

Doug Ashford

Notes on the Pedagogical Importance of Failure:

The MFA in Visual Art Program at Vermont College of Norwich University

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The commercial methodologies of art and their professionalization are on the rise. In most postgraduate programs, the measuring of artistic success according to predetermined notions of aesthetic, social or proprietary value, are in the ascendancy in America. This is the context that I am teaching in now. The potential for making artworks that contest established orthodoxies of privatized subjectivity and social place seems to have a direct relationship to an institution's ability to understand the importance of critical practices despite all common-sensical notions of success. The graduate students at the MFA in Visual Art Program at Vermont College of Norwich University come to the school to find a context in which their own life and work experiences can be thought of as critical working material. They usually come from a background in which the professionalism of the art and design worlds are perceived as standards developed by others: a set of industrial constraints. They struggle with the negative complicity mandated by marketing formats, centralized bureaucracies and corporate organization. Their struggle is the reason they got into this line of work in the first place; it is the set of understandings mandating our program to turn away from contemporary professional models and instead adopt an open and critical pedagogy as our organizing principle. This talk will be an overview of how the Program addresses the individual needs of a student to invent new definitions of artistic practice according to the specific demands of the places and times they inhabit – according to their own situations.

The Vermont College MFA Program is based on the principle of individualized, student-centered learning. Our first class was graduated in 1993, so we are still a very new project. There is no curriculum and no predetermined course of study. Applicants are taken from all walks of life, all ages; usually people who have spent time working in other capacities than a classically understood studio artist. Once accepted, candidates are required to find artist-teachers in their home cities to work directly with them who are paid by the Program to be mentors. Designed as a system of "distance-learning", students are awarded a Masters in Fine Arts Degree after four six-month semesters of studio work completed off campus. Also during that period they write four researched visual-culture studies with Program faculty. The aim of

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the Program is to provide a discursive graduate fine-art experience for students who wish to design their own degree progression.

Founded with a desire to inspire artistic autonomy in the context of our culture's increasing conformity, Vermont College has retained its identity as an alternative model for graduate education in the fine arts for nine years. To maintain this sense of alternative as a working project, our program is organized around two ten-day residencies every six months in Montpelier, Vermont. There, students present and critique work, develop both studio and writing study plans in discussion with resident faculty, and attend lectures and symposia. We request that students produce their studio work in an extended dialogue between their homes and the intellectual demands of an academic center. By encouraging a dialogic course of theoretical direction and method, the Program applies an incredible diversity of approaches to the definition of what a contemporary artist is, and how artistic practices can impact on the local cultural enterprises that surround each of us. The resulting interaction between the context of skepticism established by our pedagogy and the specificity brought by each individual student establishes a strong interdisciplinary view of both practice and knowledge. Vermont students repeatedly demonstrate that it is only in questioning the actual categories of artistic professionalism that a compelling creative process can be engaged.

The Program is administered by an Academic Director and an Administrative Director who work in close collaboration with faculty. The faculty for the 2000/2001 year are exemplary of the interdisciplinary nature of the Program itself: myself with a history of collaborative art practice as a member of "Group Material" for 15 years, Ernest Pujol, an installation artist; John Di Stefano, a film scholar and artist; Martha Fleming, an artist committed to claiming identities through urban infrastructures; Catherine Hall, a painter from Vermont; Janet A. Kaplan, an art historian and activist specializing in feminist interpretations of surrealism; Steven Kurtz of "Critical Art Ensemble", an expert on electronic disturbance and tactical media; Miwon Kwon, who has written extensively on site specificity; Michael Oatman, an artist designing critiques of eugenics and biotechnology; Nina Parris, a photographer and former museum curator; Claire Pentacost, a project-based artist practicing in Chicago; Humberto Ramirez, a painter and sound artist; and Faith Wilding, well-known artist and theoretician of both former and new feminisms. All of the faculty

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struggle with full-time teaching loads at other schools and universities. Their continued commitment to this program in the face of such career demands is a testament to its vitality.

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The way students actually go about designing their own progress through the Program is as varied as the people who go there. Institutionally, we set up a system of interaction that we hope will engender a critical relationship to practice. This system has two elements in it that each student must fulfill. At the beginning of each residency, they are asked to develop a study plan for visual-culture research. We insist that this written work be of a nature intimately bound up with problems or questions that a student has had about their studio practice. Each individual is urged to create an analytic framework for their practice through an examination of historical and contemporary visual culture. This study of reading and writing is continued through the mail with the faculty throughout the six-month semester that follows the residency. In many ways, such a distanced position to learning may seem antithetical to the traditional "hands on" atelier system of postgraduate education exemplified both here and in the States. But it needs to be understood that by working in familiar locations and studying to apply new information to an existing context, our students are customizing contemporary discourse to serve the needs of their particular cultural situation.

While working on their research projects long distance, students are of course more engaged with the studio work they undertake. They do this with an approved artist-teacher who lives in the same locality. By working sympathetically with the context for the student's previous work, the studio instructor can insist that the student undertake work that is performed in direct relation to the circumstances and site from which it arises. Projects in studio work progress also in direct relation to written research of the visual-culture study, combining the known practical constraints with newly discovered theoretical challenges. By mixing local support for the daily struggle of making art with the intense intervention of theoretical research, students are able to undergo remarkable growth in the four six-month semesters. By stressing continuity between theory and practice over a series of different research topics, we are able to ask students to progressively invent new critical methodologies to apply to the specific needs of their media and context.

At best, what happens through this two-tiered approach is that the interaction between researched information and contextualized practices leads to a crisis

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of production. Such a crisis is hardly negative at all, as those of you in the room who struggle with critical art making know all too well. It is in the confrontation between the place for art and the hopes that we have for it, that real invention can happen. But Vermont students are in an even more specific relation to the necessity for reinventing art models. As people who have already rejected the star system of art making, mostly committed to staying in the lives that they have already established, the necessity of applying critical methods in a local context become manifest. In a sense then, this is the idea of cultural studies brought home. If Raymond Williams theorized years ago that the culture of the kitchen is as important as the culture of the opera house, today this comparison is lived by students who seek to adapt social context and critical theory to the context of a locality.

I'm asked here to address how visual-art training can react to the permanently changing social circumstances of art production. Frankly, I think that the reactive tendencies of graduate schools are already overperformed. I can't think of a single MFA program in the States that still operates on a proactive pedagogical platform, one that has established a conservative model of culture that the institution aims to preserve. Instead schools labor over the most recent developments in our industry as examples to lead students through the gates of professionalism. As Howard Singerman has carefully pointed out in his book, "Art Subjects", the technique of art making is no longer taught; replaced by teaching the artist. Through a series of examples dedicated to artistic personality and behavior, the student is acclamated into a profession as someone who needs to understand the sovereignty of the institutions that mark and demarcate success. This is how I was taught: the artist himself or herself was presented as a kind of signpost to intellectual territory; something to emulate by example.

Obviously any critical role that culture might hope to achieve demands the contestation of narrow categories of the artist as professional, even those now divorced from traditional narratives of craft or mastery. To question this sovereignty though, a student must be prepared to seriously examine failure – not on the simplistic level of practical struggle but on the more metaphysical level of seeing practice itself as a tangential influence on ideology at best. As Guy DeBord pointed out, the fact that the Paris Commune of 1871 lasted only a few months may be a demonstration of its perfect character. The students at Vermont usually bring such failed but beautiful social models with

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them to the Program, models that we as the faculty meet regularly to discuss and process, as things that can be brought back into the work. As sentimental or romantic as it may sound, all students understand on some level the need for retaining a generative idea of art as representing a model of humanity that is different from the life we are given. As citizens of an increasingly bureaucratized planet, seduced to subscribe to very limited notions of subjectivity and social relations, inventions of newly shared commitment to different definitions of public life are few and far between. The fact is, that historical models of more open relationships between social change and culture, from the Commune and Arthur Rimbaud through Dada to Reyner Banham and Archigram, are often unavailable to our students in their undergraduate training. Indeed, even the work of the Situationists, which consciously and latently motors the very pedagogy of the Program, is often absent from most of their repertoire.

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Disciplines as we now know, are built upon a base of limiting language. As Michel Foucault reminded us many years ago, by allowing only a specific range of objects to be perused by a particular form of knowledge, the boundaries of discipline are guaranteed. Theory has been introduced often as a tool to expose the inadequate limitations of professional practices; their complicity with the status quo or lack of consciousness in relation to ideological forces. By demanding from our students an understanding of the genealogy of artistic discipline, we are exposing their work to the possibility of critical self-appraisal. In most graduate programs I have visited, the idea of this self-reflection is antagonistic to the overriding concerns with adopting a profession. How many questions can we ask of the role of the artist while still accepting the fact that we are becoming one? The need to disrupt the traditional categories of artistic production are obvious to many, both because of what such questioning implies in terms of a renewed practice and simply because the asking of such questions leads to new forms of beauty; to more fun. Nonetheless, the character of such questioning, of subjecting practice to the demands of theory has devastating results with many students. This is the crisis I spoke about earlier. At Vermont, in an effort to embrace this crisis, the criteria we use to evaluate and progress students through the Program is experience – not product. As difficult as this might sound to those of us still committed to making objects, the degree of a crisis in practice can indicate a corresponding mark of tremendous learning. By rigorously applying new un-

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derstanding to the models of production that students bring with them to our program, we are able to discern new possibilities for a particular. Sometimes this might mean that a student decides to put down paint brushes for political organizing, but also sometimes it may simply mean that a student chooses to use those brushes differently. The specificity here is crucial because the right questioning of a set of works bound for a gallery in Chelsea might not be the same for a work designed to be hung off the border fences in Tijuana during NAFTA negotiations. Because we reject, as an institution, any idea of "industrial standards", the relationship between theory and practice is always context-specific. It is possible to actively seek to problematize both the institutions of art and the traditions of activism with teaching.

The irony with professionalism as we experience it historically in the training of artists is becoming clearer. What may have begun as a process of gaining expertise through acquiring a skill or craft ("learned in the university and practiced outside it"), has been replaced by a new kind of profession both "in and of the university itself". Recent writing on this change of educational context points out that it has as much to do with the shifting structures of exhibiting institutions as with the art that surrounds them. At Vermont this problem takes on a unique character because, quite simply, we are less professionally driven. This is due to the overwhelming character of our students as generally more experienced and therefore filled with both the skepticism and the relativism that can come with the perspective of time. Many of our students go on to develop generative productive relationships to the traditional institutions of the gallery and the museum. They are "successful". But for many others, what may be important for centered art institutions on the cusp of market-oriented practices, is not necessarily of concern. But also, as a program devoted to the situational needs of each individual, Vermont College tends to engineer a local and specific application of theory to practice. It would be ineffectual for us to present ourselves as a surrogate for industrial centers, mortgaged, so to speak to the museum and the art journal. Instead we try to organize study in a way in which critical narratives can be applied in the situation that the student presents as his or her own concern. This sense of pedagogical specificity means that as instructors we are less centered on dominant exhibiting institutions, urging students to instead reinvent the context they already work in. So according to some benchmarks of our industry, we may seem to be a kind of failure.

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As I have said then, the combination of practice and theory as a model for production can be offered to students if a graduate program is open to the particular needs of a student's practice. By accepting primarily working artists to our program, Vermont may not be the best case study, our students arrive with developed experiences of art making and then are urged to apply new understandings to them. But I thought I could go over a few examples, at least in description of how specific individuals have negotiated the things we offer them.

We have had a graphic designer who came to us unsatisfied with the service relationship she felt to her own industry. Through a careful undressing of design history as a series of client relationships, she was able to redesign her work to serve a phantom client, invented by her and without instrumental function. When designing work without agency, her work took on new relationships to the politics of representation – and found itself placed in gallery setting rather than advertising. Similarly, that same year we admitted a student who was already well-established in the field of traditional watercolor landscape painting. By encouraging him to research the nineteenth century's aesthetic investment in realism as parallel to the emerging movement for more open and collective political spaces, he was able to expand his practice. In his third year in the Program he began to actually interact with the undocumented workers who migrated through his home area of California. By combining theories of cultural protest with his own skills and context he has gone on to develop new collaborative artistic ventures in public art that challenge the frontier mentality and cultural xenophobia of the American Southwest. Another student that year sought to depict new definitions of masculinity in painting. By becoming acquainted with both the psychoanalytic trajectories of male fantasies as depicted by Klaus Theweleit and innovations in queer theory, he was able to apply new problems for figural depiction to his work, eventually expressed through digital manipulation of traditional gender representations. By fostering diversity in thought and diversity in method, enabling our students to compare their practices with historical precedents, we have had some remarkable development of productive critical practices.

As simultaneously better and worse than it was, the category of the artist is one that we all inherit from a complex ensemble of historical forces and economic investments of the invented worlds that surround us. The category of

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the artist is better in the way that, unlike other enlightenment disciplines of intellectual labor, it carries a subaltern tradition of remaking the category of work as the work is done. In other words, the understanding of art's value is redetermined with every artwork made. This tremendous self-consciousness delivers a stunningly difficult definition for students: one of an intellectual that is committed both to production and to skepticism. It is clearly an immense task to be both, to engage optimistically in the making of a culture that is at best a peripheral effect on the "march of progress" – and to continuously maintain doubt in the face of the limiting weight of mass culture's empty affirmations. The scale of this comparison, between wonderful student work and the horror of dominant culture, is an indication of how it may always seem to a teacher that things are worse, even when they are better. I think that understanding the compelling nature of failure allows us to accept this paradox, in teaching, in practice, and in the areas in between.

So as a teacher, I have to work with a category of the artist as both complicit and resistant. And both of these identities are positions that can be questioned through the daily practice of teaching. I think that this happens first through the explicit analysis of the histories of social and aesthetic forms that predate us, and secondly through the implicit insistence on effectively misrecognizing the value of these histories. Art enables one to approach history with the idea of misusing disciplinarian hierarchies to disorganize and rearticulate the possible effects of knowledge on the future. In the face of constant consolidation of corporate ideas of the future and the militarization of knowledge as a support for the status quo, such misrecognition suggests another positive role for failure. As important as misrecognizing things may be, those who do it all the time know very well how we may be labeled as failures; as people who don't understand (or who refuse to understand) the rules. But to honestly engage with the capabilities and desires of my students as artists, I feel the need to stress an empathy for failure as a point of profound departure. In many ways, by embracing futility, a student is challenged to understand the similarity between social and sentimental models for change: both beauty and revolution confront monumental authority without any guarantee or even probability – of "success".

Until recently, American art institutions have been a key component in the distribution of models of autonomy based on failure. Therefore they have been sites through which a resistant form of professional practice through

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the making of art could be imagined. Although these institutions do still work to present models of a different world, the ability to make art with honest indignation despite the consequences is increasingly rare. Nonetheless, students must understand the complex nature of institutions: how they reflect the recent militarization of knowledge, how they coax their audiences into invented dichotomies between beauty and action – convenient and separate categories for artistic and political experience.