideas? Have we moved beyond Krauss' expanded field of relevant features of an artwork into an absurd field where we can neither justify what is relevant nor what is not relevant in critical practice? And furthermore, does the presence of anomie indicate a problem for artists in the creative process? One reason for claiming there exists an inability to determine what to do appears because there is no longer a tradition or dominant position against which novelty and subversiveness operate. A thesis having been successfully countered by its antithesis in the strict sense leaves the aforementioned method no space to function. One might at this point look for a synthesis through which direction might be found. However, this

clash doesn't actualize the breakdown within art practice of something against which to work, but rather highlights a substantial difference in the direction of the searching. Teleologically, the search moves from a reductive process of excluding that which cannot be essential to an expansive process of including everything that can fit. We move from being able under modernism to determine what is relevant to a situation under postmodernism where it isn't possible to determine what is irrelevant. The assumption is that postmodern beliefs are considered generally to be anti-modern beliefs, which is itself a belief not universally agreed upon. While changes in modern art and cultural practices progressed through alternatives and non-contradictory negations (with some exceptions), the change in cultural practices brought about under the category of postmodernism operated on a different level. Rather than saying, for example, that one's objective is to discover the essence of art, one subscribes to the thought that there is no such thing as an essence. This entails the loss of autonomy for the individual disciplines insofar as autonomy requires differentiation, uniqueness and an existence independent of a conditioning context. This is an important element in understanding the current condition not only because of the direct impact on art production but also because of the application of this idea to the study of personal identity.

On August 11, 2006, in a review for the New York Times, Roberta Smith wrote: "Mr. Williams, 26, recently graduated from the School of Visual Arts with a major in photography, but he is mainly a product of what might be called the my-art-my-self, full-disclosure school of aesthetics. The shabby Romantic bohemianism of a bygone era pervades his show, which seems to include most of his belongings, as well as everything he has made during the last four years…. No single part of this show is as interesting as

its totality, but the individual works indicate several talents" (Smith, B30). It is unfortunate that what Smith found interesting about the totality of this show was not explicated in this review, leaving us with a hollow statement. If the critical interest resides in a holistic analysis of the work of this my-art-my-self type, the focal point of that interest must be the artist. And one competing interpretation among many is that Williams produced this show as a way of expressing that we in fact are engaged in judging the person.

Smith recognizes a hefty volume of art historical precedents within Williams's show, which indicates the possibility that this show is a tongue in cheek exercise intimately related to the practices of art history and criticism. Williams has produced along side drawings and photographs biographical objects ranging from the various styles of shoes he owned to the furniture from his living room; thus he has cut down the workload of both art historians and critics in their attempt to interpret the work and to place him in relation to other artists. If biographical information including the constructed image (something like a brand) is relevant to the interpretation and evaluation of art, why not include it up front along with some instances that exemplify one's drawing skills? One might counter argue here that this biographical stuff is in fact *the artwork* and that my comments assume they are extraneous elements. This I will concede because it's not my role as critic or audience member to determine what is and what is not art; that is the role of the artist. However, the problem is not whether or not this is art, the issue is whether or not work such as this can sustain the practice of art as worthwhile for an audience to experience beyond mere entertainment or use as decoration.

With this in mind, this work appears to be on the order of a genealogical exercise. Hal Foster claims that "the partial shift from the old art history to the new is marked by a partial shift in object – away from histories of style and analyses of form toward *genealogies of the subject*" (Foster, 89). Subject in this respect refers to the audience. The premise is that identity is a social construct and art functions in a pivotally important constructive capacity. The work of personal disclosure is an alteration of the art-object-as-constructive-of-an-audience model because it presents the audience with the task of constructing the artist.

Recall the modern artist Robert Motherwell's insistence that his painting was an expression of his soul, his essence, and that he didn't give a damn if anyone understood that. Williams's show is hardly reductive or essentialist but is drenched in indications of personal choices that I am proposing are included so as to be both faithful to a relativist position while also functioning as elements by which an audience can construct his image. We should consider the collapse of the grand narratives of modernism with respect to this objective. Notice the inward turn towards personal preoccupation in the form of an individual narrative as moving to the opposite extreme from the heroic individualism of Motherwell's modernism. We have the absolutely reductive on one hand and the all inclusive on the other. This also highlights a difference of temporal attention, from timeless universals to the transitory and ephemeral.

Williams is either unable or unwilling to make a decision concerning what is irrelevant. This represents not a question begging collapse of standards and values but the presence of standards and values that are effectively directing art practice into an absurd field. To claim that everything cannot be relevant (in the widest sense) does not

entail that any single discernable feature cannot be relevant. Even if we argue for less than the complete incoherence of the everything-is-relevant model, indeterminism as a theoretical framework (employed by audience and artist) fails to generate a sufficient degree of belief in the possibility of coherence to advance the process of meaning creation. Neither is there sufficient doubt among artists and art students about indeterminacy, as a principle explanation of epistemic activity, to promote inquiry into its efficacy in communication, in art making. Foster captures a similar sentiment in the expression "paradigm-of-no-paradigm."

> Our paradigm-of-no-paradigm can also abet a flat indifference, a stagnant, incommensurability, a new Alexandrianism, and this posthistorical default of contemporary art is no improvement on the old historicist determinism of modernist art. All of us (artists, critics, curators, historians, viewers) need some narrative to focus our present practices. (Foster, 128)

Two underlying premises in my argument are that art is an act of communication and that belief in coherence is an important feature of interpersonal communication. In order to understand Williams' act of communication we need to consider the changes postmodern theory (generally speaking) has brought about in our understanding of subjectivity, knowledge, and reality.

Motherwell's act of expression manifests his position as autonomous and in relation to both nature and to a culture from which he is separated; this is an example of the alienation associated with modernism. The postmodern subject is said to be no longer suffering from alienation but from fragmentation, and the anxiety may be even more intense. Fredric Jameson believes that the postmodern subject has lost the ability to organize their subjectivity into coherent experience over time by linking the past, present and future, so how could the cultural productions be anything other than fragmented, heterogeneous simulacra. The issue according to Jameson involves the replacement of the

old relation of signifier and signified by relations among signifiers as generating meaning.   Meaning is not anchored in a so-called real, grounded referent. Following Baudrillard, he believes simulacra to be distinct from representations because the latter are based on the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real.  The simulacrum has the power to do away with its own model, the so-called real referent, and the notion of truth as construed as a relation of *correspondence* between them.

Richard Rorty confronts the issue of correspondence theories of knowledge within mainstream analytic philosophy.  The modern self was born when knowledge was founded upon a separation of the inner and outer, the relation of sense datum to an object. Rorty argues that this is the path to Philosophy-as-epistemology -- also referred to as the search for immutable structures (a powerful foundation of many cultural practices).

> To understand how to know better is to understand how to improve the activity of a quasi-visual faculty, the Mirror of Nature, and thus to think of knowledge as an assemblage of accurate representations…. To have accurate representations is to find, within the Mirror, a special privileged class of representations so compelling that their accuracy cannot be doubted…. The neo-Kantian consensus thus appears as the end-product of an original wish to substitute *confrontation* for *conversation* as the determinant of our belief. (Rorty, 163)

Confrontation in this sense means to be brought "face-to-face" with the object of belief, and claims to knowledge will have a foundation, complete with certainty, based upon the relation of correspondence.  Following Dewey and Wittgenstein, Rorty rejects this historical line of thought and introduces the concept of epistemological behaviorism, leaving the modern vision of certainty behind.  This theory asserts that claims to knowledge are socially justified in communities of interlocutors.

During the same time period of the early 1980's Christopher Lasch wrote: "Overexposure to manufactured illusions soon destroys their representational power.  The illusion of reality dissolves, not in a heightened sense of reality as we might expect, but in a remarkable indifference to reality.  Our sense of reality appears to rest, curiously

enough, on our willingness to be taken in by the staged illusion of reality" (Lasch, 87).

Lasch's criticism of our culture focuses mainly on a concept that is often applied in a less technical way to many art students in the present: narcissism. His definition of narcissism does not mean merely self-absorption. Lasch characterizes pathological narcissism as dependence on the vicarious warmth of others, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, unsatisfied oral cravings, and as the psychological condition that occurs when "love rejected turns back to the self as hatred" (Lasch, 34). He claims that this state derives from such sources as the proliferation of images, the cult of consumption, therapeutic ideologies, and changes in family life and socialization (Lasch, 33).

All of these thinkers are dealing with issues that contribute to what I have identified as the deflationary posture. Lasch diagnoses Americans as having moved beyond the phobias and fixations of the 1950s into character disorders marked by "vague, diffuse dissatisfactions with life" – emptiness, purposelessness, and depression (Lasch, 37). There are a number of recent articles on his work that support the thesis that his words still apply today. Jameson ultimately claims that the postmodern subject lacks the cognitive ability to map the space of the current environment because of its enormity. This space hasn't become more manageable in a global economy. Rorty on the other hand changes the approach to justification of claims to know by relocating it in public space while rejecting he possibility of knowing something for certain in the modernist sense. In addition to social trends like those identified by Lasch, university level art theory, art history, and studio courses generally follow the developments of continental

philosophers such as Jameson, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, Marx, Lacan, and Habermas among others.

How do students come to terms with personal identity when theory releases them into a vacuum?  Such a condition confronts one with the responsibility of both creating landmarks and the ground on which they stand. The potentially liberating aspect of this state in practicality can result in exasperation and anxiety.  Furthermore, in a state of indeterminacy both the forgoing of argument in favor of mere discussion and the acceptance of the presupposed conclusion that attempting resolution is a futile exercise result in complacency.  These are conditions for an identity crisis.  Charles Taylor claims that an identity crisis occurs when one is radically uncertain as to where they stand on issues of what is good or of value.  "[People having an identity crisis] lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial.  The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile, or undetermined.  This is a painful and frightening experience" (Taylor, 28).  Furthermore, "to know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand" (Taylor, 27).

The problem is one of orientation in a space wherein one cannot generate strong qualitative distinctions between answers to the questions that frame this space.  Taylor's argument is that the holding of mere preferences, resulting from *invented* frameworks, cannot result in the anxiety actually experienced.  "To see frameworks as orientations…[means that]…one orients oneself in a space which exists independently of one's success or failure in finding one's bearings, which, moreover, makes the tasks of finding these bearings inescapable" (Taylor, 30).  Taylor argues from the presence of

anxiety to an ontological ground.  It is a formidable task to argue today from the presence

of anxiety in practicing art to an ontological foundation.  Clive Bell and Greenberg lost

the battle for a stable grounding in significant form, however the problem of arbitrary

critical criteria has been with us ever since.  Long ago Kant said that nature gives the rule

to art, but with the postmodern shift in direction nature is no longer in the picture.

Because one's personal identity is in part determined through association with the

discipline in which they work, the issues raised here are relevant.  Lave and Wenger

highlight this in their book on learning theory entitled Situated Learning: Legitimate

Peripheral Participation.

> Viewing learning as legitimate peripheral participation means that learning is not merely a
> condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership.  We conceive of
> identities as long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in
> communities of practice.  Thus identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another.
> (Lave, 53)

It follows from the fact that students majoring in art in college desire to be artists that

their identity will in part be a relation between themselves and the artworld, inclusive of

theoretical positions.  Art is of course a cultural practice without any definitive

membership requirements or regulatory boundaries like those disciplines studied by Lave

and Wenger.  However, the theory applies because individuals do progress from the

periphery as students to increasing levels of participation as exhibiting artists.

The consequence of vanguardism on the current state of art practice is an

important conditioning factor of the deflationary posture, but it isn't the only one.

Another important factor is the rise of participatory media: wiki sites, blogs, vlogs,

MUDs (multi-user domains), message boards, and chat rooms.  Participatory media can

influence the formation of identity, knowledge, and critical practice.  With regard to the

construction of identity, MUDs and blogs are particularly powerful Internet tools.

According to Mark Poster, new media is not diachronic but synchronic, multi-user.
"People connect with strangers without much of the social baggage that divides and
alienates. Without visual cues about gender, age, ethnicity and social status,
conversations open up in directions that otherwise might be avoided" (Poster, 543).

In both blogs and MUDs, participants can construct an identity in any conceivable
manner, and Sherry Turkle believes MUDs in particular are beneficial instruments for
examining decentered identities.

> I created selves that were made and transformed by language. And different personae were
> exploring different aspects of the self. The notion of a decentered identity was concretized by
> experiences on a computer screen. In this way, cyberspace becomes an object to think with for
> thinking about identity—an element of cultural bricolage (Turkle, 646).

What emerges is a focus on the individual narrative, which was also mentioned with
respect to Williams' show. Access to the "real" properties of the person is under
intentional control. In our daily lives we often intentionally seek to control our image but
in the MUD environment the range of control is vastly greater. The benefits in terms of
understanding our differences, experimentation, and the formation of inclusive
communities are clear, however these resources are not without an influence on how
claims to know, to being right, are justified and as such will have an impact on art
practice and criticism.

Blogs and Wiki sites have properties and functions that are related to the
formation of the deflationary posture. In general, blogs function as public online journals
and open-ended conversations where posts (entries) are listed in reverse chronological
order. A blog purist would say that a blog is a raw, unedited, expression of individuality.
Blogs are powerful media forces judging by their impact on political elections and
business models. "Wikis are web pages that will allow anybody who is allowed to log

into them to change them" ("Among", 14).  In the case of Wikipedia, an encyclopedia,

that includes everyone with access to the Internet.  The obvious difference between this

type of media and older print and television media is the level of user participation.

Users upload content, create links to other web pages, compile ratings and rankings of

content, and disseminate information in a collaborative manner.  The whole system

functions on a completely different model from the authoritarian unidirectional structure

of older media.  The system is aligned as a fluid conversation that capitalizes on

collaborative intelligence and the socialization of expertise.  According to Joe Kraus, the

founder of JotSpot, "The old media model was: there is one source of truth.  The new

media model is: there are multiple sources of truth, and we will sort it out" ("Among", 5).

The belief is that in such an environment, with so many eyeballs on the content, that it

will ultimately be made more useful and correct.

     The different forms of participatory media possess many of the following

qualities: conversational, collaborative, egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, unedited,

unscripted, open-ended, present, and ephemeral.  What we are witnessing as a change of

paradigm in the media industry is also having an impact on student attitudes towards

instructor based criticism.  With the rise of participatory media, the old media paradigm

of "programmer sets the conditions for the user" is being replaced with the paradigm of

"the user is now the programmer," effectively eliminating any individual authority.   So

in relation to the experience of participatory media, the classroom environment appears

on the level of the old media paradigm, inclusive of any preferred or implied objectives

for art making and critical criteria.  This circumstance promotes not an amendment to our

current conventions for deciding what is and what is not 'good' but rather a change to the structure of critical practice itself.

My contention is not that students have suddenly come to dislike authority figures, but that the experience of a new media model and the progression of theories interwoven into art education engender a position of confidence that the classroom model is an inferior model. Students enter college with an understanding of the teaching context and epistemological beliefs developed from their experiences in the high school classroom and with their parents. A student's choice of learning approach depends upon "meta-learning, which Biggs (1987b, p.5) refers to as "students' awareness of and control over their own learning processes" (Cano, 207). That approach can follow from an extrinsic motivation which values test results, an intrinsic motivation which values the search for meaning, or an achievement approach where they do whatever is necessary for achievement (Cano, 206). The deflationary posture can be seen in part as a reaction to quantitative modes of learning, behaviorist learning theory, and the conduit metaphor of learning that have dominated the classroom. Effie Maclellan claims that "[behavioral learning] is the result of the reinforcement of behavior within a context that is *deliberately manipulated by the teacher*" (Maclellan, 136). Her construal of a behaviorist account of learning assumes knowledge is transmitted via a conduit, such as a lecture, to a passive spectator that need not be included in setting learning goals or the planning of the teaching. Learning is said to be measurable and testable, that is, quantitative. The alternative is qualitative learning where the focus is on meanings and deeper relations over superficial reproduction. Maclellan claims that "[behaviorism's] emphasis on extrinsic demands is manifest in the expectation that others will do the complex thinking

for us and, so, results in a general notion of learning being what others want/require us to do" (Maclellan, 142).

Parenting techniques also have an impact on student learning approaches. This statement seems obvious but with the myriad of parenting types its difficult to use generalities as supporting evidence. However, critics from Lasch to Hara Marano have sited self-esteem building, excessive praise, the deskilling of parents, overmonitoring and oversheltering as factors affecting adolescent development. The main side effect of self-esteem building and excessive praise is the development of anxiety because of a reduction in the ability to cope with stressful circumstances. Anxiety and depression are rising faster in adolescents and young adults than in any other age category. David Anderegg, professor of psychology at Bennington College claims that self-esteem building is counter productive because "when you cheat on their behalf to get them ahead of other children"—by pursuing accommodations and recommendations—you just completely corrode their sense of self" (Marano, 6). The overmonitoring and oversheltering that stems from parental fear of the competitive socioeconomic environment results in a negative effect because they restrict the development of decision making capabilities and make kids overly self-conscious. Anderegg clams that "as a result they get less communicative; scrutiny teaches them to bury their real feelings deeply. And most of all, self-consciousness removes the safety to be experimental and playful" (Marano, 5). Also, the deskilling of parents that Lasch identifies in his cultural criticism leads to the reliance upon parenting techniques that are more therapeutic than empowering. His argument is that the self-reliance that comes from trusting and utilizing one's own skills has been educated out of the population by the presence of experts in all

areas of life. The presence of these influences in the lives of teenagers and young adults in our culture has created identity problems.

Other psychologists discuss the concept of psychosocial autonomy as being a major indicator of a child's wellbeing and potential academic success. According to Steinberg, Elmen, and Mounts, a person's autonomy is "defined in terms of their sense of self-reliance, identity, and self-direction" (Steinberg, 1425). It does not appear that the identified parenting trends nor the dominant early education approach contribute to psychosocial autonomy. However, the conceptual learning model based on qualitative learning goals and a constructive theory of knowledge does. One need not necessarily reject the conduit metaphor of learning under a constructive theory of knowledge, but the reality of communication and the construction of the self as active rather than passive activities suggests that it should be rejected. Maclellan claims "the idea that there might be some received truth to be passed on as a commodity to some ignorant recipient, is quite inconsistent with constructivism" (Maclellan, 140). The belief is that a constructivist approach to learning encourages an intrinsic motivation to seek deeper meanings and connections when they are involved as co-participants in determining learning goals and planning the teaching. "[However], it is possible that students will have constructed knowledge other than what the teacher might consider to be useful pre-requisite knowledge for the teacher's intention" (Maclellan, 140).

My argument is that the consequences of vanguardism and parenting trends result in states of anxiety related to problems of personal identity. Participatory media provides both a release for the anxiety and a liberating critical model in line with the current theoretical standards of indeterminism, conversational justification, and reality as a

construct. The new media model allows for experimentation in constructing identities

and preferences unedited expressions of individuality. It also promotes an egalitarian

conversational conception of knowledge justification free from the constraints of the

authoritarian based teaching approach. The students that hold the deflationary posture

are engaging the theories imbedded in the current state of the discipline and are

responding to the conditions of contemporary life. And as such, the work they produce

reflects the direction of these influences.

Is this situation productive in sustaining and broadening the practice of art as

worthwhile for an audience to experience? Are there values in this discipline the absence

of which would render it worse off in the future? Lave and Wenger identify a dilemma

with regard to this issue.

> The different ways in which old-timers and newcomers establish and maintain identities conflict and generate competing viewpoints on the practice and its development. Newcomers are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand they need to engage in the existing practice, which has developed over time: to understand it, to participate in it, and to become full members of the community in which it exists. On the other hand, they have a stake in its development as they begin to establish their own identity in its future. (Lave, 115)

Richard Cary argues that we should structure a critical art pedagogy such that it

challenges "traditional instructional practices that replace the students' art worlds with

the official school art world built on canonical adult standards. For the most part,

students construct their art worlds outside school in the affairs of everyday life" (Cary,

12). Cary believes that "embracing the postmodern concept of art's value and meaning

as socially contextualized and relational instead of autonomous is one of critical art

pedagogy's primary strategies" (Cary, 21). Hal Foster argues to the contrary.

"Autonomy, even semi-autonomy, may be an illusion or, better, a fiction; but periodically

it is useful, even necessary, as it was for Loos, Kraus, and company a hundred years

ago….Perhaps it is time to recapture a sense of the political situatedness of both autonomy and its transgression, a sense of historical dialectic of disciplinarity and its contestation" (Foster, 25).

The criticism of Foster is that he is blinded by nostalgia for a defunct modernism, however his argument is pragmatic; autonomy can be put to use as a lever to upset the posthistorical attitudes that preference the present and which in his analysis have resulted in the depthless designed subject of today.  His analysis suggests that political objectives and problems internal to the discipline of art making can coexist in artwork.  A criticism of Cary concerns the potential for his constructivist epistemology to slide into absolute relativism, "the jettisoning of any substantial rational justification or warrant at all" (Philips, 11).  For example, my students have attempted to argue from the intrinsic equality of all human beings to the equality of all artworks insofar as artworks are made by humans.  We need to maintain the meaningfulness of judgments of artwork while also countenancing conflicting true statements.  We need to avoid the fall into simple minded relativism.  Accepting that what is said is true because it is from the perspective of a particular system (such as a geocentric vs. a heliocentric perspective on the movement of the earth) does not make what is said true.  Nelson Goodman writes: "That the earth is at rest according to one system and moves according to another says nothing about how the earth behaves but only something about what these versions say.  What must be added is that these versions are true.  But then the contradiction reappears, and our escape is blocked" (Goodman, 30).

On one hand we need to embrace the direction in which student work (and recent graduate's work) progresses as both a method of encouraging the qualitative learning

approach and as a means of understanding the effects of philosophical and social theory on the artworld to come. The drive to work on self-presentation as a means of self-understanding is a necessary step towards healthy human agency; Marano claims that "a steady march of success through regimented childhood arranged and monitored by parents creates young adults who need time to explore themselves" (Marano, 6). The challenge for them is in trying to gain an understanding of the boundaries of control over their lives while developing an identity within a discipline that actually compounds the difficulty.

On the other hand, we need to support their individual development without also allowing art's value as communication with an audience to be neglected. My contention is that works of personal preoccupation and works that are exemplary of indeterminacy are neglectful of the relation to an audience. The audience values decision making on the part of the artist, and the inability to determine either relevance or irrelevance as a default state of relativism thwarts this process. This statement does not negate the fact that meaning is constructed by an audience nor does it infer that the meaning constructed conform to the artist's intended meaning in order to be acceptable. A thorough going relativism promotes a sense of indifference towards communicating, the educational aspect of art creation, because sufficient conviction in beliefs about which one communicates fails to obtain. Analysis and insight on the part of the artist, as presumed by an audience, exhibits integrity in the act of communication. Being confronted with indeterminacy as a means for generating the experience of indeterminacy in an audience can today only result in the decorative or entertaining work of art bereft of the political and analytical ends of which art is capable.

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