

# Art, Fate, and the Disciplines: Some Indicators

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## 1. Art

From the standpoint of the visual arts, there are several directions one might take in approaching the topic of art and the disciplines or art *as* a discipline. One would be to reflect on the traditional sense that the arts are themselves disciplines, that there are skills, methods, tools, and a whole array of problems to be solved, along with a genealogy of master-apprentice relations that involve long training before one can become an artist. This line of thought could then expand into a consideration of its boundaries (the phenomenon of the outsider artist who refuses the conventional disciplines of craft and the social organization or institutionalization of recognized artistic guilds, academies, and so on) or its centers (exactly those schools, academies, and guilds that are so important to the institutionalization of art as an ongoing social and material practice). The contemporary impetus to upgrade the academic standing of the visual arts by creating MA and PhD degree programs and evaluating works of art in terms of “research outputs” would be central to this inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Another line of thought would be to narrow the focus more precisely to the current questions about the fate of disciplines and disciplinarity in an age of interdisciplinarity, accelerated technical innovation, and what many perceive as the de-skilling of artistic practice—the abandonment of traditional media and *métiers* that allowed artists to identify themselves as professionals in a specific material practice. Painting and sculpture are the first arts (and perhaps the last) that come to mind, as the two forms of fine art and visual art that have dominated museums, galleries, and narratives of the history of art.<sup>2</sup> The academic study of art, the “discipline” of art history whose origin is usually traced to nineteenth-century Germany despite prestigious precedents (Johann Winckelmann in the Enlightenment, Giorgio Vasari

1. The phrase “research outputs” comes from the British academic bureaucracy, which engages in annual Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) that determine the funding of colleges and universities. For a trenchant critique of these practices and their effects on the arts, see Charles Harrison, “When Management Speaks . . .,” in *Research and the Artist: Considering the Role of the Art School*, ed. Antonia Payne (Oxford, 2000), pp. 58–68.

2. Rosalind Krauss has argued the case of de-skilling in a number of essays that link de- or postdisciplinary practices to what she calls the “post-medium condition.” See Rosalind Krauss, “A Voyage on the North Sea”: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London, 2000).

in the Renaissance, Pliny the Elder and Pausanias in Roman antiquity), characteristically is a history of these two specific media.

This history is thus concerned with changes in style, innovations in materials and techniques (oil painting, metal casting), and assessments of individual virtuosity in both form and content. One could summarize this story as a protracted struggle between two models of the artist: the first as a virtuoso or at least competent professional practitioner of a material practice; the second as a godlike genius who produces ideas that are then expressed in visible and material form. We might think of these two alternatives as the disciplinary and de-disciplinary, or anarchistic, images of the artist. The first tradition stems from antiquity and explains why none of the nine Muses begotten by Zeus on Mnemosyne is associated with visual, spatial, or material arts. The Muses are all patronesses of temporal and verbal arts—music, poetry, dance, history, and astronomy. There are no Muses for painting, sculpture, or architecture. As my colleague Richard Neer has observed, “for the Greeks, especially the early Greeks, a muse of sculpture would be like a muse of jackhammering or a muse of doing the laundry.”<sup>3</sup>

The elevation of painting to the status of a fine art is generally traced to the Renaissance, when it began to compete successfully with poetry in the pecking order of artistic disciplines, as Leonardo argues in his *Paragone* or contest of poetry and painting. Leonardo, who is himself the great paragon of interdisciplinarity, transforms the image of the artist from that of a skilled craftsman in a specialized practice into that of a universal genius whose work synthesizes poetry, philosophy, and the sciences. When Hegel traces the history of the arts or the aesthetic he builds it precisely around this dialectic of material and ideal conceptions of artistic practice and characterizes the progress of the arts as a steady dematerialization, from the most ancient and materialist art of architecture, to the perfect fusion of spirit and matter as equal partners in Greek sculpture, to the ascent to increasingly dematerialized media such as painting and poetry, the exemplars of aesthetic romanticism and modernity, ultimately to be replaced by the realization of pure spirit in philosophy. This idealist history continues to echo in the rhetoric of abstract painting and sculpture and in the program of conceptual art. The abandonment of representation for pure form or for disembodied ideas stored away in file folders can be seen as a logical

3. Richard Neer, email to author, 27 Sept. 2005.

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step in the artistic transcendence of the material world for a realm of ideas and ideality.

Of course, this steady progress toward the empyrean of ideas is never that simple and is periodically interrupted by some form of dialectical reversal, as in Clement Greenberg's defense of abstraction as purified of all representational or literary reference, at the same time as it is defined as a plunging back into the materiality of paint and an acceptance of the flatness of the material support. A consistent theme of modernist aesthetics is the notion, as William Carlos Williams put it, that there are "no ideas but in things." And postmodern aesthetics has betrayed a stubborn refusal to give up on materiality, not in the name of modernist medium specificity, but in the formless scatter pieces, found objects, and detritus of "trash art." Ninety percent of the budget for Helen Mirra's recent conceptual project of producing a poetic index from books by Jane Addams and John Dewey went to the sign painter who carefully painted the words onto the walls of academic buildings at the University of Chicago. I will return to this project below.

## 2. Fate

The "fate of disciplines" has an ominous sound. It resonates with overtones of a tragic denouement or an ignominious obsolescence. A quarter century of interdisciplinarity may, we suppose, have sounded the death knell for the traditional disciplines. And this is not just because the study of literature, the visual arts, and media (my home disciplines) are not what they used to be or because something called cultural studies has brought with it (as Rosalind Krauss has argued) a de-skilling in the study of culture comparable to the de-skilling of workers under industrial capitalism. It is a problem all across the board of scientific and professional pursuits, as if the loss of disciplinary identity were a kind of echo of the logic of convergence in speculative or finance capital; physics merges with biology at the same time that law merges with economics and Time Warner (already a conglomerate) merges with America Online. Despite Stanley Fish's argument that "being interdisciplinary is so very hard to do," it is in fact all too easy.<sup>4</sup> More than that, it is obligatory, a compulsory strategy of survival in a competitive environment. Perform the following thought experiment: suppose that a prospective graduate student in any program at your university asks whether you encourage interdisciplinary work. What will your answer be? One knows that the answer had *better* be yes. A no would amount to a fatal confession that your program, department, or discipline is seriously out of date.

4. See Stanley Fish, "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do," *Profession* (1989): 15–22.

But not to worry. Just when all seems lost, the cunning of fate has a way of reversing itself. Interdisciplinarity turns out to be as nonthreatening to the disciplines as it is to corporate capitalism. It just reinstalls the same old disciplinary values of rigorous normativity, productivity, originality, and explanatory power at a higher level. Fate turns into providential design, and the breakup of the disciplines is rectified by their convergence at a higher level—the emergent program, the conglomerate or consortium, or a humanities institute, a kind of hothouse for testing out new hybridizations of professional and disciplinary discourses. These are places where, for instance, law could argue with philosophy, as in the marvelous debate in these pages between Robert Post and Judith Butler. This development is what I call top-down interdisciplinarity, a comparative, structural formation that aims to know the overarching system or conceptual totality within which all the disciplines are related. The top-down model dreams of a Kantian architecture of learning, a pyramidal, corporate organization of knowledge production that converges in the philosophy department (the only truly disciplined discipline, according to Robert Pippin) or the dean's office, where the buck stops and (we hope) starts.

But there are other models of interdisciplinarity, such as the bottom-up or shop-floor paradigm, which emerge in response to emergencies and social upheavals, to knowledge projects that go beyond the existing disciplinary structures in the academy.<sup>5</sup> Studies in gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, for instance, have a kind of compulsory interdisciplinarity that is improvised out of a new theoretical object and a political project with its attendant urgencies. They are knowledge projects, but they also have more or less explicit moral and political agendas. We need to face the question of whether this compromises their professional neutrality and objectivity. What if the Right is correct in saying that the humanities have been politicized and are a kind of last enclave of leftist thinking? Should we deny what seems to obviously be the case? Or should we figure out how to affirm it in a new way, with some claim to the effect that “all knowledge is a product of power relations, blah blah blah” and thus we are no different than physics or economics? Neither of these seems correct. Perhaps this is a time for philosophy to come to the rescue with an account of the familiar Foucauldian dyad of knowledge/power that reconnects it with the ancient and widely disregarded notion of wisdom. Humanists are precisely those who cannot accept the obsolescence of this crucial concept, which under-

5. See W. J. T. Mitchell, “Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture,” *Art Bulletin* 77 (Dec. 1995): 540–44 for a taxonomy of three different kinds of interdisciplinarity: top-down (conceptually synthesized), bottom-up (socially motivated), and indisciplinarity (anarchist epistemology) or what I would now call lateral interdisciplinarity.

lies all critical and theoretical investigation of the species being of humanity. Our business is to engage in ethical reflection, analyses of the grounds for the making of wise decisions, responsible interpretations, logical deductions, accurate estimations of aesthetic quality, the critique of religion, culture, politics, the arts, the media, languages, texts, and so on.

Let's be honest: we humanists *do* want to discipline, if not indoctrinate, our students. We share, as a community, a huge number of norms, many of which are also shared by scientists. We don't have much patience for our students questioning whether they have to provide evidence for a claim or observe consistent logic in their arguments. My sense is that we need to differentiate our shared doctrines from other strata—beliefs, opinions, bodies of knowledge—that unify our work. We need, for instance, a way of saying that one immediate agenda of feminism is surely equality for women, but the knowledge project has a value independent of the fulfillment of that goal in the recovery of lost archives, alternative traditions, and possible worlds—the utopian prospects of a world at peace with itself both at the level of nature and society.

In addition to the top-down and bottom-up models of interdisciplinarity, there is a third form characterized by an inside-out movement—a turbulence or incoherence at the inner and outer boundaries of a discipline—that I have called an *indiscipline*.<sup>6</sup> If a discipline is a way of insuring the continuity of a set of collective practices (technical, social, professional, and so on), an *indiscipline* would describe the moment of breakage or rupture, when the continuity is interrupted and the practice is put into question. Thomas Kuhn's famous paradigm shift is the classic expression of this kind of disciplinary crisis. In the discipline of art history I would associate this sort of event—the moment of "anarchist epistemology" cited by Post and endorsed, I think, by Butler—with the rise of the new disciplinary formation known as visual culture or visual studies. This *indiscipline* has arisen both at the center and periphery of traditional art history, stemming both from, on the one hand, the incursions of semiotics, literary studies, anthropology, and film and media studies into the territory of the canonical visual arts and, on the other, from within the founding intuitions of the iconologists who pioneered art history with a wide-ranging historical study of images and the visual field. In both cases, the problematic of *vision* turned out to be what Derrida, after Rousseau, called a dangerous supplement to art history, rising from within its own proper area of study and from adjacent disciplines in the sciences and humanities.

6. See *ibid.*

### 3. The Index

So far I have been reflecting on a number of indicators that point toward the fatal paradoxes of the visual arts and the disciplines in our time. Fate itself is, of course, always a question of indices—of omens, prodigies, manifestations, and signs that point to patterns and recurrent cycles in lived historical experience. Fate is the acknowledgment of a destiny, a narrative that was previously unseen but that makes sense in retrospect. It is revealed at the moment when the plot unveils itself in a recognition scene, when we see that all along events were tending toward their inevitable tragic or comic or (always) ironic conclusion—the “simple twist of fate” evoked by Bob Dylan.

The fate of the disciplines is to be dislocated and twisted. Isn't the truly interesting moment when one has a chance to see or to participate in the explosion or implosion of a disciplinary regime, even if that event is (as it usually is) rather quiet, unobtrusive, and scarcely registered even by the discipline in which it is taking place?

But what about the fatal indicators themselves, the indices that we should have recognized all along? What in fact is an index? According to C. S. Peirce, it is the existential, the pointing sign, the deixis, the shifter or trace, the sign by cause and effect. The track in the snow indicates the animal that made it, the smoke in the forest signals the fire that causes it, the fingerprint provides the clue for the alert detective. When the index moves into language it replaces the pointing index finger with the pointing pronoun, the *this*, *that*, or *it* that designates an object, or the personal pronouns, such as the *I*, *you*, or *they* whose reference depends absolutely upon the context of utterance; when I say “I” it does not refer to the same person as it does when you say “I.” The spatial and temporal indicators, *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*, similarly shift their references depending on the timing and location of the utterance.

What happens when the index moves from language, from shifting deictic signs, to the framework of a text, especially that canonical object known as a book? This sort of index, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “a table of contents prefixed to a book, a brief list or summary of the matters treated in it, an argument; also, a preface, prologue. . . . An alphabetical list, placed (usually) at the end of a book, of the names, subjects, etc. occurring in it, with indication of the places in which they occur.”<sup>7</sup> The index provides the ligature between disciplinary spaces. In top-down interdisciplinary reflections, the index plays the role of the taxonomic table or architectonic that arrays the faculties (for example, mem-

7. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “index.”

ory/reason/imagination) and the disciplines that grow out of them. At a minimum, it is nothing more than the slash or hyphen that marks the borders, and border crossings, between distinct disciplines. The index in itself is the body of empty, meaningless, content-free signs, pure information, the medium itself, as in Marshall McLuhan's notion of the electric light. It is an empty frame waiting to be filled, a structure or architecture waiting to be inhabited or haunted. In the textual book or codex form of the index, it is a double structure articulated along two distinct axes, the twenty-six characters of the alphabet and the ten characters of the decimal numeral system. The alphabetic system provides a closed, finite sequential ordering system, like a dictionary or a concordance. All conceivable words written or printed in the Latin alphabet can be captured and ordered in sequence to be looked up. Every word is then given a precise numerical location, which may vary slightly depending on whether the index is constructed on a letter-by-letter or word-by-word principle.<sup>8</sup>

The numerical system, then, is an open-ended, potentially infinite series that flexes with the scale of what is indexed (that is, determined by the number of pages). The full resources of the number system are never exhausted in an index, in contrast to the alphabet, which must be rigorously exhausted, from A to Z.

This doubly articulated alphanumeric system, then, provides empty brackets, an indexical frame that captures the imaginary-symbolic reality represented in any text—the unique and specific content of the book. One might think of the index as a pair of devouring jaws that swallow the text and grind it down in order to digest it into an utterly different form—a different kind of food for thought. The index captures a text by dismembering and remembering it simultaneously, rearranging its elements in relation to a structure that is completely indifferent to its specific discipline, genre, or content. All the conceivable orders of a text—scientific or poetic, artistic or technical—are subjected to an alien discipline, a neutral, colorless structure that is radically different from the textual structure that it captures. And if there is some resistance to thinking of the index as a discipline and not simply the ligature between disciplines, we should remind ourselves that there are professional indexers, and their work (like that of the sign painter) is highly skilled and demands a combination of hard, rigorous work with very demanding standards and an intuitive grasp of rather nebulous judgments about what is important and what is not.

But the most peculiar feature of the index is the way it reveals what might be called the unconscious of a text. Every author who has created an

8. See *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago, 2003), pp. 774–75.

index will recognize this strange moment when one discovers patterns in the frequency and distribution of words that were not there as part of the conscious intention governing the writing. Of course, this is only another phase in the process of writing and rewriting, which is always an experience of finding out what the text wants as opposed to what the author wants. But the index is even more radical as a revelation, as it in some sense provides a snapshot of the totality of the text, suddenly revealing a previously unknown set of patterns disclosed not by the unfolding of its narrative, discursive, dramatic, or lyrical logics but by a completely alien logic of alphanumeric capture, biting, chewing, and digestion. In our time, the digitization of texts, images, and sounds provides a new set of jaws, the binary logic of one and zero, to grind up texts for searchability and data mining. Now, it is not just the individual book that may be indexed but an entire canon, period, or genre of texts to reveal their patterns of circulation and evolution over extended historical periods (as in the work pioneered by Franco Moretti). The data mining of multiple texts replaces reading with counting, interpretation with taxonomy and cartography. It is more like reading the entrails of a dead animal than capturing the meaning of its flight, more like augury or divination than interpretation, or more like studying a photograph for its previously unnoticed *punctum* than reading a text, which is why it makes sense to think of the index as a photograph. Why not, given that the photograph is almost invariably understood as an index, often of a previously unseeable or overlooked reality?

Helen Mirra's indexing of the texts of Addams and Dewey and the display of those indexes as painted signs throughout the interior spaces of the University of Chicago must be understood, I think, as a subtle appropriation of the medium and discipline of the textual index, one that remedies and relocates it in several different senses. First, the choice of Addams and Dewey as exemplary cases treats them as indices of something crucial about this particular university: its foundational commitment to a dialectic between an external and internal sense of the mission of the university, exemplified by education, on the one hand, and social work, on the other. "Outreach" and "inreach" might be the unfortunate bureaucratic labels for this double mission, which is also exemplified by the constitution of the university as a structure held together by the tension between professions and research, teaching and publication (the press was, of course, among the founding departments of the university).

Earlier, I compared the index as an empty structure or frame to an architecture awaiting inhabitants or a haunting. The buildings of the University of Chicago are abundantly inhabited, as anyone who fights for office space is well aware, but they are also haunted by the thoughts of



those who have taught and learned here and never more profoundly than by the thoughts of two of its founding intellects, its foremother and forefather as it were. Between them, Addams and Dewey articulated the explicit, conscious dialectic of the university's constitution. But Mirra, in reinscribing them as ghostly presences, traces the vanished voices that still echo in the hallways, invites us to learn from the unconscious of the university. This, I think, is the secret to her whimsical and rather personal indexing of their texts, an indexing that obeys all the impersonal alphanumeric rules of the standard index but then doubly rearticulates those rules. Mirra locates a kind of found poetry waiting to be indexed in their texts, from "Abstract, in a bad sense, 6" to "World, as fearful and awful, 42." She simultaneously gathers and scatters this poem, as if planting seeds and gathering the harvest at the same time. The Franke Institute for the Humanities is the site of gathering, where the indexes in their totality are displayed. The scattering is done, starting from the Classics building, clockwise around the quad. The result of this scattering or distribution is sometimes enigmatic, sometimes ironic or uncannily appropriate; on the central stairs of the Classics building we find "Human nature, broken, 8"; near the computer science department in the Ryerson Physical Laboratory we are greeted by "Geometry, beginning as agricultural art, 129"; in the former Walker Museum, ex-business school, and current center of the humanities division and the English department, we discover "Generalities, glittering, 139."

Anyone who thinks that the University of Chicago is a place for the orderly structuring of the disciplines or of interdisciplinary systems as opposed to the anarchistic play of the interdisciplinary will be cured of this misapprehension by Mirra's lovely, playful work. I hope we, as well, when pondering the fate of our several disciplines, will not be led into a defensive conservatism about what constitutes authentic disciplines or professionalism. We must insist on the right of the arts and the humanities to be just as experimental and rigorous as the sciences, just as open to the shifting character of archives of human history as the scientists are to new evidence and new methods of producing evidence (since evidence is always produced, not simply found). While we must of course insist on the production of knowledge about culture and society, we must not resign the claim to wisdom or consign it to the uplift function of undergraduate education. The humanities has a higher mission with respect to that deeply contested entity known as the human species, namely, to find out what it is, has been, and can become.