


## Civic Sociology

# Aesthetic Citizens: Producing Engaged Artists and Civic Art in the Modern University

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The connection between the research university and the creative artist has markedly increased during the past half century. As a result, artists are embedded on campuses with the mandate to contribute to the university's mission and to shape the civic order. Today artists are researchers, theorists, and activists. How did this occur? Based on a two-year ethnography of three master of fine arts programs in the American Midwest, I explain the creation of the *discipline* of visual arts as academic practitioners have become professionalized, have become able to control their evaluations, and have developed a set of motivating theoretical ideas that lead to participation in civic culture as their practices are linked to social justice and the good society. Artistic practice is not now value free, if it ever was. With the university as a political and a progressive space, students are encouraged to articulate their practices as linked to their responsibilities as aesthetic citizens.

How do the visual arts develop the authority to speak to issues of civil society by virtue of their placement in the modern university? Those who care about civic engagement recognize that universities are centers of "arts" and "sciences," and this role impels those within to take a stand, abjuring the idea of academic isolation. Such a role justifies their position as central societal institutions. Many technological, scientific, and medical advances have been created under the aegis of the academy; collegiate sites nurture and promote knowledge domains now labeled as STEM fields. It is hard to imagine a robust civil society without these advances. Collegiate science has a clear and well-established civic purpose: improving the society in which it is embedded.

While the physical sciences have long been honored as a civic resource, the role of the arts in the academy has been more problematic. Do the creative arts, so personal, unpredictable, and contentious, belong amid those ivied and ivory towers? If they are invited in, how are they to be judged, and, more significantly, how are they to behave? Can artists develop criteria to determine competence, and what is the place of artists in public discourse and civic values?

While it is clear that the arts belong within the precincts of the university, the traditional view has been that cultural products must be studied dispassionately, as we might dissect a dead frog. The master metaphor of the university—and particularly the liberal arts—is that it constitutes a knowledge factory whose product is a set of canonization claims. This has been taken to be what the university does

best, and it is, in principle, its mission. Although the form and outcome of evaluation has been debated, as canon wars suggest, enshrinement is what humanities programs have produced. Artists are the objects, not the classifiers. As Barnett Newman breezily remarked, "Aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to the birds."<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic judgments are awarded from the outside, preventing artists from articulating their own work.

In this analysis of artistic production in universities, I make two central arguments. First, universities provide a space in which the visual arts become a site of authority with practitioners gaining the right to judge their own productions, given the autonomy of departments. Second, the legitimacy of this authority permits academic arts to be political, contributing to the artist's role as a civic actor, evident in the training of students.

## SEEING ARTISTS

To understand how universities as civic institutions incorporate art, I conducted a two-year observational study of three visual arts MFA programs, at Northwestern University, the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and Illinois State University (Fine 2018).<sup>2</sup> During this research, I spent time with faculty but mostly befriended their students. As a social scientist, my primary focus was the artists, not the work.

In selecting the boundaries of this project, I made several decisions. The first was to examine students in university-

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<sup>1</sup> See John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), xxv, as cited in "Barnett Newman," Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/artists/4285>.

<sup>2</sup> Some material in this article previously appeared in Fine (2018) in a different form.

based MFA programs, given an interest in how graduate-level art education fits into a research university. Art education is partly embedded in theory, partly embedded in craft practice, partly embedded in aesthetic choices, and partly embedded in civic responsibility (Singerman 1999).

Second, I observed MFA programs in a regional arts community, in contrast to MFA programs in the art centers of New York and Los Angeles. In those programs, situated near the economic engines of the art world, dealers scout MFA students, hoping to find the “next new thing.” This is less true at the programs I studied. UIC and Northwestern stand outside the attention of elite coastal gallerists. Rarely do dealers pay “studio visits.” However, as a secondary art world, Chicago has gallery neighborhoods and alternative spaces for exhibiting work. Illinois State University, two hours southwest of the city, is largely outside the attention of this regional center. Each program is small. Northwestern admits five students each year to its two-year program. UIC trains approximately a dozen students each year in its two-year program. Illinois State University has a three-year program, which enrolled thirteen students during my research.

I audited courses, attended departmental critiques and studio visits, discussed work with students in their studios, watched the creation of projects, partied, observed faculty discussions, and attended public lectures, program meetings, gallery openings, and art shows. I observed seven multiple-day departmental critiques at UIC, four at Northwestern, and two at Illinois State. I sat in on three courses at UIC and two at Northwestern, and I observed parts of three additional courses at Northwestern. In addition, I conducted semistructured interviews with students and faculty at each of these institutions: twenty-five at Northwestern (fifteen students, ten faculty), twenty-seven at UIC (eighteen students, nine faculty), and ten at Illinois State (four students, six faculty); I also interviewed seven faculty members from other schools.<sup>3</sup>

I hoped to understand how young visual artists fit—and never quite fit—within a modern research university. In addition, I wished to observe the organization of the arts to learn how young artists were trained to think of themselves as aesthetic citizens (C. Becker 1999, 11), creators of sensory experiences that spoke to contentious social issues, building on their disciplinary culture. These young artists were encouraged to be civic actors. They were to produce not merely decorative objects but meaningful ones. Contemporary universities reject the once common claim that they are set apart from the rest of society; today they are integral to it.

## THE UNIVERSITY AS AN AUTONOMOUS ZONE

The expansion of the university’s mission into domains that had once been handled by specialized civic organizations, such as art museums, journals of opinion, or orchestras, has become increasingly evident over the past half century. Universities, searching for elite connections, positive public notice, and community engagement, have engaged with their communities, both by including artists and in becoming public spaces. This is apparent in architect-designed art museums, concert halls, and theaters located on campuses. Celebrated practitioners are hired as faculty, absent

evidence of teaching prowess. Harvard University famously recruited the brilliant Spanish chef Ferran Adrià, of El Bulli, to teach a class in culinary physics in the Engineering School. As a result, colleges hope that their arts commitment will generate attention from the wider public.

The distance between the academy and the art world was once widely noted. Although not condemning university education as such, Paul Gauguin spoke of the “bondage” of the academy. The eternally pungent painter James McNeill Whistler asserted, “Whom the Gods wish to make ridiculous, they make academicians” (Staniszewski 1995, 165). Others cite the infamous remark of McNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation, later a backer of California Institute of the Arts, who advised universities, “The best service you can perform for the potential artist is to throw him out” (Adler 1979, 17). Even those less histrionic raise similar concerns. Deborah Solomon suggests, “The proverbial romantic artist, struggling alone in a studio and trying to make sense of lived experience, has given way to an alternate model: the university artist, who treats art as a homework assignment.” She notes that as schools have changed, they have remained the same: “While modern art began as an assault on the academy, post-modern art might be described as a return to the academy. Instead of the old academy of rules, now we have the Academy of Cool, schools that treat avant-garde rebellion as a learned occupation” (Solomon 1999).

The American university has not always been hospitable to artists. Of course, undergraduate students have learned to draw and paint for more than a century. Yet this instruction was seen not as professional socialization but rather as creating a civilized collegian, suitable for elite employment or a select marriage market. The belief that a university might provide useful career training for professional artists developed only in the 1920s. Eventually, creativity became seen as something that could be taught within the context of an intellectual tradition.

## THE AUTONOMY OF ART AS DISCIPLINE

In considering the authority of artists to justify the intentions behind their work, recall the remarks of the iconic (and political) painter Ben Shahn. Shahn stressed that the artist is a maker, not a talker. He emphasized that artists have no obligation to explain their output. They have talent but lack rhetoric. They *do* and let others critique. Lecturing to an audience at Harvard University as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor in 1956, Shahn (1957, 1) opined, “I am a painter; I am not a lecturer about art nor a scholar of art. It is my chosen role to paint pictures, not to talk about them. . . . What can an audience gain from listening to an artist that it could not apprehend far more readily simply by looking at his pictures?” At the time, many artists would have agreed that “art speaks for itself.”

However, even as Shahn spoke, attitudes were beginning to change as artists became oracles, addressing their peers, not their publics. His belief that art should appeal to a wide audience was challenged by the argument of the prominent modernist composer Milton Babbitt, writing at the same moment in the late 1950s. Babbitt is a titan of American musical composition, a MacArthur “genius award” recipient

<sup>3</sup> Quotations without citations derive from in-depth interviews.

because of his innovations in electronic music. Not merely a composer, Babbitt was a longtime faculty member at Princeton and subsequently at Juilliard. He may be best recalled for a brief essay published in February 1958 in *High Fidelity*. The magazine provocatively titled his contribution “Who Cares If You Listen?” (His preferred title was the less acerbic “The Composer as Specialist.”) Babbitt believed that music—or at least the complex contemporary compositions that were his forte—was created and performed for those with expert knowledge. Artists and critics were in sophisticated dialogue.

Babbitt was comfortable with the reality that experimental music would have only a small, select audience. Rather than treating this narrow public as a weakness, Babbitt felt that it was advantageous. Serious music demanded serious listeners, an audience that could appreciate what was at stake in the composer’s innovations and intentions. They understood the *why* of making and not only the *what*. This view made academic interpretation crucial. Universities were sites in which specialists made pronouncements about truth, power, and possibility. For Babbitt, discourse was essential, and seminar rooms were platforms for such claims.

While Babbitt focused on the composer’s role in creating contemporary music within the academy, he might equally have been addressing innovation in conceptual art, frame-breaking theater, or experimental fiction. Prominent mid-century art critic Clement Greenberg (1971) addressed a similar boundary. Greenberg insisted that art was equivalent to any academic discipline, with these experts having the right to judge. There is a power in expertise, a power that artists acquire along with their critics. One senior faculty member explained about Greenberg’s theory, “[Greenberg] tended to focus . . . on a kind of inquiry or interrogation as to what belongs and what doesn’t belong. These are the kinds of things that help us to distinguish one discipline from other. . . . They become interrelated, interdependent in such a way that while each has its own autonomy, they become necessary to one another. Tailor-made for the academy.” This gave artist-professors the right to shape how art should be viewed and why it matters.

## UNIVERSITY PRECINCTS

Whether the visual arts have the authority of other academic disciplines, once they became embedded within the university, art practice justified itself. Today few would suggest that practitioners should be expelled for their own benefit, but does creative expression deserve the institutional respect that being a discipline—a body of legitimated knowledge—provides? Does the welcome of culture creators permit graduate training with departmental autonomy and internal standards of evaluation? This question echoes art professor Howard Singerman’s (1999, 8) account of the challenge of academic arts. He writes, “Among the tasks of the university program in art is to separate its artists and the art world in which they will operate from ‘amateurs’ . . . Art in a university must constitute itself as a department and a discipline separate from public ‘lay’ practices and equal to other studies on campus.” Determined occupational members hope to transform their world into a *discipline* with boundaries, expertise, and social control.

An MFA program is a site in which local artistic cultures are produced and validated. Each unit has its own style, but because of ties within an occupational network, program cultures have recognizable similarities. To be treated as a *professional artist*, a creator must be aware of the community’s hierarchy of reputation and ideas that are consid-

ered crucial by colleagues (H. Becker 1982). Despite the occasional self-taught creator or the talented student learning through apprenticeship, institutional training is expected for most art world participants. Many leading artists and writers have moved into university positions, both administrative and instructional. As one prominent curator emphasized, considering how the arts have entered into the academy, “The feeling artists have is that they have to have some academic formation to be artists.”

Cultural worlds, particularly those embedded in universities, establish criteria of excellence and favored modes of representation. To the extent that they consider themselves to be members of a shared intellectual domain with understood standards, they gain authority to enforce judgments of quality. As Stephen Turner (2000, 50) suggests, the creation of disciplines protects members from external threats and, in the process, creates an organized labor market based upon internally judged ability. The issue is not occupational status as such, but internal control in the face of external pressures. Universities enforce knowledge control with great effectiveness, even outside the campus. Some informants suggest that up to 40 percent of those who attend art openings are affiliated with universities, making galleries, in effect, an academic outpost.

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE PROFESSIONS

In advanced bureaucratic societies, internal control is never complete, but some vocations—those labeled professions—claim the right for practitioners and not their audiences to determine what qualifies as good work (Friedson 2001; Sarfatti Larson 1977; Abbott 1988). Certain occupations (physicians or lawyers, as examples) have acquired more power, whereas others (such as cooks or beauticians) find their work judged by outsiders. Elite professionals commonly speak of having a “practice,” which points to their personal sense of control. As a result, it is notable that artists speak of having practices, hoping to acquire professional authority.

Occupations compete with neighboring workforces that have the potential to challenge their authority. For artists within university precincts, this raises the fraught question of whether creators can determine value. Is the community of creators in charge, or must they bow to the whims and preferences of those outside their domain? The multiple criteria, involving beauty, knowledge, and power, reveal a field with what David Stark (2011) terms a *heterarchy* of evaluation. Not everyone would agree that all criteria are equally weighted, but in my research, I found some informants who argued for each.

The goal of serious professionals is to produce work that peers revere, respect, and reference. Collegial esteem is crucial, a point made by sociologists who argue for the importance of social fields within art worlds (H. Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993). However, within the university, the desire for collegial esteem also applies to evaluations from those in neighboring fields whose judgments matter in the context of the university space, notably from those in more established humanities departments. The university is a segmented bureaucracy—a patchwork of disciplines—with department personnel determining competence. As a result, the MFA era is determined by the power of the institution (McGurl 2009). As one faculty member explained, “Artists are now defined by the institution. . . art schools only exist in legitimate terms to the degree they imitate the university.” This trend, growing ever stronger, has allowed the university-based art critic Lane Relyea (2013, 160-61) to speak

of an “educational turn” in contemporary art. By this he means not only that art training is embedded in the university, although it often is, but equally that institutions such as museums and exhibition halls treat themselves as schools, modeled on collaboration with the academy.

One teacher explained that the change from the “fine arts” to the “visual arts” expressed professionalization as well as skepticism of elitism. He emphasized:

You get a move toward something that can sit more comfortably in the arts and sciences university or college, which is visual art rather than fine art. . . . The university as this place where art training is embedded as a way . . . to professionalize the artist on the model of other professions. As the liberal arts education changes, so does the art department, and theory becomes a bigger thing. You have got structuralism . . . starting in the '60s, and then you have got poststructuralism, and these things really flood the art department.

Disciplines raise the standing of practitioners, but at a cost. As members of a discipline patrol its boundary and award judgments of competence, they establish criteria for what constitutes good work and what stands outside that judgment. Gallerist Seth Siegelaub (Siegelaub and Büchler 2008, 4) worries:

Unlike many fields of human endeavor where we can talk about professionalization—whether it be law, medicine, science or education, which are thoroughly professional—there still is a sense as an artist that you are doing something that nobody asked you to do. At the very least you still don't need a license as an artist.

Perhaps not yet, but for leading galleries and in university hiring, the MFA as a credential comes close.

The legitimization of training depends on being seen as a discipline. This does not suggest that consensus will reign. That certainly was not the case at the three schools I observed. Nor is it likely in any vitally alive intellectual sphere. Lacking dispute, a field does little more than create routine. A vital culture never lacks for controversy.

In all disciplines, current projects should connect with previous work. As the renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) emphasized, disciplines have cultures. In the phrase of education scholar Tony Becher (1989, 22-24), disciplines are tribes. More commonly, we speak of artistic movements as constituting “schools.” For artistic communities, an intellectual tradition enriches an artist's personal vision.

Inevitably, occupations attempt to define and consecrate what they believe constitutes good work, and to specify who has the right to define it. For faculty and students, this is the professor and the program, privileged over external actors situated in the market. Of course, artists once affiliated with an academic program world can, if the opportunity arises, change their allegiance. Still, as sites of identity, disciplinary spaces demand obeisance, at least when students are under their sway. Believing in a core of ideas and of ideology—theory—depends on an institutional world composed of teachers and students. This permits the university to assert what members consider proper cultural practices, hidden behind poison ivy-covered walls that discomfort those outside.

## THE PURPOSEFUL MFA

As noted, Deborah Solomon remarks upon a fundamental

tension in cultural training. These programs emphasize the teacher-student relationship, while students are encouraged—it is even demanded of them—to work in ways that are counter to the evaluative control that institutions promote. As art becomes academic, tradition is rejected in the name of new ideas, alternative vision, and the politics of confrontation. Progress entails not merely creating a novel aesthetic to appeal to a viewing audience but *justifying* the artist's intention. It is not the object itself but rather what the object argues: what dialogue will result. Universities encourage students to reject those judgments that they are taught. The institution presents ideas and work practices designed to be toppled. Biting the hand that feeds you is academic lunch.

Many occupations require advanced training, and often little doubt exists about the need for *some* instruction, of whatever that might consist. While debates occur about the proper form of medical or legal education, there is wide consensus that this instruction serves a necessary and legitimate purpose. Emerging artists must master a set of techniques, shared by accredited insiders and obscure to those outside. Skills—surgery or legal research—must be learned in order to be respected as competent. Finally, and most consequentially, professions—elite occupations—demand control of their own borders.

Graduate-level education for artists has special features. Contrast visual arts with medical education. No one would consider first-year students in medical school to be doctors. They lack the experience and the skills to practice. In contrast, MFA programs in visual arts admit students who already have worked as artists and consider themselves as such. Some students even have exhibition records that compare favorably with the faculty who instruct them. In this, they are not like pre-doctors or proto-lawyers.

Still, these optimistic applicants are persuaded that they need additional training, a community to shape their ideas, and the time and resources that a graduate program permits. The community provides the support necessary. This departmental backing is emphasized in a student's comments: “It was stated [that] you are part of the family when you are in Art Theory and Practice. And there is an understanding that if some [assignment] doesn't get done, it will get done eventually, and [the faculty in the program] will give you some leeway. You venture too far away from the ranch [to a different department], you are taking your life into your own hands.” His program provides a safety net for students who are late in completing their requirements, recognizing that not all students are attuned to academic timetables. Students remain anxious about being judged and about producing quality work, but the department faculty understand that artists often work on a different temporal schedule than students trained in completing papers.

In his incisive and surprising book *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, art educator and theorist James Elkins (2001, 91-92) speaks to the anomalous position of departmental culture at college:

Art departments are said to offer a ‘supportive critical atmosphere,’ ‘dialogue,’ ‘access to large public collections’ and to the art world, and the ‘commitment’ and ‘passion’ of their faculty. . . . These are all sensible things, and many of them are possible. . . . I just want to list them to suggest how much art departments teach that is not directly art. . . . Art schools would be very different places if teachers and students did not continue to hold onto the idea that there is such a thing as teaching art, even when they don't believe in it securely or analyze it directly.

The esteemed critic Boris Groys (2009, 27) similarly asserts that “Today art education has no definite goal, no method, no particular content that has to be taught, no tradition that can be transmitted to a new generation . . . art education can be anything.” In this sense, all artists are self-taught. As Howard Singerman explains:

There’s a very old and still quite strongly held belief that artists, if they are real artists, are not made in school. That they cannot be made there. . . . [There is] a certain version of the unschoolable artists, the irrepressible, unteachable real artist. . . . the very fact that these artists now come fully packaged, if not fully grown, out of art school and spring into galleries, is used as evidence of the shallowness of contemporary art, its lack of culture or maturity, its aesthetic, or even its moral emptiness.<sup>4</sup>

Taken together, these assessments provide a chill recognition of what appears to be a successful institutional arrangement. Fully 88.3 percent of graduates from visual arts MFA programs surveyed in 2011–13 felt that their training was good or excellent.<sup>5</sup> Students gain time and space to develop their talents over two or three years, learning from a set of faculty within a robust departmental culture, and perhaps given financial support. Moreover, they do discuss theories, if not within a historically accepted canon of ideas (Relyea 2013, 160). Artwork is not simply making objects in a field of action but also thinking: thinking together, a point sometimes ignored in a Bourdieusian theory of socialization. In this process, students gain mentors and seek to find a supportive community. Finally, and crucially, students receive the opportunity to think and talk about their goals and desires in ways that link to theories of cultural production, a process that affects the valuation of the work, not as an object that stands alone but as an object that is situated in a world of meanings and often of politics. This provides a self-concept, a public identity, and a group culture that helps trainees to navigate an uncertain career. Many students believe that these features are intensely valuable and remind us that university education matters for shaping a civic culture. The academy provides a place of active consideration and vigorous dialogue. Becoming an artist or a writer involves the awareness not only of forms of production but also of discourse and self-presentation, helping students not only to make objects but also to look and to perform the part. This sounds hopeful, but it leads to the kind of concerns that Elkins and Groys raise. One faculty member, considering this ambiguous purpose, concluded that MFA programs were necessary; he was just not certain if they were worthwhile. Do these programs have a civic purpose? Can they produce aesthetic citizens?

## AESTHETIC CITIZENS

The second question that motivates this text is what it means for the arts when the university is the locale in which civic engagement is produced. How do collegiate environments, given their progressive politics (Gross 2013), generate an aesthetics of citizenship? The goal is not that one

will merely accumulate facts but rather that one will graduate from a university with the belief that one must contribute to society in light of the training one has. This is what constitutes educational citizenship, and in the case of the arts, aesthetic citizenship (Witham 2012). Any observer of MFA visual arts education recognizes that a political perspective is encouraged. However, defining the role of the political in art practice is a daunting challenge (McKenna 1999). Students are encouraged to shape society rather than merely beautifying the status quo. What would happen if artists have more say than humanities teachers do in aesthetic evaluation? This would give authority to practitioners rather than to professors, who often seem most comfortable in waging esoteric and insular wars over the hierarchy of the canon. Artists contribute to public discourse as their works address political arguments. Through the intentions that are communicated in their practices, these creators establish civic virtue and the necessity of change. The intentions of the artist should be clear, addressing through imagery the conditions of the world as it is. Is artistic production a form of pleasure, social insight, or political engagement? The answer increasingly privileges the latter two. Beauty, once the touchstone for artistic prowess, has recently been labeled the B-word. Perhaps not quite an obscenity, it is no longer essential as an artistic value. This shift occurred as artists found their footing in the research university, no longer content to provide a cultured gloss for the children of economic mandarins.

MFA programs expose students to theories of art, models of discourse, shared evaluations, community affiliation, and collective identity. After months of ethnographic observations and dozens of interviews, I watched as MFA programs transformed artists into civic actors through being embedded in a world in which activism is a virtue. Fred Lazarus, president of the Maryland Institute College of Art, avowed that the goal of his school was to produce “citizen-artists . . . responsible citizens engaged in the world” (Witham 2012, 6). These programs hope to create aesthetic citizens who believe that their practices challenge and then better their communities. While they do not always achieve this goal, a primary, if not explicit, aim is to encourage students to consider culture as an arena of protest.

Art practice is inevitably shaped by politics, whether in the depiction of scenes of religious devotion, court ritual, or bourgeois comfort. However, in contemporary art, the recognition of engagement derives from a set of theories about art, tied to the approach labeled social practice. According to this increasingly persuasive model, artists must realize their civic responsibilities. Their beliefs should propel them to demand a just society. As a faculty member explained, “no politics is political,” adding, using the example of a seemingly neutral portrayal, “The idea of [Monet] painting water lilies is very much taking a position.” To produce art that enshrines beauty is to make a claim—implicitly but powerfully—that art need not engage with the social. The distance between the lily pond and the ignored, impoverished cityscape asserts that art should claim to be politically neutral, a stance appealing to moneyed elites and conservative institutions. Artists always select what to aestheticize, and their choice affects whether and how the work

4 From a lecture by Howard Singerman, California State University, Long Beach, September 23, 2000. Cited in Audrey Chan, “Jason Kunke, Joint Rolling and Witchcraft” (March 2006), accessed July 9, 2014, <http://audreychan.net/jason-kunke-joint-rolling-witchcraft>.

5 Data made available by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project. (Respondents may have graduated at any time.) See <http://www.snaap.indiana.edu/>.

enters a market or a museum. All work has political implications (White 2011).

Politics and aesthetics are *intertwined*. Their reciprocity is revealed as both connect the artist to an audience. Over the past several centuries, most artists attempted to fit into markets and patronage systems. Being explicitly and self-consciously political actors emerged only recently, even though many artists have rejected conservative and bourgeois politics since the mid-nineteenth century. However, with the growth of the twentieth-century avant-garde movements and spurred by theorists such as Walter Benjamin (2008) and his critique of diminished artistic authority in mass-produced art as constituting the “aestheticization of politics,” artists recognized themselves as political actors who had the authority to challenge the status quo.

While appealing, this choice can be problematic. Addressing social practice, the critic Randy Kennedy (2013, AR1, 17) inquires about its role outside art world institutions: “Its practitioners freely blur the lines among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism, and investigative journalism, creating a deeply participatory art that often flourishes outside the gallery and museum system.” As Kennedy emphasizes, this is art that is embraced within the halls of universities by professors with secure careers and by students insulated from the market. For these academics, a political voice suggests power, even if it is often muffled. As one faculty member exhorted her students, “The worst thing that can be said about an artist is that his art is harmless.”

The importance of politics in art programs was evident when one school decided that a rare opening be used to hire a professor who specialized in social engagement. The program invited four candidates to present their projects. One talked about water policy in Latin America, and a second discussed hacktivism and opposition to drone technology. The woman hired produced films, created documents, and aided movements opposing the super-maximum security prison system, which her activism helped modify. She was treated as an important artist because of her involvement in the public sphere. Yet one student was skeptical, asking, “Is a graduate MFA program a place where a radical practice can be developed, deployed, or incubated? Or is it a place where a radical practice really goes to die?” If this skeptic is correct, the university may create a space for dissent while making that dissent impotent by making it esoteric. What might have been civic is turned inward.

Still, claiming to be progressive is central to social acceptance in university-based art programs. As Steven Lavine, president of CalArts, explained, “everyone talks a pretty good left game” (Thornton 2008, 59). In this, progressivism is often seen in sharp opposition to capitalism and, in particular, the art market. One art teacher admitted, “I’m always trying to teach against economics.” That talk can involve describing disliked perspectives as “fascist,” a term that typically meant status quo, traditional, materialistic, or simply bad. In this light, one student’s work, a sculpture incorporating water bottles and grocery bags, was discredited as “a manifesto for thingness. It’s not fascist, but it’s a little fascist.” While this is a humorous turn of phrase, said sincerely at the time, it suggests that any work that can be taken as bourgeois runs the risk of supporting unacceptable neoliberalism, whatever the intention of the artist. The project seemed too close to an embrace of materialism rather than a critique of it. By claiming that this work with middle-class objects was only “a little fascist,” the critic avoided demeaning his colleague; instead, the critic “educated” him.

One school administrator emphasizes the sensitivity to

anything that strays outside progressive lines: “There are students who come here with great politics, but there are students who come who are sexist and racist.” As a faculty member admitted, “there has rarely been a counterpoint to the progressive by the absolutely conservative student.” In its civic commitments, the academy is a cultural field with a truncated politics in which its civic values are given esteem in a dramatically divided polity in which others might dispute these claims. To demand civic accountability for the implications of one’s work should not be to demand the erasure of debate.

In contemporary art education, with its political claims, theoretical engagements, and identity politics, artists are encouraged to confront the world but to do so in conformity with academic expectations. Politics are guided not only through the mentoring and modeling of the faculty but also by the desire for positive evaluation. The challenge in all such systems of evaluation is to ensure that ethical guidelines do not cross the line into evaluation based on political preferences alone. Politicizing is never entirely possible to avoid, but such judgments must demand institutional self-reflection. These educators are simultaneously shaping their students as aesthetic citizens and also shaping the artworks that these students treat as being worth producing, a decision based on civic ethics and on the choice of form and genre. The challenge is to integrate practice and praxis in a system that demands ethics, aesthetics, and the legitimacy of personal expression.

## THE POLITICS OF NEOPHYTES

How does the creation of political art operate in practice? What must students do as aspiring political actors in the art world? I have focused on how university faculty gain authority to make claims. But what about their students? Students who emphasize the aesthetic form of the work (i.e., the primacy of “beauty”) over the artist’s civic intention are at risk of acquiring a difficult reputation. It is better to develop a practice that is grounded in activism or at least to make clear what is one’s attitude to civic engagement. One admired student chose to get his MFA because he felt that “art was the right place to make things and also do things with social effect.” The debate is how explicit art should be in moving its audience. As one faculty member stated, “I don’t need the politics to be didactic.” However, in contrast, one attendee at a university critique noted, “I think you need to implicate us in the piece. You don’t need to let us off the hook so easily.”

For art to be admired, it must be more than politically aware; it must be aware in a productive way tied to sensory expression. Despite the mantra of “anything goes,” anything does not go. While in a democratic polity, one should not draw lines of what is acceptable commentary too tightly. At the same time, it is appropriate—and essential—for emerging artists to be challenged to defend their civic vision and how the work expresses their goals. To suggest that there is no space for alt-right artists or Trump supporters, or even much space for those who define themselves as fundamentally apolitical, is an unsurprising empirical reality in art programs and in much university life. The challenge is for those young artists who wish to disconnect their work from an engaged perspective. While art programs should never punish students with dissenting views, they have the obligation to force *active consideration* of those public debates with which contemporary society wrestles. While some students draw on classical notions of the artist and deliberately ignore political themes, despite their per-

sonal “good politics,” they may become targets in an MFA context because others treat their perspective as apathy. Defending one’s stance in light of community values is an essential part of the creation of an aesthetic citizen. The goal for civic engagement is to demand a thoughtful consideration of the effects of a claimed apolitical aesthetics, recognizing that the artist’s stance must be questioned and critiqued by their community. Crucially, art educators should insist that artists consider how their work matters and the effects that it will have in supporting (or undercutting) the values that they and their institutions embrace. As a result, the university and its art programs become a space for critique of the taken-for-granted, a virtue of higher education, recognizing that value neutrality is anything but.

With library access, computer technology, research aids, and sympathy for activism, the political artist can thrive. As one apolitical student skeptically suggested, “One of the things I have been struck by in this program is how much focus on some type of social activism a lot of the teaching is. . . . There is certainly a leftist leaning that a certain kind of ideology is definitely promoted.” One faculty member noted skeptically, “We’re all for social justice. So what?” Another notes, of a politically minded colleague, “I don’t think his work could exist outside of an institution.” Or as still another faculty member explained, “The institution is the safest place for institutional critique.”

Art should, in the view commonly heard, struggle with oppressive forces, critiquing neoliberalism, rape culture, heteronormativity, white privilege, and even narcocapitalism. One professor criticized a display by a student that he considered insufficiently aware: “This is very sterile. It’s so polite. You have the responsibility to steal power. . . . It’s very Republican. It’s what everyone can handle.” A colleague adds, “Don’t be too political in a conservative way.” Better in the eyes of the faculty was the student who, as an undergraduate, was asked to participate in a competition sponsored by a powerful corporation to paint a portrait of their CEO. The student, wishing a political edge, painted the CEO’s head cut off. His work was not selected, but colleagues admired him. Students with good politics receive opportunities for career advancement. One Iranian student used nudity in performances she organized as a means of critiquing gender divisions, contrasting Eastern and Western feminism through bodily display. In one performance, the nudity of her collaborators was revealed along with a soundtrack of an Islamic call to prayer. After this performance, a professor invited this student to participate in a panel on race and gender sponsored by an informal group of feminist artists. The student explained with gratitude, “It was such an excellent experience for me, because it opened every door to a huge community that appreciated having me. Now strangers come up to me and say I saw you in the panel discussion and I agree with what you said.” Her political commitment bolstered her career.

Despite the importance of taking a civic stance in one’s artwork, the label of “political artist” has hidden, implicit meanings. In a democracy, one should be permitted—even encouraged—to choose a perspective. However, my observations revealed that within art programs (and other educational realms), a particular type of politics is desired: a progressive vision, a belief that most claim to hold and that many, although not all, hold in fact. Students are encouraged to confront their world as activist citizens promoting social justice. Democracies have capacious politics, a broad swath of ideas. However, most institutions will necessarily promote a narrower set of acceptable claims.

We find political art throughout MFA education. Con-

temporary art has become part of the armature of progressivism, encouraged, for good or ill, by campus activists. While all art is political *in some sense*, many artists explicitly and self-consciously create works that engage the political. They commit themselves to aesthetic citizenship, merging the civic and the visual. To find a space without losing an audience is the goal of engaged artists who use form and material to raise consciousness. One student worried about his work becoming too explicit. He hoped to theorize oppression without the work being oppressive itself: “I want to think my art is political. Now I want to make sure my art is political in a way that my civic duty should find its way to my art. I found myself moving from an approach to political art that is very legible, very didactic, very obvious, pedantic . . . to something a lot more fleeting, a lot less identifiable and hence perhaps a lot less political.” A second artist emphasized that “even if there’s a political agenda behind [your work], you can still approach it on a sensory level.” To combine the artful and the political is the ideal. Artists are warned of the danger of being too explicit in their political expressions. This balancing point is difficult to find, sometimes a function of the content of the arguments; however, it is the goal that many MFA instructors emphasize. Partly this is a multiple audience problem as some audiences desire the revelation of intention, while others look for form and color and even beauty. Works gain in admiration when they operate on several levels: as aesthetic objects and as meaningful ones, avoiding both didacticism and decoration.

## BEING AN AESTHETIC CITIZEN

During the past half century, the arts have been robustly embraced by the university. Does it matter? Is culture improved as a result? Opinions differ. Those who treasure beauty and craftsmanship believe that the focus on talk, intention, and politics is misguided. Paintings should be expressions from the heart, not texts to decipher. However, art is increasingly produced for colleagues. These works can be provocative, and some audiences may consider them puzzling or perverse. Given their contentious politics, MFA students and their faculty might be grateful that many potential viewers will miss the point. Students are inevitably taught within the context of a discipline, a community of producers in which theories and politics matter.

University training in established cultural domains has changed and expanded over the decades, but astute artists always transform their practices, creating works that seem odd today but tomorrow may be widely credited for brave insight. Objective hierarchies of value are inevitably unstable, because the institutions and social relations through which they are produced change, embracing new values, new roles, and new audiences. Today colleges have allied with artists. The contemporary art scene could not survive otherwise.

Through the solidity of the program in which they are trained, creators gain a measure of control over their activities by virtue of institutional authority, credentialed mentors, elaborated ideas, and civic expectations. Over the past half century, creative worlds have been welcomed into the university— theater, dance, poetry, culinary work, winemaking, fashion, filmmaking, fiction, and the visual arts. Academics opened their gates to cultural producers. While this has not occurred at the same rate in each field, a dramatic expansion of graduate-level arts education is undeniable. An embrace of culture once transformed collegians into urbane young adults; today universities not only teach the

history of cultural production but create aesthetic citizens who must challenge the status quo. This could not have occurred until the disciplinary training in cultural fields was treated as belonging in a university of ideas, not merely in private academies or in urbane taverns. The arts needed to be sponsored, inhabited, and patrolled by professors.

The production of culture is ever changing, buffeted from within and from without, constrained and buoyed by sur-

rounding institutions, and, simultaneously, making waves as artists shape their world. Schools play a crucial role in bringing novices together in places in which they talk, think, make, demand, and judge. In this way, the university has a crucial role in creating a space that supports the autonomy and civic responsibility of the arts and of artists.



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