

Professional Me

I just read a book about art schools. Then I read a book about the media. In between, I read a book that was sort of about suicide. The first one is dense with information and I cannot possibly summarize. The second one is itself a summary, delivered in a medium demanding nothing more. The third is a biography of a woman made famous by America's nascent magazine culture, who in the end only wanted to be taken 'seriously' as an artist. The first book elucidates the evolution of 'seriousness' in regards the pursuit of life as an artist. The second describes a mediated world in which there is not enough time for serious seriousness.¹ The third suggests that a world lacking seriousness, from the point of view of the serious-minded, is a place one might only be brave enough to badmouth before threatening to bow out of it entirely.

The first book is Howard Singerman's *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Los Angeles and Berkeley University Press, 1999.) Its personal aspect is foregrounded in the preface and on the jacket commentary, as well as in the pre-prefatory acknowledgements. The book, however, rigorously defies the personal, by way of an extensive referencing of administrators who have penned the constant flow of ideologically ambitious copy for their art departments' various institutional apologia.² The author (now with a Ph.D in art history) has an M.F.A. degree in sculpture, but does not possess any 'traditional' sculptor's skills. He asks bluntly, "what constitutes training as an artist now, and what has determined its shape?" This is a fairly direct question, Singerman's research answers it. But that, of course, is not the personal part.

Here is where it starts to get personal, for me, and for him. Before finishing art school, I had the opportunity to co-edit a critical journal out of the graduate studies program, in which we published an article by Singerman called 'Professing Postmodernism: The Visiting artist and the Model.' This six year old contribution, now Chapter Six of *Art Subjects*, cites an essay he wrote directly out of graduate school which was the seed of the entire endeavor. In it, he coined the phrase 'the journeyman' artist – one who travels, installs, lectures, visits, all with the aim

of discussing and promoting himself. Me, I was accepted into a Fine Arts Graduate program without having obtained an undergraduate art degree. When talking to a room full of students I confess this when showing my first slide, often of a 1992 work titled 'self-portrait/ autobiography' – a carbon tracing of my transcripts from a state university. It lists things like Fundamentals of Oral Communication, Thought and Image II, Nietzsche and Postmodernism, Architecture and American Life, Comparative Form and Culture. The grade column starts off hopeful, then turns into a relentless stream of 'Unauthorized Withdrawals' and 'Incompletes' which eventually reappear in their own conspicuously indented columns as F's. In a review that referenced this work, the editor of this very publication introduced me to the word *Bildungsroman*. For six years I never saw the word again, until I read it described by Singerman as 'the story of education by trial and error; where each individual fashions and is fashioned by his wrong turns and false starts.' Today my presence in the classroom says 'success', and emphasizes that despite (or because of) my failure, I am a professional, a professional me.

While taking a break from *Art Subjects*, I picked up a John Keats book and couldn't put it down until I finished it. No, not THE John Keats³, but the author of the Dorothy Parker biography entitled *You Might As Well Live* (1970). (This is the 'punchline' to her famous verse *Résumé* which lists the many shortcomings of suicide: Razors pain you etc.) The details of Miss Parker's personal life brings her body of – and at – work into focus (or in Dorothy's case, not at work). She was a notorious procrastinator and quitter. Her career in journalism started with penning captions underneath fashion shots in *Vogue*, but she is better known as the wit of the *New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* crowd. On assignment to use the word horticulture in a sentence, she coined the memorable phrase 'You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think.'

"The will to art" has been called the private attribute of the individual artist and the opposite of skill' Singerman says. Volition replaces ability, and 'from Cézanne on, that volition rests – or

1 Seriousness takes time and time costs a ton of money, making seriousness simply unaffordable.

2 i.e.: Longman...in a report to his dean at Iowa in 1943...forecast the CAA committee's suggestion... or According to proceedings reported in the American Art Annual, Vassar's O.S. Tonks told the College Art Association's annual meeting in 1913...

3 What would you do if your name was Andy Warhol – and you weren't Andy Warhol? Which reminds me: the late artist, Saul Steinberg, used to call up other Saul Steinbergs out of the phonebook, asking 'Is this the REAL Saul Steinberg' and they would have to say no.

rather ferments – in the artist himself. This desire gives the artist's life the character of the *Bildungsroman*.⁴ It is interesting to note that he got on the topic of Cézanne by way of Clyford Still's master's thesis. Given the slew of magazine and newspaper articles launching rants against theory-loving academies instigating the production of boring, visually wan works of art, this book provides perspective. The 'visual power' of Diego Rivera recently convinced one columnist to assert that "teacher-artists" who scratch white surfaces with faint traces of graphite and fill the heads of their students with the drivel of Derrida and Foucault are slouching toward the insignificance they so richly deserve.⁵ It's worth it to consider the history of teacher-artists and their 'faint traces of graphite.' The chapter 'Innocence and Form' links drawing exercises used in Kindergartens (resulting from 19th century educational reform) to Joseph Albers' curriculum at the Bauhaus, to their uncanny manifestations in the works of Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin.⁶ But what's to stop Singerman's research from being turned into pap? *The New York Times Magazine* recently ran an article 'How to Succeed In Art' (June 19, 1999) with a subheading that read 'Applications to art schools are at a record high. Which may explain why art these days looks a lot like homework.' A couple days later I ran into a radio journalist soliciting responses to the article. I immediately launched my complaints. 'I suspect the writer to have lifted her only interesting propositions and statements straight out of this new book about art school.' I rifled through my bag and pulled out the evidence, 'she didn't give the author any credit.' Self-consciousness set in as I stood there wagging a book, like a zealot. Even so, I began scanning the pages for where I had written 'New York Times' in the margins. I don't think the radio guy cared; he liked the article because, indeed, today's so-called public has a hard time with today's so-called art. I had Pierre Bourdieu's *On Television* (1998) handy too, the book about the media I mentioned earlier, but I didn't retrieve it, nor could I bring myself to paraphrase at least one double-underlined comment: 'We must question the representation of the general public's expectations as constructed by the market demagoguery of those individuals in a position to

set themselves between cultural producers and the great mass of consumers.'⁷ Mustn't we? How would you put it?

I read with a pencil. I'm a big note-taker, an under-liner, a silent applause giver; not as in, 'Well put' but 'oh, thank you!' Early on, I scribbled 'OH MY GOD!' in the margin of *Art Subjects* where Singerman provided historical flesh to some metaphorical bones I recently laid out in a small book of my own. There are also chicken scratches on the second to the last page where he quoted Pierre Bourdieu almost exactly as I had in my book, but added: "Seriousness is, Bourdieu explains, 'that aptitude to be what one is: the social form of the principle of identity.'"⁸

You must be wondering what suicide has to do with any of this. In Keats, this got the pencil: 'She showed a visitor a box full of paper, saying it was her manuscript, but the box contained unanswered letters and unpaid bills. That, she explained, was the story of her life.'

It's funny how, when reading, we often exclaim 'Yes, yes I was just thinking that.' But of course we weren't just thinking that, exactly; however, the blind enthusiasm responsible for such sloppy comparisons is precisely the joy of reading, that private ineffable joy of apprehending that which was, let's just say, effable to someone else.

4 Referring at once to Clive Bell, Paul Cézanne, Clifford Still, Maurice Denis, Alois Riegl, and Wilhelm Worringer. Dizzying convergences like these take place consistently throughout the text.

5 The Diego Rivera show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art dazzles the eye and relieves the mind of worries about the future of art. So says Stephen Lamons, *New Times* (July 1-7, 1999).

6 The 'drivel' of Foucault and Derrida is put into perspective in chapter 6.

7 The fact that this would fly on TV is pretty amazing.

8 Howard Singerman quotes Pierre Bourdieu in *The Invention of the Artist's Life* Yale French Studies No. 73 1988:80, p.213