

Coco Fusco

1. Lack of access:

Most Americans have no access to art education, period. Funding for art education in public schools has been on the decline for decades. In general, art education starts too late for those who are interested in making art. Starting in high school is late. Many students apply to art school without even having taken art in high school.

2. The economic crisis of higher learning is especially evident in art and design schools:

There has been plenty of press already about the inflated cost of higher education and the obscene scale of student debt. Art and design schools are disproportionately represented among those institutions that force students into high debt. The possibility of repayment for art majors is very low by comparison to those who prepare themselves for more stable careers. This economic precarity infects the entire art-school system by excluding the majority who cannot borrow or otherwise obtain money to pay. Those who take on the financial risk are under pressure to make decisions about their work that respond to market incentives, and at times are forced to turn to a range of edgy and even illegal dealings to come up with money. I have had more students who dealt drugs and did sex work to pay their debts than I want to remember. Those students who make it into the top art schools are pressured to treat them as apprenticeships with famous art world figures who are supposed to open doors for them.

So while there are more and more art programs and art- and design-related degrees, that is not an indication that more people want to be artists—it is a reflection of the strategy adopted by educational institutions to try to increase tuition by multiplying degree programs. The proliferation of degrees does not translate into more jobs for graduates; it is just another way to lure more people

into assuming debt.

3. The bogus myth that art and design schools are not trade schools, that they are like liberal arts colleges, engaging in “research:”

Most art and design schools are tuition-driven and starved for cash. The goal is survival through increased income, whatever the marketing may be. Today it may be that this or that school is a leader in public engagement, tomorrow it's social practice, the next day it's green design. Whatever responds to dominant cultural trends and funding priorities at foundations—that is what counts, not “research.”

Most classes taught in art and design schools are practical and technical. Many teachers in art and design schools think and act as though technical skills are all that can and should be taught, because the rest is up to talent and intuition. The tiny bit of theoretical and historical coursework most art students have to do is “dumbed down” by tired professors or racked up by young theory-heads who think that dumping a ton of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Rancière, or Chantal Mouffe on students without strong academic backgrounds will somehow transform them overnight into conceptual artists who can talk the talk.

Too many art professors who don't make money from sales and don't get commissions and grants have invented the notion that their practice is “research” and should be funded by universities. They are influenced by trends in Europe and Australia that have spurred a growth industry of art PhDs. There is no quality control, just a lot of ego and paperwork. Advanced degrees in art are useless in the United States. And while *all* art involves research, few—if any—artists engage in the kind of deep inquiry and evidence-based analysis that scientists and humanists must do to have their research validated by their professional communities. How living artists are validated is much too close to market priorities to be able to be judged in the same ways that academic endeavor is. So this is an *Emperor's New Clothes* situation.

Furthermore, most art and design schools do not have managerial structures or labor practices that engender strong research environments. More than 90 percent of art professors are exploited adjuncts that teach too many courses for too little money. That leaves little time for updating methods and course content, or for “research.” Most of those with full-time contracts have little or no job security, and most full-time jobs in art schools involve so much administrative work that research becomes a dream. Since there are so many adjuncts, the majority of the administrative work is put into the hands of professional bureaucrats with little or no involvement in teaching, whose primary purpose is to make sure the schools save money by holding on to students, exploiting teachers, and generating more income. All this makes art school laborers risk-averse and politically

docile for fear of getting fired.

Those who have a bit more protection through tenure or unions behave as though they are in a lifeboat that will sink if they let more people in or if they have to change their methods. That culture of fear produces a hostile work environment with lots of struggle between the haves and the have-nots. It also makes changing content and teaching methods into a source of constant internal strife. There are strung-out art teachers who use the same course plans for decades—something that would be a serious problem in academic fields—but the teachers defend themselves as standing by “tradition” or by characterizing calls for change as an attack on their jobs. They misrepresent the calls for change as political in ways that serve them by making them seem like victims or by arguing that change will destroy art. So, even though every year Yale students complain that they need teachers who support their interest in performance and video, the people in power resist and maintain divisions in disciplines that hardly make sense given what the students are doing.

I am not trying to suggest that art schools do not use calls for curricular change to undermine teachers—don’t get me wrong—but digging in one’s heels and being resistant to change is also about teachers feeling threatened, either with the loss of their salaries, or the prospect of having to work harder to adapt. For the elite at top schools, accepting change would mean that star faculty and visitors might have to start teaching for a change—and they don’t want to. They just want to do studio visits and keep things easy. The prevalence of one-on-one encounters in MFA programs makes for lots of smarmy exchanges that are very difficult to control since everything is he-said-she-said—they are breeding grounds for all kinds of psychological weirdness on the part of teachers, visitors, and students. That is the dark side of art school.

4. The relationship with the art market:

Few art and design schools have close ties to the market, though many try. Those connections are key for validating the expense of insane tuition based on a better chance of making good on the investment. But the connections are people-based, more than alumni-centered, which would be the case at business and law schools. Art schools secure their connection to the market by bringing art stars onto the faculty and having them as regular visitors. They also forge ties with curators who pass through on studio visits, scoping out the next new talent. Art department websites list those names as if schools were galleries with high-powered rosters. Most schools cannot play that game because of the cost. Those who do are the ones whose graduates are more likely to show commercially early, but that does not guarantee long-term success. Former students of mine have had their work snatched up for a few years and then dumped—the normal vicissitudes of the art market. What the instant success of art school graduates does however, is create hype around certain art schools, which explains why Columbia or Yale would get over 1000 applications while a small, regional program would have trouble filling seats. This is not about the quality of teaching, the size of studios, or the range of course offerings. It’s about the market connection. That orientation is far from the

mentality that was espoused in prior generations, when the chance of selling one's work as a young artist was minimal.

The downside of all this is that art school stops being a place of learning and becomes a place for networking. Students become more interested in getting shows out of visitors than in thinking. In addition, many star visitors and faculty don't treat art school as school, either. It's quick money for some, a way to find emerging artists for overworked curators, a dating game for the creeps, and a bit of a power trip.

Behind all this are the backdoor operations at the high-profile schools—faculty play favorites with students and reward them with introductions to their own art dealers. Some even speculate with student work.

5. Pedagogy:

Everyone will want to argue about pedagogy. Art school is an ideological war zone in which teachers are frequently on the defensive about the “right way” to teach. For many artists, teaching gives them the only chance they have to hold court and wield power—and vent their own frustrations or propagate their personal myths about what art is about and for. There are formalists who just want to make school about technique and beauty. There are others who want to make art teaching all about reading theory and spewing philosophy. There are those who hate identity politics and shut up students who want to create work about their outsider status. There are those who hate painting and are mean to painting students, those who think performance is a joke, those who believe that video just involves turning on a button and that no one needs to learn how to edit (although years are devoted to teaching students to draw). There are those who tell students that all they have to do is dig into themselves and access their deepest feelings or find a “great life experience” to contemplate—so that the slacker teacher doesn't have to prepare any course material. I have seen it all. Where does one begin with the problems of pedagogy? Too much too late? Not enough quality control? Lack of standards? The radical disparity in skills among students? The poor integration of the humanities into art and design education?

There are people who try to do their best to help students without being overly egotistical about the endeavor of teaching. Sadly, they do not represent the majority, certainly not in big cities with large art communities.

Teaching art is a long, slow process. It is expensive to do well. Classes need to be small. The facilities needed to teach a range of skills are costly to maintain. Students need time to absorb and practice what they learn, and that, too, is costly. They need to look at art and that means having to travel for most students, which is also costly. In a dog-eat-dog art world where most artists are having a hard time getting by and most schools are having a hard time staying open, you won't find a lot of

generosity or openness.

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