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Pragmatics of Studio Critique

Judith Leemann

We study in the sound of an unasked question. Our study is the sound of an unasked question. We study the sound of an unasked question.

Fred Moten (2013)

One cannot not communicate.

Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson (1967)

Positions

I teach studio art in a public art college, where collegiality and trust of faculty leaves me great room to shape what happens in my classes. When something arises that wants to be studied, I may lay it out before my students for collective examination. In the Spring semester of 2010 I found myself teaching an advanced undergraduate sculpture studio with a number of students I already knew. I mention this familiarity because it made possible what in retrospect stands for me as one of the most fruitful moments of collective study with my students, a richly productive turning over and around of pedagogical habit in the service of renewed attention to what studio critique might yet become.

My own undergraduate education was not in a visual arts school. I recall collectively looking at work produced in the art classes I took, but critique wasn't the centralized practice I encountered in the graduate program I later entered. The lack of familiarity with the form produced in me a kind of anthropological fascination with the way studio critiques unfolded in that art school setting. *What is this well-rehearsed performance and how do I enter it?* The rules of engagement are never made explicit. I have to extrapolate them by watching and trying to find my way in.

I grew up as a girl, and as a queer person at a time when, at least in my environs, queerness was neither visible nor acknowledged. I grew up the child of immigrants. These are positions from which one learns to look behind the construction of normed forms to see what the "normalcy" of those forms conceals. One learns to do that looking-behind because survival (be it bodily or psychological) is at stake. Richard Wright borrows the phrase "frog perspectives" from Nietzsche to describe that which can only be seen from the down position of any dynamic of oppression (Wright 1978: 27). From a frog perspective, what caught my attention about the way critique was practiced wasn't in fact anything about the practice itself, but rather the naturalized way it was assumed everyone in the room already knew what was expected and how to dance the dance. What was notable was the *lack* of explicit instruction in the practice. From a frog perspective these assumptions of common understanding have so often masked the preservation of old power that the simple lack of explication sets off small alarms.

If biography primed me to suspect the many tacit arrangements animating studio critique, it was a set of writings encountered in my early twenties that provided the language I would later need to move from suspicion to study. These were the writings of Gregory Bateson, Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, Don Jackson and others taking a cybernetic approach to communication studies. In their 1967 book *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson lay out a number of useful tools for teasing apart the many things happening at once in a communication system as complex and enfolded as the one we call a studio critique.

Pragmatics

Fundamental to the research described in *Pragmatics of Human Communication* is the axiom that every communication "not only conveys information, but . . . at the same time it imposes behavior" (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 51). Every communication functions as both report and command. "The report aspect of a message conveys information and is, therefore, synonymous in human communication with the *content* of the message. . . . The command aspect, on the other hand, refers to what sort of a message it is to be taken as, and, therefore, ultimately to the *relationship* between the communicants" (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 51–52). Essential to understanding how these aspects can function simultaneously is recognizing the distinction between digital and analog modes of communication. "Digital" indicates the purely informational aspects of a communication: *what* is being said rather than *how* or *to what end.* It is the part of a communication that can be transcribed into text with little loss. "Analog" refers to that continuum of affective, bodily, and historical relations through which any digital communication takes place and which every communication re-inscribes or bends in its own way. It is everything we register about what a communication *produces, generates,* or *does* in excess of transmitting content.

Watzlawick and his colleagues offer this example to illustrate the distinction: "the messages 'It is important to release the clutch gradually and smoothly' and 'Just let the clutch go, it'll ruin the transmission in no time' have approximately the same information content (report aspect), but they obviously define very different relationships" (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 52). Digging further into the operations of the analog, they offer this: "All such relationship statements are about one or several of the following assertions: 'This is how I see myself . . . this is how I see you . . . this is how I see you seeing me . . .' and so forth in theoretically infinite regress" (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 52).

Central to this systems-oriented approach to communication studies is the practice of questioning how cyclical behaviors get habitually punctuated. "Where the *why?* of a piece of behavior remains obscure, the question *what for?* can still supply a valid answer" (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 45). One can know a thing by seeing what it produces, generates or does without needing to take up the difficult if not impossible task of prying into origin or intention. Dropping the notion of linear causation for ever-circling interaction, any partial arc becomes a valid place to gather information about the system as a whole. Translating this approach to the studio art classroom, we take a chance and trust that reading the arc of a made object forward in terms of what it now produces/generates/does for viewers will reveal as much as any digging after the origins, the *why* of the work. We arrive in a place as speculative as it is pragmatic.

Propositions

I don't recall when I decided to fully open up to my students my accumulating suspicions about studio critique. I had established the habit of sharing with each new class a brief text I called *Observations on Forms and Patterns of Critique* (Leemann n.d.), in which I took up in a broad way the kinds of things I noticed happening in critiques. I trusted that if we examined the form, taking time to discuss what we thought we were doing, we could produce a space for more consistently meaningful encounter.

We began in pairs: *What is the best thing a critique can do? What is the worst thing a critique can do?* And those conversations then shared with the whole group and that leading into another round of questions. *You say that critiques make you a better artist. How? What is it exactly that happens in critique that sends you back to the studio with greater capacity? You say the worst thing a critique can do is make you want to quit making art. What kinds of things get said that lead to that? Is it* what *is said or* how *it's said?* Here, though I don't at first make it explicit, we invoke the distinction between analog communication (tone, how it's said, the way you can read the assumptions playing out about you and your work) and digital communication (content, the concrete observations about the work itself).

In past classes I would jump from this priming conversation right into critique, but in this particular class I laid out my concern that it seemed too often a chance operation whether or not any given critique would be productive. I proposed dissecting the parts to see what we could make of them. I taped a large sheet of paper to the wall and we began by listing all the kinds of questions that get asked in critiques. We began teasing out what *else* each of those questions was doing: *What are you trying to say? Did you think about . . .? Did you mean to. . .? Why did you . . .?* Not only questions but familiar frames of response: *It reminds me of. . . . I wish this part were. . . .*

I drew a simple diagram: a central circle for the work, an X to the left of that work, indicating the maker but also the time of the making, the protected space of the studio.[1] To the right of the work, I arrayed a half-circle of Xs indicating viewers but also the time of looking, the space of becoming public. We diagrammed what parts of these relations each question foregrounded. We mapped *What are you trying to say?* as a direct arrow from maker to viewers, noting the implication that the work *should* be able to deliver something like a statement directly to a viewer in the same way that the maker's speech could. Someone offered that there was in the word "trying" both a suggestion that work *should* be able to say like speech says and that the work was failing to do that, why else use the word "trying"? To map *Did you think about . . .?* we needed to add to our diagram a kind of unborn sibling of the work sitting ghostly next to the work that was in fact made. We noted that having more feedback addressed to the unborn sibling of the work than to the work that was in fact made too often left a maker disoriented, confused, impotent.[2] *It reminds me of . . .* was mapped as an arrow that left the viewer to bounce quickly off the work before landing on something that was already there near the viewer all along. Here the work mattered only as satellites do—as relay or reflector for some signal already prepared in advance. Reflection of this sort can be also *de*flection, a way to refuse engagement with the object at hand, a way to substitute a rehearsal of expertise for dialogue with this material thing newly arrived in the world.

Having worked our way through a number of these questions, registering how many of them veered away from actual encounter with the object that was in fact made, steering either toward the backstage process of making, the unborn siblings of the work, or to the tastes or associational ecologies of individual viewers, I asked what it would take to let those objects that *were* in fact made take center stage more consistently.

I proposed two broad categories of response to any object under critique. The first included observations about the work so obvious we would never think to mention them. These observations were generally verifiable and consensual—we could all agree that the thing before us was in fact the size of a fist, stark white, made of coarse cloth. We seemed, though, based on how rarely we took the time to name physical attributes (size, color, material, orientation to other things in the room, etc.) not to value that information much. On our diagram I placed these kinds of responses right on the skin of the object—far more about the object than about us as viewers. The other type of response had more to do with observer than object. *It reminds me of . . .*; *I like how you . . .*; *I wish you had . . . .* Not verifiable, not shared, but seemingly more interesting, or at least more frequently spoken. These kinds of communications we diagrammed as little moons orbiting viewers. I suggested we call them associations and understand their limited relationship to the object at hand.

We would need to take time to make obvious, verifiable observations about the object, no matter how silly or tedious it first seemed. Only then could we articulate connections between those things we could agree to call verifiable consensual facts about the work. To articulate a connection was not the same as making an association; it was re-tracing through language a relation between verifiable facts about the work in order to then articulate what this relation was itself generating. If we were serious in our belief that an artist should leave a critique with a better sense of how her decisions in the process of making communicated themselves to viewers, we would need to root ourselves firmly and consistently in this habit of spending time on the thing itself, the object before us. The question of what the object was doing, generating, or producing became our central focus; the work of building connections from first observations our central labor. We dropped questions about the process leading up to the making of the work. We dropped, in fact, all questions to the maker, unless they were framed as observation (one of the things a work can do is generate questions): *The way this part connects with that one makes me think about which part came first* rather than *Which of these parts did you build first?*

With all this effort to ground ourselves in observation, there was an important speculative component to our experiment: *Assume everything you see is intended.* We know full well that every made object is the offspring of intention and accident (and necessity, habit, budget, will). *Choosing* to see an object as fully intended freed our minds from the lure of parsing intention and accident, in order to give ourselves over to the demanding task of articulating what a form is doing in the full complexity of its internal and external relations. Similarly held at bay was the expression of wishes for the work to be different. Instead of saying what we wished to be different we tried to name what the form was doing *as it was* that led us to wish it otherwise.

Looking back, I suspect that what these several constraints did was in some ways very simple. They conspired to keep us from escaping encounter with the object itself. Quite simply, it is easier to make associations and to share wishes for a slightly different version of the work than it is to settle the eye and mind and to humbly begin to name what is there.

We asked the artist to just listen and take notes. We asked the artist to say nothing until the following week, and in that time to take up privately the connect and disconnect between what was intended and what was in fact communicated. These are ethical choices with real consequences—time and privacy to contend with information this multiply loaded makes it possible to move one's thinking forward. Performing one's response to feedback before an audience limits greatly the ways forward. Intimate reading of a work needn't require skinning the maker.

We practiced this form for the remainder of the semester. Mostly with objects, but also with video and installation. Each slow start naming the seemingly obvious verifiable aspects of a form temporally re-inscribed our shared belief that materials and forms have the capacity to communicate. This common ground of observation served also to anchor dissenting views. *Can we come back to the way this section opens into this other one? We keep reading that as an invasion, but I see it in relation to this other opening and then it seems more like an* *inviting passage through.* I was particularly interested in these branching moments when, from the common ground of verifiable observation, there emerged very different, but legitimate ways of connecting relations among elements.

We developed a nuanced sense of what constituted a connection and what an association, and which of those insistent but not immediately connectable associations were worth bringing forward. One person might say *Ok, I know this is an association, but I keep thinking about carnival rides.* Or *I don't know why but I feel incredibly sad the longer I look at this.* And then it was our work to trace back through the verifiable elements what relations it was among them that could be producing that sense. In one of the more beautiful moments of the semester, a series of four minimal towers, thin plaster skins around concrete cores, began to produce in the group a sense of estrangement, specifically familial estrangement. We traced our way back to the verifiable fact of the distances between the towers, in relationship to the proportion between insides and outsides, the cold neutrality of the outsides. I watched out of the corner of my eye as the artist sat quietly taking notes, her face reflecting the humble assurance of someone whose work was generating the very dynamic that led her to make it. Absolutely different than if she'd stood before the work telling us what it was about, before letting us loose to play the relatively easy game of comparing her work with her words.

Confluences

Classroom experiments like these happen all the time. Artists do not invent only in the studio. We work to forge spaces of study with and for our students. Sometimes a discovery is made of a precedent that, if known, would have made of one's own experiment a continuation rather than a seeming beginning. Artist and philosopher Erin Manning makes the useful distinction between influence and confluence, where the latter describes exactly this moment of discovering a heretofore unknown precedent (Manning 2015). To situate this classroom experiment within a wider ecology of pedagogical inquiry, I want to trace several bands of both influence and confluence.

In the realm of confluence there is the vital precedent of artist and professor Mary Kelly's method of critique. Recently brought to my attention, I attempted to track down some detailed report of it, and found only fragments tucked here and there. In a video interview, Kelly delineates the essential approach as "a very, very detailed reading of the work where the artist doesn't speak at all but everyone else kind of works on the reading of the piece, semiotically speaking" (East of Borneo 2011):

> I start with the phenomenological. . . . Oh it was light or it was empty or it was confusing. How much meaning is already in place there and how do you kind of pull yourself away from what you're bringing and what the artist is bringing to that situation through the work. But not through their biography. You actually just unrealistically pretend you don't know them in my class, which I know is absurd. But just trying to pull away from that, not to make any assumptions on that basis. And often we as artists are not fully knowledgeable about exactly what it is we've done. There is an intentionality; you appreciate it if people could try to follow that argument, but you can find out things yourself. So why put you on the spot to say over again in words what you did in another way. . . . There must be more to it than someone just asking you why did you do that? Well maybe you don't even know, but I did *that* so what does *that* mean.
>
> East of Borneo 2011

I'm glad in some way that my students and I were able to make our own discoveries, but I do wonder how much else of early feminist pedagogy is lost to my generation and hence to succeeding ones.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, in their book *The Undercommons: Black Study and Fugitive Planning*, offer a notion of *study* that resonates strongly with my own understanding of what constitutes a rigorous studio practice. Requisite for both studio practice and study (and by extension for any practice of studio critique as close reading) is the devising of methodologies for holding back those forces that would otherwise encroach on the open field of study. A classroom can still be a place of study, but practices must be implemented to continually clear out all the calcifying habits that will otherwise maintain that space as their own. Moten offers this:

> What's totally interesting me is to just not call the class to order. And there's a way in which you can think about this literally as a simple gesture at the level of a certain kind of performative, dramatic mode. You're basically saying, let's just see what happens if I don't make that gesture of calling the class to order—just that little moment in which my tone of voice turns and becomes slightly more authoritative so that everyone will know that class has begun. What if I just say, 'well, we're here. Here we are now.' Instead of announcing that class has begun, just acknowledge that class began. It seems like a simple gesture and not very

> important. But I think it's really important. And I also think it's important to acknowledge how hard it is not to do that.
>
> Harney and Moten 2013: 126

I introduce this provocation of Moten's partly as a dare (I have been experimenting with it and it *is* difficult) and partly to establish an order of nuance in what I am calling for in this paper. It might seem that Moten's refusal to call the class to order and my own insistence that the practice of critique be framed explicitly are on opposite sides of a continuum, but what they have in common is more important. In each case it is about recognizing and interrupting the habits of power in the context that is a classroom. *Not saying* "ok let's get started" and *saying* "how do we understand this thing called critique that we are about to engage in?" are each a kind of renunciation.

Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* oriented me to the significant role of the *verifiable*, be it text or art object, as necessary ground for common study, and influenced my first attempts to distinguish among different ways of responding to an object. Rancière's text builds on the "intellectual adventure" of French-speaking Joseph Jacotot, sent in 1918 to teach in the Netherlands. Facing students with whom he shares no common language, he brings them a bilingual edition of *Télémaque* and instructs them to begin teaching themselves the French language. "He had only given them the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered" (Rancière 1991: 9). It is difficult not to read passages such as the following as renderings of what studio critique as study might look and feel like:

> . . . by observing and retaining, repeating and verifying, by relating what they were trying to know to what they already knew, by doing and reflecting about what they had done. They moved along in a manner one shouldn't move along—the way children move, blindly, figuring out riddles. . . . All their effort, all their exploration, is strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to, not as students or as learned men, but as people; in the way you respond to someone speaking to you and not to someone examining you: under the sign of equality.
>
> Rancière 1991: 10–11

His translator's choice of the word *stultification* to stand for Ranciere's own *abrutir* ("to render stupid, to treat like a brute")[3] captures precisely my objection to the opinions of teachers being the primary thing communicated by any critique. If a student leaves a conversation about her work with only the opinions of her teacher, she has indeed been educated, but perhaps only in the aesthetic inclinations of her teacher. By contrast, when time and effort are given to collectively tracing how a student's materialized decisions communicate, and effects are understood as arising from verifiable observations about the relations (and the relations of relations) of which any work consists, then a student will learn something about *and from* her own work. As one student put it: "I remember the ability to go back to the studio with concrete action points. Instead of being filled with people's personal stories I was filled with communication from the piece itself" (Benbernou 2015).

Remainders

As I prepared to write this text, I wanted confirmation that what I thought had taken place had in fact taken place for my students as well. I've kept in loose touch with many of them and they generously responded to a query I sent out. In reading their reflections five years on, I was struck by the centrality of what one student dubbed the "Axiom of Intention." I had seen it as a secondary constraint, but as their responses accumulated it was clearly more central than I had thought:

> There were few rules, but they were non-negotiable, and the first rule was more an axiom than a rule, anyway. The Axiom of Intention, let's call it. It's the idea that the art, the object, is exactly the way the artist wants it to be. Without that, the other ideas just sort of evaporate into a lot of talk. . . . When you assume intention, you give the artist a respect they can grow into. Does that make sense? I know and you know that when I produce a sculpture, some of it probably gets away from me. Who cares? That's life. Hopefully I'll have better control the next time. The Axiom of Intention focuses the discussion on an actual concrete object or experience that everyone in the room can perceive, and doesn't abuse the artist who was kind enough to put work on display.
>
> Underhill 2015

Several of the students wrote of the silent looking that kicked off our close reading and the clarity it produced:

> Not only did we nurture the observers' fresh perspective we recreated it for the exhibiting student artist. By beginning in silent empirical observation we gave the artist the critical distance that is lost while creating. In that moment of silence and final execution he/she is given time to see if all the elements involved

> are actually serving the work in the way they were intended. In that still moment removed from the chaos of the communal studio space and relieved of the stress of preparing for that very critique the artist is finally able to step back and really see what it is he/she had put together.
>
> Ristic 2015

In the time elapsed since this classroom experiment, other lines of curiosity have joined themselves to the ones that first led me in. One of these has to do broadly with how little trust members of the public appear to have in their own experience of art viewing. A person fully capable of noticing and responding to a tree outside a gallery crosses the threshold into the gallery and becomes suddenly unable to muster that same capacity facing a work of art. (It strikes me that tree, work of art, and viewer are all underestimated here.) Could changing how we talk about work amongst students and teachers ripple out to offer other kinds of orientation to works of art? And what of this fiction my students and I allowed ourselves: becoming "just eyes" for one another's work? How does this square with our knowledge that all seeing is located and that a viewer's gender, sexuality, race, class (but also humor, anger, hope) inflects their seeing? These differences don't make a difference equally, and in the context of higher education in studio art, it feels particularly vital to take up the question of racialized seeing.

Very much an open question for me is whether this close reading my students and I practiced tends toward the interruption or the reinforcement of those pervasive dynamics of marginalization that make it so difficult for students of color to get what they need out of classroom practices such as group studio critiques. It was both sobering and heartening to see in the results of a recent diversity survey at our college how often studio critique came up as a concern for our students of color. Sobering in the sense of seeing how much I hadn't seen of the way this central pedagogical practice, especially when performed in classes with one or only a few students of color, becomes another place in which insides and outsides, "included" others against a normed white background, get inscribed. Heartening in the sense that addressing that which is visible from a "frog perspective" may yet force a rigor and transparency to the practice of studio critique that will benefit every student artist. I want to be absolutely clear here: while "frog perspective" arises from navigating conditions of oppression (and is thus inextricable from a certain lack of privilege), where *sight* (and I would add *insight*) is concerned, this *is* the privileged position. It sees more, knows more, can name more.

I want to propose that we view the habitual enactment of studio critique as a kind of symptom. Our common understanding of a symptom is as an indication of some disorder in a system. Here symptom is seen primarily as expression. But in the cybernetic approach of those communications researchers whose thinking has so influenced my own, a symptom is not only a thing that kicks out of a body but also one that kicks back in and *makes* a larger collective body. In the context of family therapy, Watzlawick et al. suggest moving "... toward viewing symptoms as one kind of input into the family system rather than as an expression of intrapsychic conflict", and further as "a piece of behavior that has profound effects in influencing the surroundings" (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 44, 45). What happens if we transpose this repunctuation into our own context? Might we begin to recognize how certain dynamics of our field are protected or even produced by the seemingly minor habit of keeping studio critique a tacit set of agreements, not plainly asking in each new gathering of students what it is we mean to undertake. Habit is efficient, it need only remain unnoticed to continue its work.

Gregory Bateson famously called noise the only source of the new (Bateson 2000: 416). My students and I made one kind of noise in the system within which we found ourselves, and something came of that. Something immediate and something with a longer tail that flicks about still. Everything communicates; in the realm of studio critique, the lack of explicit instruction communicates whether we mean it to or not. When I addressed the distinction between digital and analog communications earlier, it may have seemed that I was most interested in those aspects of the analog realm that have to do with affect, with the state in which a student artist leaves a critique. That does matter to me. If we can transmit the same content in ways that leave students affectively mobilized, eager to get back into their studios, why would we *not* communicate that way? But there's another way that our lack of explicit instruction communicates analogically. Recall that analog communication is always a proposition about relationship. Every student studies her teachers as much as their subjects.

To the student studying her studio art teacher, what gets taught explicitly about contemporary art practice must always resolve itself against what gets taught implicitly about the context, habits, and power arrangements patterning the field. Recall this oscillation at the base of all analogic communication: "This is how I see myself ... this is how I see you ... this is how I see you seeing me. ..." (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 52). In how we practice critique, in whether we take the time to find out what understandings of the task pre-exist each particular gathering of students and teacher around a work, in how we privilege some subset of the multitude of communications that could be made in response to a work, we not only reveal our most fundamental epistemologies of art making and viewing, we enact them.

Notes

1 Illustrations and additional images at http://www.judithleemann.com/teaching.

2 The word "impotent" I borrow here from Fluxus artist Robert Filliou: "as soon as you have left a house where you were talking to friends, to a girl, etc. you realize clearly what you should have said or done, but somehow didn't. . . . Feeling too strongly that what we should have said is more important than what we actually did say, can only lead to guilt, or impotence, or both" (Fillou 1970: 74).

3 The principle of stultification emerges from the emphasis on explication as necessary to learning: "The pedagogical myth . . . divides the world into two. More precisely, it divides intelligence into two. It says that there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one" (Rancière 1991: 7).

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14

Re-Thinking Art Education (Revisited), or How I Learned to Love Art Schools Again

Jen Delos Reyes

I was first invited to contribute to this publication on rethinking critique in education in the summer of 2013, before Cooper Union announced it would begin to charge tuition, and before the entire 2014 incoming class of the USC Roski School of Art and Design's MFA program dropped out "based on the faculty, curriculum, program structure, and funding packages," inviting us all to deeply pause and reconsider the current structures and institutions, and move beyond amelioration and towards "new spaces for collective weirdness and joy" (BFAMFAPhD 2015).

This call to "keep it weird" was one that I was more than familiar with as a resident of Portland, Oregon for eight years. I worked within Portland State University from 2008 to 2014—I was the co-director and Chair of the MFA in Art and Social Practice for most of that time. The mantra of the program could easily have been that art and social practice starts and ends not in rarefied spaces, but out in the world. Our classroom could look like a walk through the woods mushroom hunting, blindfolded soccer, or a pipe organ demonstration. We worked with the Portland Art Museum to create a series of programs and integrated systems that allowed for artists to rethink what can happen in a museum, and reinvigorate the idea of the museum as a public space. Dowsing the museum, orienteering the museum, serenading the museum all became forms and possibilities through our collaboration.

Unfortunately, the weirdness I experienced while at Portland State University was not always positive, as often is the case in academia. After years of working as a full-time, fixed term assistant professor with the constant promise of a tenure track line opening up to potentially secure my position in 2013, I went from full-time to half-time, and then adjunct all while at one institution.

During this time, I was invited to give a talk on the theme of Education as part of a national series of breakfast lectures for creative communities. I was at a crossroads and felt like I was in a position where I had nothing to lose, and took this lecture opportunity as a way of really laying bare my current thinking on art schools and art education. What follows is a transcript of the lecture I delivered on December 19, 2014 at Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, Oregon. This talk on rethinking arts education was prepared for Creative Mornings PDX. The text appears in full with notes in track changes that are my additional reflections as of October 14, 2015. These sidebars trace my coming back around to the promise of public institutions, and once again falling in love with the idea and potential of a radical school of art and art history for the twenty-first century.

This is about options: Education, art school, and other ways

I know that for myself a large part of my education came from participating in the local Winnipeg music scene of the mid-90's—infused with the energy of Riot grrrl and DIY. How I work today is rooted in what I learned during these formative years as a show organizer, listener, creator of zines, and band member. I place a high value on what many might dismiss as incidental education.

I have had many other teachers in my life, some of which have come in the form of challenging experiences, or people. These are usually the lessons we never ask for but, if we are open to learning from them, can be immensely powerful for personal growth.

For this talk today I am going to tackle the following questions [1]:

1. How does teaching change when it is done with compassion?

Comment [1]: One of the things I asked myself while writing this talk was would any art school want to hire me after I give this lecture?

I sent a copy of the transcript of this talk to the Director of the School of Art and Art History at UIC, and then less than a year later I am now working directly with her with the goal to create the most impactful, relevant School of Art and Art History of the twenty-first century.

2. What should an arts education look like today? [2]
3. Can education change the role of artists and designers in society?
4. How does one navigate and resist the often emotionally toxic world of academia?
5. With the rising cost of post-secondary education in this country what can we do differently?
6. I think it is worth starting at the beginning. What is the impetus behind education? Where did it come from? What is education for?

Comment [2]: This question has taken on a new significance for me as my new role as the associate director of a School of Art and Art History and working for the first time in the administration of an entire school.

The standardized education system that we know today comes from a historical, societal base of industrialization and militarization. Since its formalization, society also turns to the school system to provide its citizens with critical lessons in socialization. As education critic Edgar Friedenberg wrote, "What is taught isn't as important as learning how you have to act in society, how other people will treat you, how they will respond to you, what the limits of respect that will be accorded really are" (Repo 1971: 400).

Radical approaches to education fundamentally believe that learning can teach us so much more. These schools of thought believe education can liberate, empower, and assist in the creation of a more just world. I personally believe that formal education must serve in the creation of thoughtful, caring, and compassionate members of society [3].

Comment [3]: What would be the measures of assessment for this? I am currently in the process of doing program assessments for a university and am thinking about how different things would look if this was one of the outcomes we were expected to measure.

Is art school a state of temporary delusion? In Dan Clowes' 1991 *Art School Confidential*, he illustrates the rarity of the art school instructor who is willing to "level with students about their bleak prospects", stating that, "only one student out of one hundred will find work in her/his chosen field. The rest of you are essentially wasting your time learning a useless hobby" (Clowes 1991). The sad reality is, as

Clowes puts forward, that many students who are in the system believe they will be the exception. That art school really will work for them. The New York based collective of artists, designers, makers, technologists, curators, architects, educators, and analysts BFAMFAPhD's research findings show of all of the people in the United States who identify as making their living working as an artist, only 15.8 percent of them are fine arts degree holders.

A primary problem with art school is often the perpetuation of the cult of originality; trying to do it "first." Students becoming paralyzed creatively because—everything—has already been done. This is a mistaken interpretation of the avant-garde—constant originality and innovation. Without delving too deep, I believe that the historical avant-garde was really about the quotidian, and making sure that art does not make the mistake of divorcing itself from life (Delos Reyes 2014). In the system as it stands, students often become closed off and feel restricted from freely sharing their ideas or thoughts out of fear that someone else will steal their precious "original" ideas. I think that this unhealthy emphasis on originality often makes students move in the direction of the frivolous, which is miles away from how philosopher and education reformer John Dewey beautifully described how the everyday can be the birthplace of meaningful originality: "Originality does not lie in the extraordinary and fanciful, but in putting everyday things to uses which had not occurred to others" (Freire 2008: 51).

The next point I want to take issue with is the violence of critique. I have experienced almost every possible manner of viciousness and self-importance in art school critiques. It is a bizarre and often cruel forum. This is likely where the majority of any given students' art school damage happens! Often instructors are the worst perpetrators in critiques. Seldom do they place any rules of engagement for their students, and this is where the cycle of violence is perpetuated. Instructors often foster these unhealthy and destructive environments of power and dominance, instead of creating space for growth and deep understanding.

Another fundamental problem is outdated curriculum. I often got flak from the art school professors I would challenge during my BFA about assignments and approaches I thought were irrelevant. I did not want to draw nudes and still-lifes. I didn't want to make a color wheel. When I pushed back for more applicable work I could be doing in my art education I was once aggressively yelled at by a male professor, "If you don't want to do what I tell you, why are you even in art school?" Never thinking to ask himself—why was he teaching this way in an art school? My belief is best summarized by Canadian Artist Ken Lum: "What students need to be taught is that art is about making everything in the world relevant" (Madoff 2009: 339).

My next issue is the lack of critical care [4]. When I say lack of critical care I am talking about two separate, but equally problematic deficits. First is a social deficit. The lack of a real emphasis on community building, as well as what I feel is an epidemic of teachers who lack a real investment and care in their students and the creation of a learning community. Second is a widespread lack of care in whether or not the curriculum has real value and application outside of an art school or art world context.

Currently most of the art programs that focus on socially engaged art are Masters of Fine Arts programs [5]. I believe that an artist's relationship to and placement in society should not be an area of specialization, or afterthought, but instead a core

Comment [4]: One of my first tasks at UIC was to take on thinking about what self-care could look like in a twenty-first century art and art history school and to find ways to foster and model the daily implementation of self-care into the lives of artists/students. My name for this initiative is Critical Care—this endeavor will emphasize notions of care and wellness centered on collective courage, emotional fierceness, and embodiment and joy. Holding the space in our creative practices to maintain our personal well-being, give in to public exuberance, maintain relationships, face our emotions head on, and build community is what makes it possible for us to continue to do the important work of artists in the twenty-first century.

Comment [5]: In 2007 Portland State University became one of the first MFA programs in the country with a focus on socially engaged art. While it is now one of a handful of emerging and established programs with this focus, there are many aspects that differentiate an education in this program not only from similar programs, but as a critical departure from the professionalized MFA system.

component of the education of all artists (Delos Reyes 2013: 56). But can education actually change the role of artists and designers in society? Yes, but that means changing how and what we teach. I believe that this change needs to happen first at the foundations level. This Fall Carnegie Mellon University [6] will be the first art school to make this kind of approach to art making a foundations level requirement [7]. Another new and incredibly promising and relevant undergraduate program is the newly formed Art and Social Justice Cluster at the University of Illinois in Chicago [8].

You don't need the creation of an entire program to foster these ideas in how you teach art and design. How I teach is social. It is from a de-centered position of power. It is about respecting and valuing all of the contributions of the group equally. It is about finding ways to make the work we are doing as learners and makers socially relevant. And it is about having the contributions of students seen as valuable to multiple contexts.

A friend and fellow artist and educator Nils Norman introduced me to the book *Streetwork: The Exploding School* by Colin Ward and Anthony Fyson (Ward and Fyson 1973). It had a major influence on how he teaches and it did the same for me. I am going to share how that was put into practice for me from 2008 to 2013, when I was co-directing an MFA program in art and social practice. I believe in learning in the world, that environment has an impact, and that student interests can drive the direction of the class [9]. I know that being a listener is one of the most important contributions to the world. There needs to be a focus on teaching active listening. Understanding that we are bodies, and not just brains, is also important. Yoga, basketball, and walks were staples in the program. But maybe most important, and even less emphasized is love.

Comment [6]: Since writing this talk I spent a semester doing a fellowship at Carnegie Mellon and teaching a class on Art in Everyday Life at their School of Art.

Comment [7]: CORRECTION: Professor Michelle Illuminato informed me after I gave a talk at Alfred earlier this year that this has been a component of their freshman curriculum for years.

Comment [8]: I am now currently the Associate Director of the School of Art and Art History at UIC, the state's land grant university. The school remains committed to serving the needs of the people of Illinois and asking what that means in terms of access to arts education. I have never before been part of a school or administration that so actively pursues a mission of social justice and art.

Our school in the landscape of Chicago art schools is an underdog. For many in my ART 101 class this fall it was their first college class ever. For some they are also the first person in their family to go to college. It was humbling to be in the words of my friend Jovenico de la Paz, "the first face of college" for this group. I am looking forward to the responsibility of teaching this foundations class and exposing this group to so many ideas that I hope will help shape them into thoughtful artists, and more importantly present and conscious human beings—the true goal of education.

Comment [9]: While inspired by approaches to education ranging from the Highlander Folk School to the Pedagogy of the Oppressed the program at Portland State has made no explicit statements on the philosophy motivating the program.

In 2010, I team-taught a course with artist Mark Dion on museums. Mark also teaches at a prestigious MFA program in New York, and he commented to me on the differences between our cohorts. Our students were less interested in reading the latest issue of *Artforum* cover to cover, but the most notable difference was that they genuinely cared about one another. He was amazed at how generous the students were with each other, and how much support they offered. There was a distinct lack of competition and with that came open communication, dialogue, and resource sharing. While it is a hard thing to measure, quantify, or put a value on, I know that this atmosphere of care, and the emotional IQ of the group at the time was the most important, and least publicized, aspect of the program. It is also the kind of thing that is not built into a curriculum; it is set by example. It is our duty as teachers to model this. In Canadian education activist Satu Repo's publication, *This Book is About Schools*, there is an essay titled "If You Can't Love Them, You Can't Teach Them" (Repo 1971). This title sums it up completely. If you are an educator and you are starting to feel hatred or resentment towards your students, it is time to step back, take a break, and then return with the capacity for care.

The unfortunate reality of art schools, and academia as a whole is that it is not a place that is teaming with actualized, loving human beings. American author, feminist, social activist, and public intellectual bell hooks has spoken about the emotional toxicity of the academy, and why for her it was the right choice to distance herself and not teach full-time. This quote from hooks captures some of my own specific disappointments: "It was particularly disappointing to encounter white male professors who claimed to follow Freire's model even as their pedagogical practices were mired in structures of domination, mirroring the styles of conservative professors even as they approached subjects from a more progressive standpoint" (hooks 1994: 17).

Yet, it still came as a surprise to me when a progressive-seeming, tenured white male colleague enacted similar systems of dominance and oppression in our own working relationship, telling me after six years of working to build a socially engaged art program that I had "become too visible" and was "taking too much credit for the work I was doing". So I asked myself, "What would bell hooks do?" Luckily for me I live in a time where texting a number for supportive quotes from bell hooks is an option: "Whenever domination is present, love is lacking." This exchange with this former colleague made it clear that this was no longer a program where I could teach from love or feel proud about the quality of the educational experience. To quote American educator and founder of the Highlander Folk School Myles Horton: "I think if I had to put a finger on what I consider a good education, *a good radical education*, it wouldn't be anything about methods or techniques. It would be about loving people first" (Horton et al. 1990: 177).

The last problem I will address about art schools is one of the biggest: the cost. Seven of the top ten most expensive schools in this country are art schools. How much would it cost if each of us in this room (100 people) received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute Chicago (a more expensive art school) and an MFA from Portland State University (a lower-cost state school)? Even before adding interest on loans, or cost of living expenses, both together would cost us $9,128,000.00. What other options could that money have if we approached education differently?

I want to propose some other ways that artists could approach their education. Ways in which we take control, work together, and shape knowledge collectively. In the words of Myles Horton, "You have to bootleg education. It's illegal, really, because it's not proper, but you do it anyway." I think that many people would be surprised to know that Oxford was started by rebel students from Paris, Cambridge by rebels from Oxford, and Harvard by rebels from Cambridge. If these schools, which were born out of revolution, could become among the most revered sites of learning in the world, who is to say that other radical propositions could not be valued equally?

I am going to come to a close this morning by sharing an anecdote with you about a conference I attended last month in Cleveland. Members from BFAMFAPhD were also presenting at the conference and shared a lot of their research. During the Q&A portion someone from the audience asked an inflamed question about "who their target is?" The person was concerned that the end goal of the group was the closure of art schools. BFAMFAPhD ensured that was not their goal, and they were in no way interested in mass layoffs and tenured faculty losing their jobs. That night over dinner someone at my table knew the woman in the audience who had made that comment and said that she thought it was so important that she spoke up, especially since the group was presenting in the context of an art school. I am going to paraphrase what I said in response:

> This is not about targets and takedowns. This is about options. What we really need is to change our structures of value so that we can respect and acknowledge other approaches to education, whether that be free school, self-taught, community-based education, or other. We need to get to a place where culturally we truly value education and knowledge over purchasing power.