
Unprofessional Painting, Unprofessional Teaching

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Any attempt at passion, at stepping out of this skepticism of the known into an inadequate confrontation with what exceeds it and oneself, must be suppressed by... professionalization. (Harney & Moten 2013: 35-36)

When you work, you are necessarily in absolute solitude. You cannot have disciples, or be part of a school. The only work is moonlighting and is clandestine. (Deleuze & Parnet 1987: 5)

What might it mean to profess to be unprofessional in one's chosen field of practice? Can an unprofessional philosopher have anything to say, can an unprofessional (but exhibiting and possibly even successful) artist make an interesting artwork, and is it possible to teach art unprofessionally – to moonlight in one's own job – rather than teach competently or incompetently?

If professionalism suggests a certain criticality, a display and mastery of a securely fenced field of expertise – a reflexivity that enforces such boundaries of knowledge and exclusion – then how might we conceive of what it is to be *unprofessional*, where this might be a continued encounter with the unknown, not as conquistador but in a spirit of adventurous collaboration. If professionalism denies the unprofessional a voice or space, perhaps unprofessionalism moves through and within as much as beyond the professional sphere as a minor force, seeking encounters with other forces ('people...movements, ideas, events, entities') (Deleuze & Parnet 1987: 5) and the creativity that might arise out of the conversation between them: in this sense it is collective rather than subjective. If professionalism has tried and true authorial methods that can be copied, imitated and replayed (affirming

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the author), unprofessionalism in the same field of enquiry creates not models or methods but meta-models problems (affirming the event). If the professional works competently, the unprofessional studies 'without an end' (Harney & Moten 2013: 67).

Unprofessional painting

If, as Deleuze and Guattari demand, an unprofessional philosophy is an act of invention, creative rather than critical, meta-modeling rather than strategizing, how is it that painting, which already seems inherently inventive, might be thought of not as invention-critique or invention-knowledge or invention-control, but as a form of study? Could unprofessional painting could be thought of not as a mastery of skills but as a radicalization, preparing the painter to move beyond the known into a deeper engagement with a co-created field of experience, a teaching through encounter?

Paintings are perhaps always catastrophes – either caught in the middle of a disaster or in the middle of disasters about to happen. There are, even only on a pragmatic physical level, so many variable elements to juggle in each brushstroke that the chances of ever feeling in total control are slim: the difficult coordination of eye, hand, long brush handle and bristles of differing resistance, length and absorption; the viscosities of paints and mediums mixing together (and their interaction with ambient temperature and humidity); the grain and absorption of the surface; and the complexities of colour. Here colour in particular emphasizes or brings to the fore the enforced immanence and problematics of painting, with its completely independent (but complexly interacting) variables of hue, tone, saturation and colour temperature that each dab of paint contains, then to be multiplied or folded to the nth degree by this dab's immediate relationship to the hue, tone, saturation and temperature of each other stroke of colour on the picture plane, vibrating intensely with those colours in its immediate neighborhood but also in conversation with both every other mark, and the ambient light in the studio or gallery.

Each new mark encounters everything already on the canvas and pulls towards marks yet to be made, the painting event an attractor around which

these forces and potentials 'coalesce', though only in the sense that they are held in tension. Rather than working towards resolving a picture, problems are affirmed and multiplied - the brushes, paint, colours and canvas betray the 'hand' - both extending relationships and forging new contrasts or intervals (hue-hue, hue-saturation, tone-temperature and so on), effects emerge from potential, unresolvable differences. Each new colour reinvents the field of possibility - re-engages with an outside - restarts every ongoing conversation as it also introduces new factors. To negotiate this is to be implicated in a painting machine or perhaps a meshwork of painting machines: expressing some collective potential through the act of engaging repetitively with the same (now compounded) potential failures and collapses.

If this is a form of open learning or studying - a questioning, a speculative process (a reassembling without end) that is also pragmatic (a composing of problems) that is always an encounter with others (again 'people...movements, ideas, events, entities') - then perhaps it is a studying of how to become diagrammatic. It encourages a fluid negotiation of not only dilemmas that lie directly before the painter (what to do next: what colour, medium, brush, gesture), which are themselves mutably interconnected and interdependently problematic, but also a bringing to attention or intensification of this state of flux that moves it beyond the simply topological (oscillating around a single shared becoming) into a more complex field of contradictory becomings that always threatens to pull apart as much as come together.

And, no matter what the success of an individual painting, a painter - unless they resort to mere replication - can never claim to conquer or banish this diagrammatic nature of the painting act, since with each new canvas they are faced from the start with the same problems to be worked through. In this, *painters* are not only alone in their work - immanently confronting the catastrophic painting at hand - but each *painting* is an event composing itself alone, pragmatically recomposing skill sets and a questioning or problematics from the ground up: metamodeling or studying. Painting is collective work, in that it involves a conversation between all these component elements, but also singular as each canvas expresses a particular collective nexus of

problems. The art of the painting is not contained within any one of these elements, but through encounters between them – the tension (art) that arises as a third position or ‘double capture,’ both between and outside individual factors, flowing ‘in another direction’ (Deleuze & Parnet 1987: 5). It is transindividual, a collective individuation or co-composition, not (necessarily) between multiple artists – although this past and future echoes through every painting – but between all the entities and forces invested in the event, which reaches into an excess, teaching all these elements something about what more they can be or do in relation. [1]

To paint is to, at least at some stage in the process, be confronted by this tension of the diagrammatic, even if it is at this point that the professional (capital ‘P’) Painter knows how to wisely bypass such disaster, while the (small ‘p’) painter embraces the battle of wills between canvas, viscosity, colour, brush, eye, not in a naive belief in their ability to subordinate but with some knowledge that it is in the midst of this meta-chaos that something might coalesce. The question is how to remain an unprofessional, how to continue to paint through stumbling, stammering and false moves, through errors, mistakes and erasures that are all in themselves creative, but without romanticizing failure? How to keep this spirit alive without simply excusing clumsiness, bad painting (as unprofessional painting is not ‘bad’ painting any more than it is expert painting)? [2]

All this, I think, has nothing to do with the chosen genre of a painting, but everything to do with the style of inquiry. As such it never belongs to an established school nor establishes a school with all its implied false promises – it is practiced alone, in the singularity of the event. And, while this idea of painting may seem to imply a turn away from figuration towards abstract expressionism and some heroic struggle with the canvas and the necessary immanence of such approaches, I would argue that it might equally apply to photo-realism. For example, in a scene in an ABC video, artist Jeffery Smart [3] is shown painting a figure in an interior space. The painting surface is carefully gridded up and penciled in from detailed drawings and photographic reference material, and the artist is depicted spending several hours meticulously painting in a realistic figure with a tiny brush. At some point, despite the apparent completion of the work, he decides that the figure

is in slightly the wrong position, and furiously scrubs it out and begins again, with the same quiet approach, then erases this effort and begins a third time. He does this seemingly without frustration or regret, as if accepting that even within such a tightly controlled process this is in fact the only method by which a painting might ever grow and reach a resolution. This, it seems to me, is a kind of unprofessionalism in that it embraces the continued problematization of the painting process, full of false starts, errors, re-workings and partial solutions. Smart, rather than professionally circumventing potential errors and encounters with problems (as he surely could have given his vast experience and level of compositional and painterly skill), utilizes the disruption of such encounters to propel the collective painting-event forward. [4] Here to paint is to always be beginning again, to confront the same problems and invent new, inadequate solutions – their inadequacy a future-feeling propelling the artist forwards into further conversations.

Unprofessional Teaching (of Painting)

How can you (can you?) teach a student all this, in a way that enables them to continue without exhaustion, without giving up, but also with the bravery to sit at this very uncomfortable moment of impending artistic collapse?

Were any of my students to read this they would laugh, as far from being the ‘out there’ radical teacher who encourages experimentations like one of my colleagues (‘paint anything you like,’ ‘paint what you feel,’ ‘just play with the materials’), my classes are clearly organized, always have processes students are asked to follow and a careful limitation of resources and techniques. In my experience lack of structure tends to lead straight back into bad habits as students repeat what they already know and feel comfortable with.

I would suggest that it takes a technique – or a certain type of immanent structuring (a technicity, moving through and beyond and reinventing techniques) to move beyond Painting: Mondrian’s neo-plasticism perhaps, that distilled his painting world into simple rules. [5] On paper these rules sound too constricting, yet to stand before a room of his late paintings, is to experience an artist engaging in open conversation with the problems of

painting. Seen in the flesh, paintings that in photographs might appear rigid and clean instead shimmer with uncertainties, subtle variations and the wonkiness of a cautious line drawn in awkward collaboration between rules, hand, eye, paint viscosity and grain. Each still-visible brush stroke has a tentativeness that seems alive with potential, as every dab of paint creates new tensions within the picture, as each off-centre rectangle of colour begins to unbalance the work, grids create new conflicts and connections rather than salve existing relations, uncertain, almost straight lines almost meet the edge before petering out, taking the work to the wobbly edge of a precipice. Rather than being still and complete, the paintings exhibit a meta-movement, still alive as they are with the tensions between colour, temperature, tone, line and plane that are less resolved than at a point of pre-collapse under torsion. Each work is a partial solution, a singular exploration of the problems Mondrian has set himself – they ‘work’ but only to a certain extent and they provide no answers, rather they complicate the rules and generate only continued and mounting questions: how does this shade of blue question the darker blue in the previous work and converse with the yellow in the next, how does the introduction of a grey field question the white background, and so on, how does all this complicate every other painting and future painting? And, then, just as a room full of these works at MoMA appears to begin to coalesce into an oeuvre, the placement of Mondrian’s last, unfinished work (*Broadway Boogie-Woogie*) shakes everything up, reinvents techniques to question the rules again, reopens every problem, turning lines into contrasting squares, tightly repacking the sparseness of previous canvases with saturated colour (but in fact they are all unfinished works, or workings-through of one unsolvable problem). His structuring is a technicity to lead him into encounters with trouble rather than one that limits through building fences around a safehouse.

My interest in how one might begin to teach painting in such a way is threefold:

Firstly, it seems of interest to me to explore the radical potential of what may seem an inherently ‘conservative’ or historically burdened and structured art form, rather than simply try to move painting students towards the expanded field, reinforcing a belief in a dichotomous relationship between conceptual or

‘process-based’ art and traditional art. (How can any art not be process based? It always involves a process of making, therefore ‘process’ as a certificate of authenticity loses its meaning). Rather, what we perhaps need to differentiate between are those processes that have become strategies – moving towards some pre- or overly structured concept of an outcome and those that remain diagrammatic – immanent and saturated with potential in the way I have described above to activate minor potentials of painting – while acknowledging that these positions are two ends of a pole with which all artistic endeavor engages.

Secondly, to consider whether it might be of interest to teach something at which one is not a professional. I’m often met with concern, even disdain, when I tell Painters that I teach painting. They try to reason with me, explaining that, as a non-Painter (by which they mean that the primary practice I am identified with is not painting – I don’t exhibit paintings, show at a respectable gallery, have a degree in painting, my shoes are not stained with the correct splatters of paint), I should not be allowed to teaching painting: I cant possibly produce professional Painters.

Thirdly, and most pragmatically, as someone given the responsibility to teach students to paint I want to interrogate my own attempts and mistakes in order to develop a series of techniques with which to experiment in the future, even though any suggestions must of course be reinvented in collaboration each time to be of any use.

Seven Questions or Tentative Propositions for an Unprofessional Teaching Toybox

- How to be Vague?
- How to use description?
- How to play?
- How to collectivize?

- How to learn more than you teach?
- How to repeat but not imitate?
- How to problematize?

Perhaps a radical pedagogy might be about learning rather than teaching: is it possible to teach as a form of study in itself, to not offer solutions but enable a collective working that turns towards inventing painting problems rather than providing solutions, to collectively describe rather than individually instruct, allowing story-telling to drive investigation as an ongoing story-telling running parallel to painting (a dynamic act of engagement through shared listening and imagining), to repeat tasks so that things that appeared settled are questioned again, to invent directions powerful in their vagueness (not a vagueness that is a lack of potential, but a vagueness that is indeterminate because it is *too* saturated with potential), to seek to be surprised rather than confirmed by the energies of the classroom?

How can any of this be produced without succumbing to burnout? Without either teacher or students simply becoming dispirited, confused and exhausted by constant change? How can we make the constantly challenging sustainable? Perhaps this is what the experience of the painter or artist can begin to explore, as they learn to juggle all those elements and foolishly embrace the catastrophe of a new painting, while being refreshed and invigorated by the challenge.

Undoubtedly all these approaches will ultimately fail if followed and become strategies encoding and controlling practices – which maybe is the point. If they ‘succeed’ then I will have become, despite my efforts, a professional Painting Teacher. At best they might begin to assemble into a tool or toolbox of techniques, with the understanding that the most they can offer is the beginning of a way in to engagement or encounter with a game or problem that cannot be other than still in the process of being invented. Here such techniques are props in a game of painting, to be picked up so that one might “move into some new thinking and into a new set of relations, a new way of being together, thinking together. In the end, it’s the new way of being

together and thinking together that is important, and not the tool, not the prop. Or, the prop is important only insofar as it allows you to enter; but once you're there, it's the relation and the activity that's really what you want to emphasize" (Harney & Moten 2013: 106).

Notes

[1] I don't mean to imply that painting occupies some privileged position in relation to a diagrammatic or machinic approach to artistic engagement. The same juggling of problems could of course be present in every performance (and within every step) of a dance whether improvised or tightly choreographed, or performance (and note) of an orchestra, whether adlibbed or scored, or within the carving or assemblage of a sculpture and within every hammer-blow-onto-chisel-onto-stone. But for me personally I more easily slip into an exploratory unprofessional mode of working with a brush in my hand than when constructing an installation, where I am more competent and I have to always remind myself not to fall into the trap of making things that I already know will work. Perhaps it is in part that one mode of working is always at the necessarily open ended beginning of a process, while the later mode is always burdened with the need to at least partially fulfill gallery obligations. Similarly in teaching painting I find it my own uncertainty in the process makes it easier to enable open inquiry than in drawing or sculpture where I perhaps possess more defined skills to impart.

[2] Even if the 'bad' painting as a movement – think Elizabeth Peyton in the 90's – was initially a force against professionalism it has perhaps by now passed its use-by date and its self-conscious stylization is a very different thing to unprofessionalism.

[3] Smart was a well known and highly conservative, Australian realist painting of urban dystopias who was dismissive of both abstract and conceptual art.

[4] It is interesting, I think, to consider if and how such an approach bleeds into the final painting, since this is all most people would have a chance to interact with. How is its tonality different? Can we distinguish between the

initial late Pollock canvases where experimentation and immanent disaster bubbles throughout the painting and, as critic Robert Hughes has claimed, the last works where Pollock is merely repeating himself, imitating his own practice to please an audience?

[5] Mondrian decreed that paintings should be entirely abstract compositions, have only straight lines running parallel to the picture plane, and utilize only black, white and primary colours. Mondrian himself bent and broke these rules at times, but was apparently highly scornful of other artists within De Stijl who also did so.

Works Cited

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