Teaching Art: 
Process Over Product

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Some of the many complexities of thoughtful studio art production are introduced in the first meeting of a class I designed called Markings, Methods and Materials. I typically begin with an exercise in which a very large piece of paper is laid on the floor before class commences. Students help each other tape a stick (1” x 1” x 30”) to their nondominant arm in a manner that restricts movement of both elbow and wrist. A brush, marker, or large piece of charcoal is taped to the end of another 30” stick. Students are then asked to make a drawing prompted by the smell of an unidentified substance. (Things like shaved crayons, vanilla extract, cocoa powder, suntan lotion, WD-40 are put in paper bags held by the instructor so that the students can lightly sniff the contents without seeing them.) Only the most basic of instructions are provided, and I avoid suggesting or referring to a specific approach. When the drawings are finished, I roll up the paper and put it into the recycling bin.

Students usually draw with their nondominant hand and stick, and they typically draw on the paper I’ve placed on the floor even though no specific instructions were given to do so and other surfaces are available. Wordlessly, they frequently claim a space with their toes near the edge of the paper. They rarely go outside of their chosen space with their medium or their bodies. Students often will go to great lengths not to step on the paper before or after it has been drawn upon even in a confined area, or even if they’ve seen me walk on it. Representational and illustrative imagery dominate the drawings and students are often concerned with the quality (which they often define by its proximity to realism) of the drawing.

Apart from breaking the ice, this exercise touches lightly on topics addressed in-depth later in the semester. It displays
Student work—Kimberly Hampton, steel, Plexiglas, inkjet print, found objects, and live goldfish, 2004.
by which art can develop from sources other than the visual. It emphasizes the ways that impediments can become advantages thus making the problem the solution. Ephemeralily, the preciousness of art, the group dynamic and interchange, the assumptions that accompany directions, and the boundaries of assignments all become just some of the notions that rise to the surface of the discussion that follows this exercise.

Art instruction should emphasize process over product. Problem solving, idea development, and synthesis are methods I use to spur thoughtful studio production. Presentations and assignments that explore critical and historical issues in art provide other primary means of fostering creativity. The cumulative events, evaluation, and the sharing of knowledge occur around finalized art within the forum of critique. My studio courses do not focus as much on how to make art but why to make art. Through varied processes my courses provide students the opportunity to discover their own values, their views of themselves, their cultures, and the societies in which they live. My approach to teaching includes the dissemination of information, but more importantly, it emphasizes the employment of options; while I do provide ideas, I devote more time and attention to advancing, challenging, and fostering those of the students. In this situation the student becomes builder, designer, analyst, activist/motivator, critic, and interlocutor. In becoming this, the student discovers the excitement and merit of art production.

Art production and art instruction gain reciprocally. My presence as a practicing artist is key to the functioning of the studio classroom; it relays my commitment to, and enthusiasm for, the field. I strive to act more as a model than as an expert, and more as a mentor than instructor. The isolated work in my studio where I am consumed in the perplexities of my discipline grants me the understanding of a subject and of the various methodologies used to investigate it. This then informs the communal activities that foster learning in the classroom. The benefits of continual inquiry and shared insight in the classroom energize me in the studio—they keep me connected to the essential questions that can so easily and otherwise slip away.

I strive to maintain both the discipline necessary to implement an organized curriculum and the flexibility of one-to-one student relationships necessary to guide and encourage students’ individ-
ual interests. I see the classroom as a forum in which to test my ideas; I find debate challenging and valuable. In a well-rounded undergraduate program it is important to relate issues from other disciplines and to urge students to apply the imagination and experience gained in the study of art to all areas of their lives. I stress visual literacy and encourage students to critically address relevant issues such as their function as viewer; the political role of art; and issues of gender, race, and class. While established canons of art maintain a viability in academia as a pedagogical tool, investigations of the subject should require students to also think critically about the discipline itself.

An examination of my syllabi will reveal that projects and schedules at the introductory level are much more structured than those at the advanced levels. A more delineated structure is necessary at the introductory level as a means of slowly revealing means of creative exploration. The more directives that are supplied the less daunting the assignments appear. The advanced students, usually those having interests in studio production beyond basic degree requirements, need an environment that further promotes self-motivation and personal research.

My introductory courses cater to the array of experience students commonly maintain at the University of Rochester; these classes challenge the adept students and entice the uninitiated beginner. An effective groundwork is established through thorough technical instruction about materials and methods. Projects that guide the students’ processes and encourage informed risk taking can also reduce intimidation. Assignments that require research on contemporary artists or aesthetic strategies and movements provide students with a greater understanding of current cultural manifestations. Films, image presentations, and museum and gallery visits widen the breadth of the students’ definition of art; preconceived limitations can be opened up to personal possibilities. The student should leave the class understanding the visual as intrinsic to culture; this is accomplished by establishing a visual vocabulary and a critical and historical familiarity with art.

The advanced student should have the freedom of creative activity that comes from second-nature mastery over the fundamental tools of production. An art student must not be inhibited by a deficiency in the basics, basics which, beyond primary
Student work—Sara Meyer, paint and bedsheet, 2002.
implementation, can serve to cultivate. I also reinforce students' use of nonconventional media; found materials and common objects can often supply a better voice than the drawn image or formed clay (see image A). I encourage work that accomplishes more than the establishment of sites for aesthetic contemplation. Conceptually based work enables students to take a position and become critically aware of the levels of its meaning (for example, its ramifications, its inclusiveness, and its exclusiveness). Visual metaphor is quite often the best means of clarifying the conceptual. In a project that intended to address the degree of control we actually maintain over our various life situations, one student painted her body with slow drying paint and went to bed. Her sheet (see Image B) became a document of her movements during sleep—a period when all control was relinquished to her body's physical needs for rest. The stretched sheet became a metaphor for her main thesis. Simultaneously, it quoted and critiqued the historical “use” of the female body in western painting.

Students must recognize the essential connections between art making and culture making; they should be led through earnest investigations of their own agendas. Their work will impart the ways in which their agendas are revealed, confirmed, supported, and countered. It must be understood that art can be clear-sighted and liberating, but it can also be narrow, impolitic, and exclusionary. Students should recognize that art is guided by, and linked to, the historical and contemporary value systems and activities of the culture from which it is formed.

Art making, by its nature, coalesces. It integrates everything from plastic to wood, and personal politics to social awareness. The problem-solving processes used in my own art production are what I share; a strong work ethic is what I expect students to grant in return. Both problem solving and work ethic can be applied to any field of study that values investigation, research, discovery, innovation, and production. The rapid-paced change that surrounds us demands that effectual education center on learning how to learn. This attitude provides the only promise to future knowledge and understanding. My pedagogical approaches consciously position the production of art within a wider liberal arts curriculum where knowing how to learn is the primary aim.