

The M.F.A. Academia's Pyramid Scheme



If one person recruits six agents, each of whom, in turn, recruits six others, here's how the numbers would multiply in theory. Most people, however, fail to recruit new members and the pyramid soon collapses.

How
a pyramid
scheme works:

Level 1- **3**
 Level 2- **36**
 Level 3- **216**
 Level 4- **1,296**
 Level 5- **7,776**
 Level 6- **46,656**
 Level 7- **279,936**
 Level 8- **1,679,616**
 Level 9- **10,077,696**
 Level 10- **60,466,176**
 Level 11- **362,797,056**
 (Higher than the total U.S. population)

A few more exchanges have taken place in a long overdue discussion. Exactly one year ago, a "Speakeasy" appeared in these pages called "Guilty by Association." It was written by Steven Mannheimer, the President of the Mid-America College Art Association and a contributing editor for this magazine. In his half-hearted confession, he addressed some of the crucial problems now facing all art academics, as well as newly minted academy wannabes. On most art-world politics Steve and I usually see eye-to-eye, but on this issue, our dramatically different locations in the food chain require that our sight lines differ.

Professor Mannheimer cheerily described the interview process that takes place every year in February at College Art Association (CAA) meetings: Everyone understands that 199 of every 200 hopefuls will return to Des Moines or Missoula or Toledo empty-handed. But the interviewers' good manners and the candidates fear of appearing unattractively pessimistic render this statistic almost unmentionable.¹

Something about this accepted conspiracy of silence nagged at me. I couldn't quit thinking about that article, and about how comfortable we've become about the staggering number of unemployable colleagues we produce. They're just part of the professional landscape. I mean, we all know what the situation is; how else can we explain our fearfulness and impeccable manners? Against my better judgment, I fired off a letter to Steve suggesting where he missed the mark. Here's a sample paragraph from my reply:

Steven, I hate to contradict you, but you knew where this was going, didn't you? I wish it were true that merely "good manners" prohibited frank discussion of the lopsided numbers of job openings to artist-applicants at CAA. It's more a matter of institutional self-preservation, donchathink? If more artists paid attention to such details there might be a few (thousand) less enrolling in grad schools, or at the very least, we'd all be going to a warm island every February instead of some snowy art metropolis.²

This went on for three pages of spirited commentary. I got it off my chest and got back to work. But then one day last spring Steve telephoned, and in so many words, he dared me to tell all of you what I told him. Here goes.

Pyramids

Every year, thousands of people in America and around the world take part in one of the most common financial scams, the classic Pyramid Scheme.

Typically, optimistic investors respond to a charismatic sales pitch. Following their hearts and dreams, they dump cash into the "start-up" of the business, paying for entry fees, sales kits, and training programs. Target victims are usually financially vulnerable, eagerly looking for big returns: they're new immigrants, people seeking career changes, recent college graduates, and the elderly. There is often no real product and no actual market for the supposed product, but instead, a system requiring that you continuously sign up other recruits in order to realize a profit- or a paycheck- on down the line.

Let's look at a few examples to get the image clearly in mind:

Illustration #1 : Amway is a worldwide distributor of cleaning products, organized around a complex multi-tiered "sponsorship" system. And in this classic example, it helps if you're a better recruiter than you are a product salesman. Of course, new recruits aren't referred to as victims or even competitors, they're simply "part of the team."

Illustration #2 : In InfoWorld, Ed Foster writes about the current proliferation of junk e-mail or "spam" scams on the Internet. He says "junk e-mail is itself one huge pyramid scheme, because the 'product' being sold by spam so often is in fact spam: bulk e-mail tools, e-mail address lists, or how-to-get-rich-by- spamming instructions."³

Illustration #3: Last year, hundreds of thousands of Albanians lost their life savings in a country-wide scam, when a government-assisted pyramid collapsed, taking a billion dollars with it. U.S. News & World Report summarized, "For the cheated, the only consolation may be knowing that tens of thousands of other former East bloc citizens have fallen for similar frauds."⁴

But all is not bleak. . . . Here's an *inspiring* testimony from the Mary Kay web site:

Unlimited earning potential! A flexible schedule! And a new car in the driveway! She knew she could do it, so she started a Mary Kay business and became her own boss. Now, she was calling the shots, keeping her own hours, with plenty of time for the things she loved best- her family and friends. Meanwhile, her success grew. (So did her bank account.) She earned the use of that brand new Cadillac she'd always wanted. And the rewards kept coming. She earned great prizes for her home, office and leisure. Then she set her sights on exotic vacations and luxurious perks. It was all within her reach! Not only was she having it all, she was also celebrating it all with tens, hundreds, thousands of women with big dreams just like hers... The great friends she made supported her all the way to the top!⁵

Are you ready to sign up yet? This web site reminded me of a possibly prophetic collision with the "Mary Kay way" that occurred during my own M.F.A. program in the early 1980s. A fellow student sheepishly brought in boxes and boxes of the abandoned beauty products, inherited from a sister-in-law who bailed out of the path to riches and pink Cadillacs. Having purchased an ambitious amount of "starter products," the new entrepreneur discovered, too late, everyone in Los Angeles already had all the cosmetics they could ever use. A spontaneous performance piece erupted as a group of female art students- in the middle of what was (so far) the most macho experience of our lives- became the recipients of an unsolicited avalanche of facial creams, makeup, and perfumes. I wonder how many of that group is an "independent beauty

consultant" today?

The promises and dreams in the above scenarios are all similar and familiar, and so are the dynamics. All pyramids rely on investors recruiting others to serve as the income-producing layer underneath. No new blood, no pay-out. If you fail to recruit, you remain on the bottom of the heap, because technically, there's no place to go except up and on top of the backs of your recruits. By definition, the only ones who can benefit from a pyramid scheme are the ones who got there first.

Artists, Education, & Employment

So what about us? Don't worry; regardless of the pyramid's product or sales pitch, there's always room for one more- at the bottom, that is. This fall, more than 10,000 students are starting out in graduate art programs nationwide.⁶ But once they graduate, almost all of them will disappear off the face of the art map, because the tracking systems we have in place guarantee it. The Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau tracks very detailed employment statistics, but doesn't distinguish between full- or part-time employment, or whether or not the job is in one's chosen field. Classifications are based on the job in which the person worked the most number of hours, for pay.⁷ (If you're an artist on a college payroll, you're counted as teachers or administrators, not artists.) Since less than a third of all artists earn their main income from their art,⁸ this leaves most of us unaccounted for.

Even using this very restrictive census definition to decide who qualifies as an artist, the census *still* counted over 1.6 million artists in all disciplines in 1990, an increase of 54 percent since 1980, and an unbelievable increase of 127 percent since 1970. In this same period, the number of artists reporting they have full- or part-time jobs as college teachers has shrunk by 50 percent.⁹ Good luck tweaking your slides.

Regardless of its diminished value today, the M.F.A. *did* start out as a job ticket. The creation of the degree was a direct response to the sudden need for teachers created by the G.I. Bill in 1944 in all disciplines, art included. Thanks to the flood of government scholarship money, student enrollments doubled and kept climbing. For a while, the newly formed departments supplied teachers as planned, but that vacancy was adequately met back in the mid-to-late 1970s.¹⁰ It's been surplus ever since.

Students enrolling in art programs today seem unaware or unconcerned that the supposed teaching market has long since peaked. And educators appear unconcerned as well. A recent letter from my graduate department breathlessly described pending plans to expand enrollment, and the current College Art Association "Standards for the M.F.A. Degree in Visual Arts" recommends up-scaling degree requirements to include three years instead of two. But please, let's not have more of the same. Until we start improving our results and our students' survival rates, we should limit the damages we're inflicting to at least the current levels. (Remember the physicians' motto: "Above all, do no harm.") Allowing M.F.A. numbers to swell further simply because paying candidates exist is bad for the profession and extremely short-sighted. We can no longer justify preparing more and more graduates to compete more stylishly for fewer and fewer jobs.

O.K. now, *stop*. Trust me, I've already heard it a few million times: "Art school isn't just about preparing teachers." Well then, we had better start talking about what we are preparing for. For 30 years now we've been leaving it to chance. How will today's students be able to go on to use their educations, to live even minimal lives, so that their art making can continue? California artist and educator Fred Martin has said that without meeting the needs of that basic trio- food, shelter, and sex- NO artist will persist long enough to make that desired body of work that gives tribute to their time and place- and to their educations. Teachers, what happens to all that knowledge and effort you give? Where does it go? We've all heard the snide predictions about

how few students in any given class will be making art ten years from now. But instead of the smug implication that most students "don't have what it takes" to keep making art, we should have heard this as a warning. We *don't* have what it takes; what it takes is a *job* .

Ten years ago, a study that's rarely been attempted before or since was done by Julie Ardery at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Originally expecting to find gender differences in the satisfaction and employment rates of studio M.F.A.s once they left school, she quickly discovered instead that nearly all of the 55 alumni interviewed were in the same sinking boat, regardless of gender, media, or any other differences. Most were still shell-shocked several years after leaving the department, cobbling together disappointing jobs and wondering what went wrong.¹¹

Recent phone conversations with Julie confirmed my guess that at the time she was scorned as the bearer of bad news; ten years ago this kind of data was even more hidden than it is today. But don't shoot the messenger. What her survey revealed is not unique in any way to Lexington, her methodology, or the decade. Statistics and demographics are on her side; they prove her study was an accurate tip of the iceberg. If anybody ever has the guts to do a massive follow-up study on a few thousand M.F.A.s 15 years after graduation, I guarantee you, it will *not* be inspiring recruitment material to share with your deans.

An insightful little book, *Art & Fear*, by David Bayles and Ted Orlando says "If 98 percent of our medical students were no longer practicing medicine after graduation, there would be a Senate investigation, yet that proportion of art majors are routinely consigned to an early professional death."¹² Has anyone noticed *we're* the ones that cover it up? In addition to the "disappearing artists" in the census statistics, we alter reality in more questionable ways. There's been a lot of buzz about the U.S. News and World Report rankings of graduate schools and art departments. Like its predecessor, a guide to undergraduate colleges, this list is intended to be an informative consumer tool, to assist in evaluating strengths and quality. In a recent piece in the magazine *Afterimage*, Michael Starenko investigated exactly how "quality" was defined in the comparative rankings. He says:

According to the fine print in the 1997 edition of *America's Best Graduate Schools*, in the fall of 1996 questionnaires were sent to "deans, top administrators, and senior faculty" at all 190 art schools and departments that offer the M.F.A. Respondents (40% of those surveyed) were asked to rank "the reputations" of schools and their specialty areas on a scale from "1" to "5", "taking into account a school's scholarship, its curriculum, and the quality of its faculty and graduate students." Other measures- the "placement success" of graduates, for example- were not used because U.S. News and World Report was "told by some art school deans that art education is a different kind of animal and that reputational rankings are the only way to go," said research director Robert Morse.¹³

I say, let's ask some alumni.

Starenko goes on to question the irony of even offering teaching assistantships when there are no jobs. Even our favorite, the "buying time to work" justification for graduate school, is getting pretty thin in light of today's tuition costs and unemployment probability. You could buy a lot more time someplace else. If the M.F.A. degree has become, more than ever before, merely a "personal development" indulgence, then perhaps students should consider taking their 50 grand and going to Nepal, getting some blue chip therapy, or just hanging out in New York with their friends for a while. Of course, you'll never get a student loan for that.

Conclusion

A few people are starting to struggle in public with these monsters, but more of us need to join the discussion. Much is being written lately that questions the media-based instruction now common in art departments. How well does it really equip the interests and motivations of today's students, let alone their employment options? Dave Hickey regularly hits home in his

essays on how art functions in a democracy, and the ways in which the art bureaucracy middle-men are sucking the juice out of it. Carol Becker from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago advocates for artists to step up to the immediate challenge, to be "public intellectuals" and take their educations into all corners of the "real world." In her book *Zones of Contention*, she articulates forbidden questions about why and how we train young artists to fail.¹⁴ David Mendoza, the founder of Artists Trust in Seattle, is leading the way in designing a pilot curriculum for traditional art departments that attempts to reintegrate artists with the world. Perhaps most innovative of all, a rancher friend of mine in Montana thinks there should be a teacher bonus for every employed graduate. But these pioneers are so outnumbered, I worry it's too little, too late. Our pyramid's collapse is surely coming. The entry-level bloat in the art pedigree business has been accumulating for too long. Besides the nearly certain economic disaster facing heavily indebted art graduates, the very structure of art schools comes from another era- decades, even centuries ago. Of course, the current mess isn't unique to art, but the magnitude and timing is particularly bad, in today's world that increasingly demands accountability.

This is no news flash. Massive pressures and changes are happening in academia across the board. In his cranky expose of academic decline, *Impostors in the Temple: American Intellectuals Are Destroying Our Universities and Cheating Our Students of Their Future*,¹⁵ Martin Anderson persuasively illustrates how many of these problems are inherent to the institutional mindset. Sabbaticals, faculty rule, research time, publications, and the use of teaching assistants are all under the public microscope. Restructuring departments around staffs of migrant part-timers is now the norm in most disciplines, with over a third of all faculty working on part-time contracts. Some very visible and noisy critics- Anderson among them- are demanding an end to tenure all together.¹⁶ We're foolish if we try to dismiss this as a fringe movement; the number, persuasiveness, and vehemence of the books, reports, and articles I've found that attack "business as usual" on campus far out-number and out-perform the defensive arguments that commonly crop up in annual conference question-and-answer periods.

When I first wrote about the M.F.A.-job imbalance in 1991, I had to dig deep to document anything. Now, proof is abundant, from within and outside of academia. The conversation is on the table. Things are changing, and will continue to change, with us or without us. Unless we develop our own accountability we will have no defense when our results are questioned- as they surely will be in the increasingly consumer-driven academic market. It's a poor time to be cranking out unemployable graduates by the thousand, and insisting we're innocent.

What can be done?

First, we need to admit that we're part of the problem. Then ask: can we ever be part of the solution? What might it look like? We're reproducing like cancer cells and we say we feel fine. With this masterful denial deeply embedded in our institutional fabric, it's no surprise that artists are still poor and the public still uninterested- when they don't outright hate us. If we could succeed in changing the life-span of post-grad art practice, everyone might benefit from a world that has more fun, challenge, vision, beauty, and problem-solving in it. What good is it if all this stuff stays locked up in the "art world," which, by the way, is looking more and more like a playpen, not a world at all? And where does it get us if most of the artists we carefully educate are never really born- never get to make their contributions, because real-life unpreparedness forces them to drop out before they start?

At one time, I expected a job at a college. I'm part of the generation that was supposed to inherit the earth in 1990 when the G.I. Bill guys all retired. But, instead, departments downsized, faculty went part-time, and I got older and wiser. Now I'm almost to my 20-year survival mark, and it feels like some weird support group: "Hi, my name is Karen. I have an M.F.A." (Chorus reply from my colleagues in post-grad recovery: "Hi, Karen!") I see how things might start to even out, if you can figure out how to hang on long enough. Last week I was talking on the phone to a West Coast friend who finally got a tenure-track job at the age of 45. She laughed and said, "Anybody

who says this isn't cushy compared to freelancing is lying!" She then likened her longevity and eventual success to scoring the last life boat on the Titanic. The only problem with this metaphor is that the boat is still sinking and most of us are going to drown. At least some will go down with health insurance.

To conclude, let's tie all this back to our original conversation. Here is another excerpt from Steve Mannheimer, from the closing paragraph of "Guilty by Association": ... we must have the courage to begin talking realistically about our professional and moral responsibility to the thousands of students we send out into the world. And it is time we expect our professional organizations to actively, aggressively address these issues.¹⁷

This is our challenge. All pyramids eventually collapse. The college-manufactured pile of short-term artists is no different. Our only hope is to dramatically rebuild its structure, to critically reassess issues of entry, purpose, employment, maintenance, market, and audience. Without massive remodeling, there is no reason to believe that future generations of M.F.A. graduates will end up anywhere else than on the growing mountain of casualties.

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1"Guilty by Association," Steven Mannheimer, New Art Examiner, Feb. 1998, 15-17.

2Letter from K. Kitchel to S. Mannheimer, Feb. 11, 1998.

3Ed Foster, "Pyramid Schemes Seem to Generate a Lot of Spam, and there is Little Enforcement," InfoWorld, Aug. 24, 1998, 54.

4Kevin Whitelaw, "Falling Hard for Easy Money," U.S. News & World Report, Feb. 10, 1997, 41.

5"A Tale of True Rewards," Mary Kay web site, July 28, 1998.

6Andrew Hultkrans and Jeff Burton, "Surf and Turf," Artforum, Summer 1998, 106-9.

7"Artists and Arts Employment," 1992 Addendum to the 1989 Source Book of Arts Statistics, National Endowment for the Arts Research Division, 2-3.

8Joan Jeffri, ed., Information on Artists II, Abstract, Research Center for Arts and Culture, Columbia University, 10.

9Diane C. Ellis and John C. Beresford, National Endowment for the Arts, Research Division Report #29, "Trends in Artist Occupations: 1970-1990," 8.

10Julie Ardery, "A Bitter Paradox: M.F.A. Confers a Degree of Contradiction," New Art Examiner, Sept. 1989, 28.

11Ibid., 27-29.

12David Bayles and Ted Orlando, Art & Fear (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1993), 11.

13Michael Starenko, "Assessing the MFA in Photography," Afterimage, July-August 1997, 7.

14Carol Becker, Zones of Contention: Essays on Art, Institutions, Gender, and Anxiety (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

15Martin Anderson, Impostors in the Temple: American Intellectuals Are Destroying Our Universities and Cheating Our Students of Their Future (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

16William Honan, "The Ivory Tower Under Siege," New York Times, Jan. 4, 1998, 33, 44, 46.

17Mannheimer, 17.

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