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ASCII CLASSROOM

a text dependent investigation of the studio art classroom

INTRODUCTION

The synthesized and stylized results from a two year, multi-phase, collaborative effort entitled *Classroom Dynamics*, the ASCII Classroom presents a theoretical and visual text-picture of the process of art education along side a speculative vision of an ideal classroom. The project performs its philosophical basis as it tackles indeterminate entities formerly known to behave in categories. In particular, I parallel two hybrids: word/\picture and teacher/\student.

What follows is a moderately structured treatise suggesting a reconfiguration of structure through visual and textual language. Text is my tool and my target, causing some confusion, which I promote. The project includes two "images"- diagrams derived from the *Classroom Dynamics*¹ projects- which are produced as ASCII² art (the process of making images out of common keyboard characters). The most accessible form of transmitting "visuals" over the internet, ASCII (art) perfectly "materializes" my aim to collapse image and word, teacher and student, and notably, conventionally appropriate forms for theory and art.

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From fall 1995 through fall 1997 five upper division Print<making> classes, totaling seventy five students, and I, produced five collaborative oversize (linoleum block) prints. Four of the projects diagrammed individual responses to the actual, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics of our studio art classroom³; the fifth print⁴ offered a speculative vision of what could be. The projects were completed, in turn, concurrently with independent student work, and were the direct product(s) of our time together.

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ASCII is the acronym for the American Standard Code for Information Interchange

THE BATTLE FOR ATTENTION I

Late 20th century (visual) art education, in particular urban college art programs, figure in the continuum of questioning authority. We teachers fancy ourselves championing the imperative to contest; but raised arms tell true tales. Just barely perceptible under-arm stains attest to the workout our nervous systems get as the source of both prongs of a double message. Between the lines of course descriptions and out the sides of our mouths seeps a desire for the status quo. We can't help it. Status quo in the academy is teacher talks, students listen. If the lesson plan foregrounds alterity and dissent, that's a good-faith choice that unfortunately implicates the above mentioned seepage. Switch that around- teach conventionally, and hope your students surprise you- and you have a bad-faith option, one that thinks little of yourself, your students, and I dare say, the school.

The image of choice for the successful classroom has been a sea of uplifted arms, high and hungry to respond. Not unlike the swaying antennae of underwater anemone (stuck to a rock and waiting for food) this image, and the model it suggests, has a problem: it doesn't go anywhere. Serving as an adroit example of the delimitation inherent in the 1 - 2 punch of proposition and resolution, the model also reminds that urgent questions never get asked, or never politely anyway. It reminds that the sweat under the arms of students, raised and lowered alike, is the sweat of fear: The fear that they just may (not) challenge authority.

The more commonly experienced classroom discourse regarding authority looks to imported texts and pictures - their authorship, originality, truth and beauty as safer points of contention. Some of the more interesting and problematic discourse concerns the viability of the concrete. (Using language to debate the relevancy of material is a good one.) This is not your mothers debate about what constitutes reality, more like whether we need it or not. I suspect that the shift in emphasis from what we see, to what we need, is symptomatic of a wired, tired, and insecure commodity culture- simultaneously providing so much and so little. The most cursory look at the multitude of products yielding little real choice combined with the rabid growth of service-work and self-help industries, reveals a contemporary concern for what we need. The question of what we need now, in art culture, includes such intangibles as the benefits of beauty, the value of relativism, and the type of intervention necessary to qualify an appropriated then manipulated text/image as newly original.

While we decide what we need, the sister question that recognizes available products, servants a n d personal limitations is, what will suffice. The case for and against adequacy is primarily a contest between quantity and quality. Numbers first (and the argument against grades)- here, the dull, no frills, and down right dowdy status of adequacy presumes a context dependent on linear and quantitative evaluation. This spectrum of adequacy, bracketed by excellence and failure, is easily mapped and without surprise. And though "finding yourself" may still be a goal of higher education, it has surely shriveled next to the goal of finding your spot on that map.

The more glamorous issue of quality takes us to a different notion of adequacy. If we consider quality apart from any external system to rate it, we find an adequacy defined through the experience of the independent beholder. In this light, "good enough for me", transforms from sad resolve to self-at-the-center affirmation. Undervalued and feared as a goal of education, self satisfaction gets a bad rap. For if faculty are paid to be Quality Central- arbiter and clearing house for what is good- then students must simply mimic or fail. Privileging the ability to recognize, then pleasure, yourself, is dangerous to every component that keeps teachers i n f r o n t of classes. The dubiousness of this (QC) protocol is rarely embraced- even in the most progressive of forums, where we would expect singular truth to be under ritual scrutiny.

THE MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL, IN LIGHT OF EACH OTHER

The erosion of certainty, in general, has pointed faith back to the experiential. In the case of art culture, the current flow of criticism lauding in one way or another an embodied art experience, coupled with the ubiquity of museum educational programs, point to institutions assuming the (passive) position. That is to say, a great deal of ink these days promotes the possibility that the customer (however unversed) is always right. It remains true, though, that there are customers, and then there are Capital customers, an uppercase "C" for big cash. The most positive a n d negative thing about this moment is that the two may be linked, with educators and critics as facilitators. The delicate line between the appealingly non-verbal (but embodied) art experience and the disfavored spiritual (out of body) experience would seem to need facilitation also, since it too continues to employ teachers and critics. So it follows that actual art practice within the academy can be addressed as the curious fruit of the following (material+immaterial) couplings:

1) 90's economy < > 60's idealism
(boomers in post boom)

The remarkable connection between these otherwise strange partners is the scrappy nature of both decades. The (economic) boom and subsequent crash of the eighties left us with rich debris, scraps with potential, like the imperative to invent your own context. Not a little reminiscent of the best of the 60's, it f e e l s like power, and thirty + years later, that may be all we need. Poverty of economic means, evidenced in minuscule supply budgets (the schools and the students), and the national poverty of attention for visual arts are of course depressing, but alternately viewed, give us permission to stop caring about appropriate means, forms and ideas.

2) object making < > theoretical writing
(wherein the thing looks to the word, who is looking back at the thing)

To state the obvious, ideas expressed in matter, and words that insinuate themselves in-to your matter, have as partners been dating for some time. The tension between them has been sufficient to keep the relationship interesting. Here also, we find within the product of their union- in this case, student produced image (object)\text work- either horror or delight. Pedagogy's own affection for language has given us several generations of art students, who if not scared away by mystification, have been able to see their activities in the larger cultural context they inhabit.

3) knowledge < > information

(what you're looking at)

These two shifty words, equally charged and vacant, sit on a precipice looking out at our most critical concerns. They may be laughing at us arguing about the seat of content, or the importance of tradition and progress, but I think the joke's on us for realizing them as discreet concepts. In a manner similar to the somnambulistic form/content discussion, language here appears to hinder, where really it is language's plasticity of construction and use that offers release from the dilemma to choose a superior method of transmission. What and how we "take" something "seriously" is at stake. I mean it.

4) received wisdom < > discretionary education

(what we want vs. what they get)

The poverty of promising \$ career paths for artists has fueled a ground swell interest in "graphic design" and "computers" while filling lecture courses with interested but unavailable students. Those who do major with us are caught in the changing of the guard. Received wisdom, the unidirectional method of teaching, is still in; but its main man, mastery, is out. This confusing turn of events leaves in its wake a body of students whom you want to know what you know, but not too much. Too much feels like a level of commitment superseding post-graduate opportunity. The problem here is not with the death of mastery, rather, that the notion of received wisdom hasn't died with it. The more insidious problem with this picture is our inability to want or trust that students can make their own great way.

Images and words are interchangeable as signs and sights (o.k., sites too) of meaning. When classy or lively typography joins the ranks of fine art and inviting women as effective sales devices, designer typefaces challenge how and what we read, and artists backpedal with sincerity in response to the overly didactic "Text-Image" work from the 80's, then we know we are reliving the drama, dilemma and contest of meaning brought about some 450 years ago when text and image competed for favor. At the point when calligraphy lost its solely utilitarian function (through the printing and distribution of books), is precisely when it's high flourishes (unreadable, I might add) flourished; its practitioners becoming artists while jockeying for the position of "best way to know" with painting- itself newly infatuated with portraying what could and could not be seen (speculative nature).

The spirited exchange between the script and the illumination (as seen on the pages of late illuminated manuscripts) is a moment that portends our own. The visual conversation produced by their cohabitation managed to be both competitive and harmonious. An historical survey of the subsequent see-saw of dominance and submission between writing and visual representation helps us to understand the c u r r e n t debate surrounding the feared eclipse of tradition by digital media, and why that debate is so foolish. In the broad-based cultural attempt to isolate the mind from the body, (the fullness associated with) reading, along with its evil twin, (the immediacy associated with) vision, battle only to be the superior specular experience, the one with the deepest resonance. Unfathomable depths to be sure, however, discerning size still draws a crowd.

Following the lead of printing, then photography, digital media and its potential are the latest tools for the projects of expression and representation. The availability of the means to produce, reproduce, mutate, author and multi-author are a progressive consequence of mechanical technology reminiscent of the direct hand technology found in calligraphy and painting. The connection goes unnoticed, however, as the case for (exclusive, fixed) tradition gives voice to the fear of unrecognizable origins. A byte i s a byte i s a byte. Sans pedigree, the digital byte affords the mutability of literal lines (words into images, vice versa) and strategic boundaries, its own vulnerability the very source of its profundity. This lies in marked contrast to the material artifacts of tradition, their influence a result of an attributed and guarded (reliable) position.

Many readers will prefer the perceptible and tangible bite of hot metal on paper to the cool and distant bytes floating about on a monitor. But here temperature is only a surface issue; some do, after all, like it hot, and some are really cool. Under the skin of this particular preference often lies the restrictive cultural imperative to choose which dimension is best. In this moralistic context, the sureness of material offers, ironically, a kind of chaste purity- possession through touch, but by permission only. Remove that permission and the material m a y become (through its own or someone else's will) just another tart- all dressed up and ready to go (and the argument for/against multiples). Digital processes, promiscuous by comparison to more visible and tactile processes, fall victim to the unfortunate equation made between fluidity and destruction.

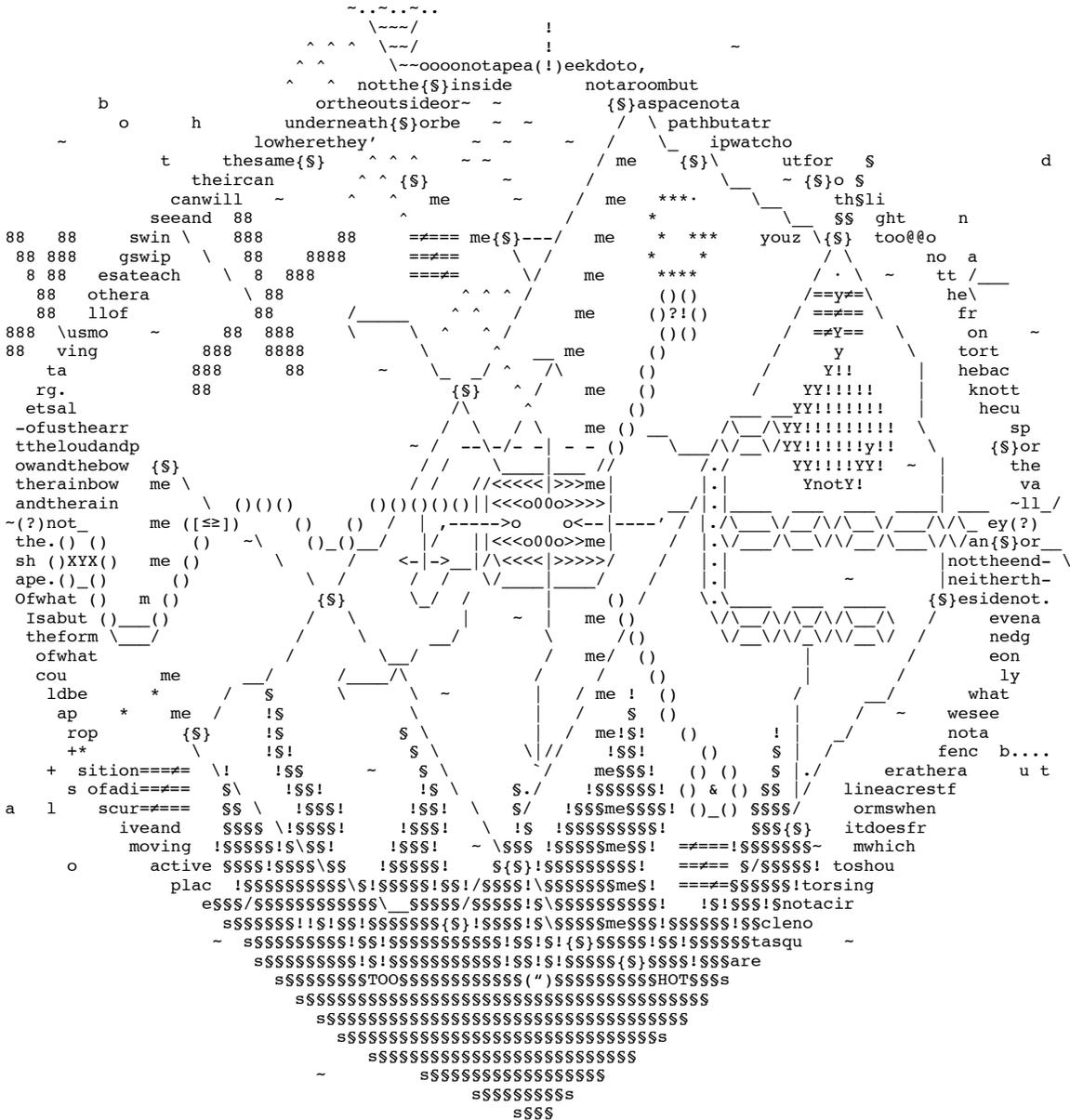
OUR TOOLS OURSELVES

Now that we can locate grand meaning within the detail, and conversely find personal significance in the big picture, we have officially arrived (again) at the moment when everything truly is everything, which necessarily means that everything must be something. The boundaries between teacher </> student and word </> picture necessarily erode when we see the plain logic, possibility and compassion inherent in that proposition. We all give, receive, color and complex the environment and what we make from it.

Text, its authoritative tendencies coexisting with utility and poetry, i s critical to, well, criticality. And criticality is important in the classroom. Critique, credentials, books, journals, readers, evaluation forms and grades; for better or worse, we express our ability to discern officially through speech and text. Small wonder that from contemporary plastic knowledge systems, a national literacy crisis, and students alternately bored, hostile and enamored with power, emerges a ripe moment

for the resurgence of an art practice that considers everything as (text) readable, and letterforms as concerned with their appearance as high modernism.

4



4b

The invitation to diagram an ideal classroom, though initially met with the enthusiasm you might expect, proved to be a formidable proposition. Students felt freer or were more willing to explore their extant experience rather than articulate a hypothetical one. The resulting print- its production process and the imagery on it- evidenced a reluctance to commit to an alternative pedagogy or mode of interaction. What the print missed in commitment and clarity it made up for in actualizing an instance of impaired vision. Lacking previous (academic) opportunities to visualize then act on their own ideas for education, the students were simply

unable to consider options. The futility was palpable, underscoring the problematic nature of my intention, and the reality of our movements within the academy.

Rather than being a record of our marks, what you see here reflects more upon verbal re-marks (intraclass exchange). Conversations about an ideal classroom revealed a surprising desire for a center, albeit a charged and changing one. My personal vision of decentrality, a holdover from the eighties, met with a response akin to loss. They envisioned a center with energized nomadic occupants. Less a panopticon than a battery, this center behaves like a solenoid- energy comes in, then goes back out transformed to another task. Our conversations also revealed an emphasis on personal effort (E), the appreciation of life's finer details (~), a desire to both favor and transcend gender associations (XYX), and the tediousness of boundaries. Also seen is the flutter of persistent egos (me me), and the overwhelming desire for an inclusive environment.

Rounding out our semi-circle is the fusion of inquiry and exclamation (?!). Having something to say in the classroom usually takes the form of a question or a statement. A statement invested (obvious belief or importance) becomes an exclamation. Can we exclaim and question our beliefs at the same time!? Can an educational model premised on, and proud of, the impossibility of quantifying art practice (properly identifying all studio art programs) fulfill its premise and remain in business? I propose we turn up the heat on our idea of vision as the linking of physical and intellectual phenomena. Once seen as connected, as the union of our material and the immaterial, the otherwise nasty notion of judgment becomes a particular, if fleeting, moment, of lesser or greater importance, depending upon who is looking.