

Greg Shelnett: Teaching Philosophy

If I've learned anything over the course of twenty-two years in the classroom, it's that one must evolve to stay fresh, and my ideas are constantly evolving. As a friend of mine once stated, "Someone who'd miss seeing a dime on the sidewalk is the same person who'd walk past a refrigerator on the sidewalk without seeing it, either." I think the general point is well taken: some people are open to the world around them while others simply pass it by.

I would argue, however, that the individual who fails to notice either the dime or the refrigerator are, more often than not, one in the same person. All of us have the capacity to be both cloistered and cut-off or exceptionally open to the world around us. The issue has more to do with temporal introspection versus observation. Moreover, rather than extolling one mindset over the other, I find that both processes are essential to the creation of art. Artists develop insights from being receptive to and observant of their environment, but they must also allow themselves time apart to reflect on those perceptions and observations. A good artist mulls over the potential relationships between seemingly disparate ideas and images, and not only allows connections to emerge, but fosters seemingly incongruent and tenuous alignments.

I have also discovered that I am an aesthetic pragmatist: it matters less to me how one categorizes the arts, it simply matters that one creates. In a society that increasingly values speed and efficiency, a key role of the artist is to help viewers to slow down, to assist audiences as they abandon expectations, suspend disbelief, and engage in a variety of observational modes. From the constant evolution of lines, forms and proximities in a modern dance performance to the emergence of ideas and images in a novel, the arts engage in both the staccato creativity of the moment and the more lengthy unfolding of ideas that progress and reveal over time before they reach their maker's aesthetic conclusion, if, indeed, they ever they do.

The key processes in either creating or appreciating art, then, are experience and engagement. The sculptural work in which I ask my students to engage closely parallels the daily acts of negotiation we use to experience life in the three-dimensional world. My assignments in introductory classes present specific sets of ritualized behaviors and sets of outcomes designed to immerse students in inventive explorations of recognized design concepts. I remind my students that I consider my assignments to be like paper bags: one can fill them, empty them, draw on them, coat them in Vaseline, bend, fold, or mutilate them, and they're still paper bags. Indeed, it is their job—while honoring all of the requirements of any given assignment—to turn the assignment on its ear in an attempt to define the limits of both the assignment and their creativity.

I stress the importance of design concepts and terminology, typically giving multiple vocabulary and concept illustration quizzes in my introductory classroom, for example, on the theory that repetition not only reinforces the ideas but also changes one's relationship to the material over time. While I cover such key concepts as plane / line / mass, and harmony / unity / variety, I also talk about theories of visual perception and the idea that design is both a biological response to ordering our environment as well as a culturally determined set of precepts. Such ideas are not a set of fundamental laws; ideas put forward by any artist can, and should, be challenged. I frequently offer short readings from sources such as John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Keith Haring's *Journals*, Mary Anne Staniszewski's *Believing Is Seeing*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, Henry Petroski's *The Evolution of Useful Things*, etc.

All students are required to maintain a separate sketchbook for my class: a minimum of two pages of sketches, plus notes from class lectures and critiques, for each day the class meets. Additionally, they must sketch three different ideas for each assignment before they begin to fabricate the actual work. I remind them that I consider sketches to be "around and about" the work: a sketch is not a blue print, but simply an idea of how to proceed. A sketch that functions as a prescription leads to predictable results. Whether one approaches a work of art – indeed the development of any creative idea – as a novice or as an expert, one must work to remain open to the possibility of being changed by the experience.

I also stress the importance of simply starting. So much of art is best informed by direct experience, especially the tactile. Whether through a pencil, a brush, a haptic computer device, or the body, an artist's tactile experience of actually making something ultimately informs and determines the outcome of any given work of art. The sooner one begins to fabricate or perform, the sooner one gets either to resolution or disaster. Indeed, having to alter one's plans or analyze "failed" efforts fuels the development of craft and the evolution of form and concept. Here, too, the sketchbook is not abandoned: it serves as a diary of the process. It provides a temporary refuge where one can record the seemingly absurd without fear, and, through written and drawn observations, think about procedure and potential outcomes for a work or series of works. As I often tell my students, "You may find that you draw largely things you will never make, actions you will never perform and record ideas you will supersede; that's not a problem at all."

Finally, I am a strong advocate of dialogue, both internal and external. From maintaining a journal of one's ideas, to discussing issues with peers in at coffeehouses or via electronic forums, to formal and informal classroom critiques, or professional presentations at scholarly conferences, the process of externalizing and discussing one's ideas and responding to those of others helps both to sharpen one's focus as well as to broaden one's horizons. Indeed, as Marcel Duchamp stated, "I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste."