Fine Art Education and Popular Music:
A Crossover of Competence

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Table of Contents

Introduction

To analyze the composition and appreciation of music in terms of its social function and of cognitive processes that may be applied in other fields of human activity does not in any way diminish the importance of the music itself, and it is in line with the common custom of interrelating a series of human activities and calling them The Arts (John Blacking).[1]

As art forms develop through time it becomes harder and harder to find something new to say: consequently there is a tendency to renew old art forms by appropriating material from other media and by recycling the art of the past. Transposing the image or idea from one context to another is often sufficient to alter its meaning or significance, or to recharge its shock value (John A. Walker),[2]

Simon Frith writes that art school is, "a place where young people…can hang out and learn/fantasize what it means to be an artist, a bohemian, a star" (Frith 1987:22). His pioneering text on the subject, *Art Into Pop*, sought to explain how extraordinary numbers of British popular musicians began their creative lives while "hanging out" at fine art colleges. Famous musicians in bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Roxy Music, Cream, and Talking Heads all studied fine art before playing music professionally, and have attributed aspects of their musicianship and style to their educational backgrounds (Frith and Horne 1987; Foege 1994; Bowman 2001; Martin 2002). Art students continue to participate in popular music in local scenes, on a semi-professional or professional level. This paper looks at local scene participants living in New York City who studied fine art and consider it to be an influential factor on their musical practice.

In *How Musical Is Man?*, John Blacking called for a context-sensitive analysis of music in culture (Blacking 1973), and this paper follows his call by looking a group of popular music participants in the context of their post-secondary art education. In each of these two fields, I

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[1] Blacking 1973:49.
[2] Walker 1987:12.

look for the socially constructed definition of "competence" as it applies to the use of instruments. How each field defines this concept helps each form an aesthetic value and define a social practice about creative expression. Through ethnographic work with musicians who studied fine art, I show how contemporary fine art's definition of manual skill "competence" is similar to that of the punk and indie music definitions of musical "competence." From these similarities, I show how these two cognitive systems coincide in art-educated musicians. This differs from other art-educated musicianship studies that approach art-educated musicians sociologically (Frith and Horne 1987), as part of the historical shift of avant-garde movements (Gendron 2003), through performance studies (Mitchell 1989), and through popular journalistic narrative (Reynolds 2006) in that I place dual importance on the role of art education and popular music practice in the development of a cognitive system by which art-musicians shape their musical ideas and practices.

In his description of the Venda people's attitudes towards musicianship, Blacking writes, "we do not know exactly what musical competence is or how it is acquired" (Blacking 1973:8). The question of who is musical, and who is not, is a social question and, "the value of music in society and its differential effects on people may be essential factors in the growth or atrophy of musical abilities, and people's interest may be less in the music itself than in its associated social activities" (Blacking 1973:43). From this, I use "competence" to refer to a socially constructed valuation of musical skill, and value of the skill in social practice. In this paper I will show how the social conditions of two separate "art worlds" (Becker 1984) impact the thoughts and processes of art-educated musicians.

Blacking discusses how modern industrial societies' definitions of musical competence perpetuate social exclusion by assigning musical labor only to a few superior musicians, turning

the rest into passive "unmusical" audiences (Blacking 1973:34). Popular music scholars have challenged this line of argument by highlighting the numerous local popular music scenes in which musical skill is not a barrier to participation and within which an aesthetic appreciation of the amateur is celebrated (Finnegan 1989; Cohen 1991; Thornton 1996; Fonarow 2006). I locate art-educated musicians' practice primarily within punk and indie scenes, two scenes that exhibit high levels of amateur career and novice skill level participation (Fonarow 2006).

In leaving their formal art training for musical practice, art-educated musicians crossover from one expressive practice to another, and from one potential career to another. I use the term "crossover" not according to its popular music meaning,[3] but as defined in art historian John A. Walker's *Cross-Overs: Art into Pop, Pop Into Art* (1987). Walker calls crossover, "the cross-fertilization between different arts, media, genres, styles and sub-cultures" (Walker 1987:11). Crossover suggests a kind of desire on the part of the one who crosses – that something on the other side may be better, more useful, more exciting, or more profitable. This leads to questions answered in myriad ways throughout the paper: Why do young fine artists leave their art practice? Why crossover into popular music? and, What does an artist bring into their practice of popular music? I address these questions in three sections: in terms of art education, in terms of popular music practice, and as daily popular music practice with art-trained musicians.

The first section of this paper is centrally concerned with the fine art studio education model as a locus of discussion about mechanical skills and conceptual art frameworks, the value of these skills and frameworks in the production of artwork and discussion of how these values are reflected in contemporary fine art practices. In the second section I draw upon popular music

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[3] David Brackett defines popular music crossover as a "metaphor for integration, upward mobility, and ever-greater acceptance of marginalized groups by the larger society" marked by the strict hierarchizing of musical styles as mainstream and marginal (Brackett 1994:777).

studies literature to discuss how punk and indie musicians define musical competence. Punk and indie music aesthetics echo Blackings' rhetorical questions about the absurdity of a universal definition of musical competence, "What is the use of being the greatest pianist in the world, or of writing the cleverest music, if nobody wants to listen to it?...Why bother to improve musical technique if the aim of performance is to share a social experience? (Blacking 1973:34).

In the third section I present two ethnographic interviews with art-educated popular musicians: Rob Corradetti of Mixel Pixel and Lalena Fissure of the Color Guard. In these interviews, I hope to show how fine art education can serve as a conceptual framework by which these artist-musicians arrange aspects of their popular music practice, including musicianship, songwriting, arrangement of songs, and organization of a band structure. Within these interviews I move between my own examination of art education as a site of discourse production and popular music studies theories to show how problems of popular music can be and are approached by art-educated musicians through dual cognitive and social systems. I do not mean to suggest that every musical practice undertaken by someone with an art education is a reflection of that education, but that art-educated musicians experience their popular music practice with two different but highly complimentary conceptual systems for the creation of expressive work. In conclusion, I address how art-educated musicians' musical works are seemingly different on the level of sound, but that by understanding the dual cognitive processes used to organize their sound, art-school trained musicians are meaningfully related.

Section 1: Art Education and the Development of Mechanical and Technical Skill

Historically, the methodological and ideological split in art education has been between teaching technical skill (technique, mechanical skill, knowledge of tools and instruments) and developing "conceptual frameworks" for the evaluation of art including: aesthetic sensibility (a comprehensive system of evaluating art), knowledge of art history, art theory and critical theory (Michael 1980:18). In this section, I discuss how the technical/conceptual split shapes nearly every aspect of art education including the construction of aesthetic values, the employment of tools and materials, and the creation of artwork. The technical/conceptual split has a rough popular music analog in commercial/non-commercial ideological split. I will draw tentative analogies between art education and practice and musical skill acquisition and popular music practice here but more fully address the art/music relationship in subsequent sections.

Fine Art Pedagogy: Where to Teach Technical Skill and Conceptual Frameworks

Each era of art education has dealt with the technical/conceptual divide in different ways. Since the institutionalization of fine art training in France in the 17th century, there have been a variety of educational models in which technical skill and conceptual concerns were combined. For hundreds of years, lectures on art history, theory and aesthetics were held for students in separate facilities than the studio, where practical skills and techniques were taught while work was created. With the industrialization of Europe, art schools began to train students for technical skill and craft vocations, and programs were developed to teach these disciplines in a more pragmatic fashion. Art vocational programs did not often include conceptual aspects of art

education (Macdonald 1970). Because of this skill-oriented, pragmatic art programs tend to have a lower reputation among elite members of the art community to this day while schools that emphasize the esoteric, conceptual aspects of art education (Becker 1982) are known to the art world as "farms for the top-tier galleries" (Bransford interview, October 25, 2005) and students coming from these programs have advantages within the fine art world.

Since the postwar period, the dominant type of post-secondary fine art instruction has been the studio art model of education. Studio art pedagogy emphasizes learning all aspects of the art experience – conceptualizing, creating and critiquing – within the space of the artist studio, a "hands on" model (Michael 1980). Studio art programs housed within a greater university system also offer theoretical or historical survey courses in a lecture format for introductory and intermediate art students. Advanced students only work in the studio, where an instructor provides individual lessons in theoretical, historical, and critical art approaches that will help with students' work. In this way, young artists are encouraged to develop their mechanical and conceptual faculties simultaneously. The art "work-in-progress" is the site of student's educational progress. This is similar to the manner in which many young popular musicians learn to play: in "hands on" environments such as rehearsals where stronger players lead weaker ones through new material (Bennett 1980).

New York City is one of the world's largest fine art centers, and features an extensive network of art schools, museums, galleries, art dealers and artists. The Art Students League of New York (1875) was the city's first academic art institution, and within a decade two more art institutions were founded. The Pratt Institute was founded in 1887 by the Brooklyn oil magnate Charles Pratt, who "dreamed of founding an institution where pupils could learn trades through the skillful use of their hands" (Pratt Institute 2005). Pratt called for its working class students to

apply their mechanical art skills to industrial trades. The Chase School (1896), now known as Parsons School of Design at The New School, taught commercial art to middle-class students, as reflected by its institutional biography:

> By locating visual beauty in the ordinary things of middle-class American life, Parsons virtually invented the modern concept of design in America. From the beginning, the faculty cared about the spaces people lived in, the garments they wore, the advertising they read, the furniture and tableware they used. The principles they taught had the effect of democratizing taste and making it available to America on a broad scale. [Parsons School of Design 2005]

While the statement makes clear that a Parsons education is a commercial education, it also emphasized that it is an education in the aesthetic refinement, suggesting that Parsons School graduates design commercial art that rises above the level of the everyday. As Rosalind Williams notes, the highly aesthetic commercial object seeks to raise the everyday consumer to an elite consumer (Frith and Horne 1987:20). Elite consumption also legitimates a high art aesthetic for certain kinds of commercial art. The appeal of elite design for everyday commercial objects may not be, as the institution stated, a "democratic" appeal, but it is an appeal to middle-class notions of social mobility through the cultivation of tasteful habits (Bourdieu 1984). Popular music too has its commercial art aesthetes who argue for the "lifting up" of pop music into art. Many of them were trained in elite commercial art schools like Parsons.

Commercial art students have mechanical technical skills that can be utilized easily in many business applications, and thus commercial art education provides an obvious career path. Fine artists generally do not have the same level of mechanical skill as commercial artists and are often ideologically opposed to art for commercial purposes. There are few full time jobs for fine artists and underemployment is a constant reality (Menger 1999). What motivates artists to study fine art instead of commercial art if it is not in their economic interest to do so? Pierre Bourdieu

writes that, "non-economic" forms of capital such as skills, competencies, and advantages acquired through education, family background, and social class are a form of 'cultural capital'" (Bourdieu 1984:246). Early acquisition of cultural capital increases an individual's likelihood of continuing to acquire cultural capital, but cultural capital does not necessarily convert into economic capital. Through institutionalized education a student acquires competence with skills and knowledge that can help her qualify for certification, a form of institutionalized cultural capital. In the case of fine art-educated graduates, a degree affirms the student's conceptual art competence, which does not necessarily transfer into economic capital.

If students and their families decide fine art education is a worthy educational pursuit, they are likely to believe that increasing cultural capital is valuable too, perhaps more so than increasing economic capital. Thus they "value" esoteric education and the making of fine art. The perpetuation of the fine art studio system of education is based on a value of cultural capital reproducing itself and this is a sort of implicit agreement between students who attend art school, parents who pay for their attendance, and teachers who teach. This will later be shown in the case of pop musician Lalena Fissure, whose fine artist parents instilled a value in her at an early age that "only fine art…is a valid noble career for artist" (Interview, July 8, 2005). It took her 25 years and an MFA from Pratt Institute to realize that she did not exactly share her family's value in fine art as a career.

Art Studio Experience: Sitting in with First-Year Artists at New York University

In order to understand the choices young students make about their artistic careers during college, I decided to observe a New York City studio fine art course. As an undergraduate

student at New York University (NYU), I had many opportunities to visit the campuses of university art departments around the city.[4] I decided to attend an introductory class at the Art and Art Professions Department at NYU because a new course for the fall of 2005 promised to be good place to observe a meta-discourse about art education. The course was co-taught by Linda Vega and Jesse Bransford and attended by the entire 80-student first-year studio art class. Vega is the Student Advisement Coordinator for the studio art program and has served as an art school guidance counselor at various institutions for over 30 years. Bransford is a practicing artist and the undergraduate program director for NYU. Their course was the New Student Seminar, introduced university-wide in 2005 as part of an attempt to transition first-year students into life in the university and in New York City.

Vega and Bransford made the art department's New Student Seminar an introduction to fine art education and the art world. The course description called it, "a forum in which to explore and openly discuss issues in contemporary art as well as any other issues about the curriculum, teachers, and future career goals; to foster a sense of community in the art department" (Vega 2005). The syllabus was sprinkled with lectures (a crash course on contemporary artwork) and mandatory department information sessions (a presentation by NYU's hazardous materials team) but generally followed an informal progression of questions relating to the students' movement towards art as a profession. Students kept weekly journals about the challenges of their art-making experiences and adjustment to the university and each week Vega voiced their concerns in class. Bransford often illustrated her topics by providing

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[4] The post-secondary art education programs available in New York City are the Parsons School of Design, Pratt Institute of Art, Cooper Union, School of Visual Arts, Columbia University, New York University, City College, Fashion Institute of Technology, The Art Institute of New York City, New York School of Interior Design, and the Art Students League. While at NYU, I played in a band with a School of Visual Arts student and we performed at a number of student art shows.

background about his own experience as an art student, which usually succeeded in creating a dialog between the students and the teachers. Several of the discussions generated from the journals focused specifically on questions of mechanical and conceptual skills and the value of each in making artwork. The discussions below are drawn from in class observations, informal conversations with students and recorded interviews with Bransford and Vega.

Moving from Uncultivated to Cultivated Art-Making

One of the students' recurring concerns was about the shift from high school to college art value. Many of the students were having difficulty accepting that they were now among peers who they perceived as being just as talented as they were. In high school each was praised as an exceptionally skilled artist, but among young peers in art school few were sure of their status since everyone seemed equally skilled. Vega announced that everyone had written in their journals of a fear that "everyone else is better" at art. Bransford's solution to this student anxiety was to spend the rest of the day showing all the admissions slides for the class (no names were mentioned in association with the works shown). With each of the 80 pieces he discussed what aspect of the work appealed to the admissions portfolio review board, whom he said were looking for evidence of "potential for growth" which he defined as "conceptual rigor, exhibition of curiosity, and freshness of approach" (In class notes, October 2995). After finishing his discussion of the slides, he told the students that he did not mention technical skill once for a reason – he believed it was not the most important way to evaluate the strength of an artwork. To seek to make "beautiful and pleasing" work that exhibited great technical skill was a high school-era value, not that of an advanced artist. He said that it was the job of the studio art

program to replace this uncultivated aesthetic value system with another, more contemporary system. Vega said that students entering into art school often want to work in highly detailed mechanically skilled techniques such as photorealism, or as she put it, "When the students come in, they all want to be Chuck Close"[5] (Interview, October 10, 2005). They quickly find out that Close's 1960s photorealistic style is not NYU's idea of contemporary practice.

Manipulation of materials and development of manual skill are the first steps in skill-based art education (Michael 1980) and these skills are primarily taught in K-12 education. Incoming studio art students are expected to have mastered a basic set of art skills and techniques. At a majority of four-year art programs, "the foundation year" gives students a chance to further cultivate these skills while rapidly developing the conceptual aspects of their art practice. NYU art majors take a foundation year course load that includes art history, two semesters each of drawing and sculpture fundamentals and one media-fundamentals course,[6] which combine skill acquisition and theoretical concerns side-by-side. While art historian John Walker is correct in pointing out that, "practice is more important to art students than theory" (Walker 1987:17); at NYU theory is embedded in studio art practice. With every assignment they match their ideas with already ingrained or recently developed skills to find the most effective and affective form of visual communication. As students, this is often met with failure, but the mantra of studio art education is that creative failure is often the best path to learning (Bransford, in class notes, October 2005).

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[5] Chuck Close is a contemporary artist whose painting style is referred to as photorealistic or sharp focus realism, which is marked by highly detailed e work that bears little evidence of its medium or production. This movement began in the 1960s as a reaction to the non-figurative and spontaneous painterly gestures of the abstract expressionists.

[6] This works out to an average of 24 hours a week in class. One of the most persistent negative stereotypes of art students is that they are lazy and don't have "real" work to do while in college. Students at NYU prove this untrue by taking a full humanities course load and fine art courses. Studio courses run often for four hours or longer because students cannot take their works home to complete.

One way they refine their conceptual skill is through the cultivation of a critical language about visual art. In his painting fundamentals course, Bransford introduces the critical language of art within the first three weeks of the fall semester using the book *Primer of Visual Literacy* (Dondis 1973). As an educational model, "visual literacy" is a philosophical and psychological orientation of art education that stresses sequenced study for perceptual and conceptual skill development (Hamblin 1985). Its ground stage of learning is to create a common " visual language" of art – textures, shapes, and colors – while developing a common critical language by which artists can communicate about the visual aspects of art. Students rehearse their critical language about art by leading numerous critiques of one another's works-in-progress, called "crits". Through the crit, students perform oral criticisms of their own works and engage in debates about the work with other students. This form of verbal performance allows students to "show" the conceptual aspects of the artwork, and to be evaluated on aspects of the process that cannot be perceived by the eye. Bransford says that one of his major goals for the foundation year is to teach students to "not attack the person, [but to] attack their work" and "find ways to get excited about each others work" when critiquing it (Interview, October 25, 2005).

Students learn to "see" the merits of a work through listening to and voicing critical language about artwork. In a studio environment, these oral performances are sites of learning that help shape students' conceptual frameworks about art. Through repetition, they become effective communicators of their art's value and critical listeners about the art meaning of other students.

Students also learn the critical language of art through two survey courses where art instructors show thousands of slides representing the history of Western artwork. The instructor discusses the work in terms of history, theory, technique and influence and students are expected to take notes so that they can recall names, dates, genres, materials used and other important

characteristics of the artworks. They are also listening to the oral performance of expert critique from an instructor, an institutionally recognized "expert" whose discussion of aesthetic value and historical importance is taken as legitimate. Young students seeking to legitimate their own works and practices then replicate this language in crits (Bransford interview, October 25, 2005). In learning the language of art, students are developing a conceptual approach to art history and contemporary art practice that is centered on discourse more than immediate visual impression. This conceptual aesthetic is the evaluative system that replaces the "unrefined" aesthetic students had when they arrived at NYU. In the third section of the paper, both my informants discuss how they organize musical compositions around visual metaphors, as a form of art-metaphor driven musical theory (Feld 1981).

The "Broken Pencil": Conceptual Approaches to Mechanical Skill and Instrument Use

One exercise Bransford uses in his foundation classroom is what he calls, "the broken pencil," an exercise in the creative adaptation of a writing instrument for unconventional usage. The exercise illustrates a larger point about the use of tools within contemporary art practice: they are sites of experiment. As students move from introductory to advanced-skill workshops, they have achieved a fine art "competence" in the use of tools, materials and instruments and are ready to move on to the conceptual and experimental aspects of these objects and processes. I borrow from general art theory to define *materials* as physical substances used in production (including paper, canvas, clay, marble), *tools* or *utensils* as equipment that provides a mechanical advantage and *instruments* as tools used for purposes mechanical work that necessitates delicate or specialized skill. A pencil is an instrument that art students already have competent

understanding of as an art instrument. The challenge for Bransford is to get young students who have intermediate and high levels artistic competence with instruments to denaturalize the use of these instruments. In the "broken pencil" exercise, Bransford asks for detailed drawing using pencils he will provide for the students. Each pencil he hands out is broken in half. Students initially panic because the instrument can no longer be used to produce the refined, controlled line that the students have learned is "the purpose" of a pencil. As the students scratch or break their pencils in attempt to find a useable edge they are learning Bransford's lesson that, "an art student is to look at every one of their utensils, since 1945, like a site of an experiment" (Interview, October 26, 2005).

Bransford said that his approach to art education emphasizes heuristics, the art and science of discovery and invention, over aesthetic approaches. Bransford says the "broken pencil" is process-based learning meant to get young artists to question the accepted methods of art making. John Walker writes that foundation year is full of "broken pencil" type exercises and projects, "set to challenge conventional notions of what art is, and to introduce students to a wide range of materials and techniques" (Walker 1987:17). In the exercise, the pencil as a metaphor for "convention." Howard Becker defines "conventions" broadly as the "earlier arrangements that now have become customary" (Becker 1984:29) to members of an art world and states that these agreements are what form the common knowledge of art worlds and what make possible daily interactions between all levels of workers. Because "a system of conventions gets embodied in equipment, materials, training, available facilities and sites, systems of notation, and the like," changing one convention will have a ripple effect in the rest of the art world (Becker 1984:32) and this can have a stifling effect on anyone who would like to break with convention. Bransford is using his "broken pencil" exercise to break two conventions: the traditional use of

the instrument and the idea that the skilled use of instruments is what makes "good" art. The conceptual shift is from the *use of tools* to make art to the use of *questions about tools* to make art.

Without prompting, Bransford switched his discussion about the radical rethinking of instruments to a popular musical model. Bransford uses the words tools and utensils interchangeably, suggesting that his "broken pencil" model can be adapted to every aspect of the traditional art-making process. Here he extends the idea of art tools to include musical instruments:

> Music made by artists-who-make-music is so interesting because the artist-musicians are not looking at their tools as necessarily part of a virtuosic tradition of mastery. That's definitely what the Talking Heads were about. They weren't very good at playing their instruments but they made really amazing records because they treated their instruments the way they treated utensils – cameras, paintbrushes – like they were taught in the art school. [Picks up bottle opener] This is a tool with an obvious function: it can open a bottle. What else can it do? How else does this tool lend itself to doing things, other than the mode that was suggested for it?
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> That's definitely the way I came to it with my first band – what can this instrument do? It's heavy. It sits like this. I've seen pictures of people holding it that way. Do I have to do it that way? Those ideas of the *instrument that makes sound* being questioned in the same way that the *tools they had to deal with in art school* are questioned… For me that was the big realization of how art school training transferred into music. [Interview, October 26, 2005]

There is a traditional way to use a pencil, a camera, a paintbrush, and a musical instrument. Posing the question, "What else can it do?" extends the potential of the instrument.[7] In Bransford's terms, the challenge is to "un-learn" an instrument's conventions and to examine the instrument as an as new, unknown device. Like an ethnographer making inquiry about her native culture, the challenge is to take something familiar and find a way to "make it strange."

Bransford based his understanding of musical instruments on images he's seen, on a

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[7] Many avant-garde twentieth century art music practices approach instruments in a similar fashion, attempting to break from the art music conventions. Extended musical techniques, prepared pianos, and the development of new electronic instruments have been some of the examples.

general media representation of how a musical instrument is held. He asks, "Do I have to hold it that way?" not only as a physiological concern, but one about historical convention. Holding an instrument in an "improper" way makes it strange for someone accomplished on the instrument but this improper use can become easily naturalized for a beginner. The naturalization of an unconventional musical technique leads to a new relationship with an instrument and to the chance for new uses of the instrument. In the case above, Bransford conceives of the Talking Heads as art-educated musicians whose approach to their musical instruments was informed more by their conceptual art approach to instruments than by a traditional understanding of musical technique. To Bransford, they took rock instruments and made them strange.

To Bransford, the "rock" music that they made was strange too. Bransford makes two evaluative statements about the Talking Heads, first that they "weren't very good" at their musical instruments but that nonetheless they recorded "really amazing records." Bransford is correct to point out that the Talking Heads were in their first era (1974-1978) not musically competent by the standards for rock predecessors or by art music's traditional definition of musical competency. Pressed to define what was "amazing" about their music, Bransford offered a cluster of synonyms "innovative, non-traditional, inspiring, weird" (Interview, October 26, 2005). Innovative, non-traditional and weird are all words which could associated with the conceptual aspects of the Talking Heads musical process, and "inspiring" connotes that Bransford felt energized to creativity through the Heads. Weird and innovate might apply to the sounds and structures of the Talking Heads music as well, which could be explained in part by the fact that they did not have a full understanding of the technical traditions of their instruments, or that, additionally, they rejected those traditions in favor of a more experimental approach to musical practice. This unconventional use of instruments contributed to the formation of a new

genre – punk – that fashioned its own idea of "musical competence," in part out of this approach to instruments. In my interview with Rob Corradetti, this approach to instruments returns in his use of all manner of objects as "collage fragments" for his home recording studio compositions.

***Not Fun Anymore: Unlearning Conventions and Accepting Art
As Intellectual and Manual Labor***

On another occasion Vega voiced the students' concern that art was becoming a "day job," and that it wasn't "fun anymore." Vega then discussed the general malaise of turning a hobby into a career, as a career advisor is likely to do (In class notes, October 2005). Later, Bransford suggested that this concern was deeply tied to the earlier classroom conversation about manual skill. First year students routinely complain to him that they cannot finish their homework assignments to their satisfaction because of their workloads and time constrains. When he hears enough students complain about this, Bransford gives them an assignment to complete 100 drawings in 24 hours. He says, "It drives them crazy, because they can't spend time making them look good" (Interview, October 26, 2005). His exercise is meant to break students of the habit of devoting too much time over one drawing. Students must learn that sketches can be mere notes for future work.

Bransford's project is a practical speed-sketching exercise, but it also incorporates a difficult lesson about aesthetic output. The students' anxieties about this exercise come from the rapid transition they must make between Romantic ideas of the artist laboring over one work – making a skilled masterpiece, *the* goal for most young artists – and the reality of learning new processes: one must make a lot of work and a lot of mistakes. Repetition is the key to competence, but competence at a skill, students come to learn, is not an end to itself in contemporary fine art practice (Michael 1980:19).

Skill in the NYU model of fine art is a means to an end, which Michael defines as the "problem" of fine art, "to express one's self aesthetically at the highest human level (Michael 1980: 16). Michael writes that, "Every product made with art materials is not necessarily a work of art. It can be merely an objective report, skillfully done but with no personal involvement, expression, or feeling. The product becomes superficial with no 'soul' or expression. It is the wise art teacher who appropriately develops skill of the students as a means for them to create art. Skill should always be a secondary expression so as to bring about a harmonious integration (Michael 1980: 18). This is one common goal of fine art-education: to teach students to "create art" that has qualities of "soul" identified as personal involvement, expression or feeling. The problem is how to prepare students for engagement with contemporary post-modern ideas (and critiques) about the concepts of "personal expression," "the soul," and "authorship," when attempting to reach this noble goal through their art practice. Students must engage contemporary ideas in contemporary processes, and learn both simultaneously at a fine art school. This is a deciding factor for art students as early as their foundation year: convention or experimentation, tradition or innovation, common practice or contemporary practice? Studio art education cultivates practitioners willing to experiment and has little space for those who wish to make art by traditional methods or about traditional topics.

Vega said that students decide after their first year whether experimental, process-based art making is what they really want to pursue. She said that many young students to drop out of the studio program at NYU after the foundation year: "They stay until the end of the first year and then say, 'No, this is not for me.' They'll often go into other art fields where the end result is more traditional" (Interview, October 10, 2005). These fields teach conventional and commercial art practices such as oil painting, gilding, faux finishes, and art restoration. Those who remain in

the studio art program are more committed to contemporary practice, and they must learn enough about it to stake out an individual aesthetic position for themselves before graduation. The cultivation of an aesthetic stance is an important part of any art practice, and below I describe two very different examples of conceptual art: the Sol LeWitt model of "conspicuous intellectualism" and the Andy Warhol model of "covert meaning." These two often-oppositional aesthetic art frameworks also appear in popular music practice in the form of indie music and "pop."

The value of conceptual work in contemporary art practice

While fine art has always had a "conceptual" aspect, the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s emphasized that the value of art lay primarily in its conceptual and not expressive visual aspects and has become both a dominant art form and critical apparatus with the fine art world since that time. Its precursor was the 1960s New York based international movement Fluxus called together artists, musicians, and designers in a highly participatory approach to art-making that lay emphasis on making and enjoyment of fine art in the everyday. Fluxus art objects were made of everyday materials and rendered crudely to pointedly mock bourgeois values that "good" should bear evidence of great mechanical skill (Friedman 1998). Conceptual Art developed from the Fluxus movement as an even more austere avant-garde rejection of highly skilled fine art object production for a non-object based, conceptually driven process. Material artworks produced by these artists were made of cheap, unconventional art materials (soil, plant matter, food) often meant to break down during or immediately after the installation of the artwork. In this way, Conceptual Art aspired to disappear, dematerialize or otherwise erase the physical representation of itself, leaving only an idea (Lippard 1997).

Artists like Sol LeWitt rejected the very touch of the artist in making an artwork. He writes that in his model of Conceptual Art, "All planning and decision are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art" (LeWitt 1967). The realization of conceptual artwork like LeWitt's created a division of labor between idea and execution, privileging the artist's idea/plans as "art" and the freelance unskilled realization as labor. According to Howard Becker, when society believes artists have special talents, it believes that it is the artist's choices that give the work its artistic importance and integrity. Artist's choices can be realized by people he refers to as "personnel" or "resource pools," who have the technical skills to accomplish the manual labor involved in art production (Becker 1982:16, 78). Both cultural capital and economic capital in this system is given to the artist who has the concept, with personnel being paid an hourly wage and having no credited role in the production of the art project. In this way, idea and labor were completely separate within the most austere conceptual works. In hiring non-art trained personnel or relying on messy organic substances, this type of conceptual art had either an austere minimal look (like LeWitt's geometric patterns painted on a wall by a grid method) or a conspicuously "amateurish" visual representation (Alberro 2003). In this way, minimal and conspicuously amateur artworks came to signify that deep meaning was held somewhere outside the immediate visual representation and that only esoterically trained audiences could "see."

American Pop Art was another 1960s fine art practice that shared Conceptual Art's self awareness about the commercialization of art and fine art's use by the mass media. The Pop Art solution to the problem of binaries *high art versus commercial art* and *aesthetic object versus market commodity* was different than that of self-identified conceptual artists: American pop art was an ambiguous celebration of the commodity as a work of art and the artist as a maker of

commodities. Andy Warhol was celebrated and lionized for his "deadpan" pop style as he refused to give explanations for his ideas and works, telling those searching for meaning, ""If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it" (Berg 1989). This maxim became so synonymous with Warhol's aesthetic that it was included on his recent .37 cent stamp and its sentiment – that neither the artist's intent nor the depth of the work mattered – distanced him from other conceptual artists for whom control over meaning and display of rigorous intellectual frameworks were the crucial elements of art-making.

Warhol's works were perceived of as indistinguishable from their commercial equivalents, bearing no trace of expression or authorship. Warhol presented himself and his works as blanks on which audiences could project their own ideas about the artist's intent and the artwork's meaning (Leung 2003). The works were then interpreted either as naïve homage to capitalist success or deeply satirical reproductions of commercial, everyday and "vulgar" objects whose rendering in an art context was meant to shock bourgeois American values of fine art as a communicator of deep human emotion. For this reason, his numerous biographers call him an art world trickster figure, a "fool" or suggest he was "playing dumb" (Cresap 2004). While his industrialized silkscreen technique challenged art historical importance on skilled production of work, the blank rejection of conceptual depth is the most widely employed contemporary art technique attributed to him. Contemporary conceptual artists work between the poles of deadpan, seemingly commercial Pop Art conceptualism and the esoteric, conspicuously intellectual, and visually amateurish or austere type exemplified by Sol LeWitt. Popular musicians have analogous poles between the pop trickster and austere intellectual indie rocker.

Before an artist can make the complicated decisions about their placement in contemporary fine art practice, they must go through four years of undergraduate training in which their conventional use of art tools, instruments and materials are unlearned and reshaped, their language about art redefined, their knowledge about art history and theory broadened and their creativity constantly challenged by rigorous on the spot critical evolution of every aspect of their art-making ideas. Upon graduation they look forward to joining a huge oversupply of similarly trained artists all struggling for recognition by cultural and economic gatekeepers. While some thrive in this competitive, often lonely and potential financially ruinous situation, many others search for other ways to apply their fine art educations that will fulfill some of their needs to create while offering financial, social, and creative alternatives. Popular music is one of common ways in which young artists resolves those needs.

Section 2: Musical Competence in Popular Music Practice

During school, upon graduating or upon dropping out, a young person educated at an art university may decide to try a hand at popular musicianship. These young people are pre-professional artists often with little or no musical training prior to joining a musical ensemble. What aspects of their art training do they use when confronted with new instruments, a new working environment, a new historical model, and new social network to help them make sense of the creative experience? What aspects of art training help them in their musicianship? What aspects of their art training cannot be resolved in popular music? To address these questions, I first address the various definitions of musical competence within popular music and show how two related definitions, those of punk and indie music, share similar aesthetic sensibilities with contemporary art practice. In this way, I relate contemporary conceptual art practice with that of punk and indie musical practice.

How to acquire musical skill is primary decision in a popular musician's many decisions about how she will place herself within the many genres and accompanying aesthetic positions in popular music practice. The question of musical skill is often not one of access to musical education, time to practice or "talent" (Green 1997) but of an aesthetic position towards musical skill. Throughout this section I will use the term "novice" to refer to a person with a low level of technical skill and "amateurism" as an ethos that values novice-sounding musical performance[8]. I

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[8] Sociologist Robert Stebbins writes of the amateur as relates to a leisure/professional split and shows through ethnographic data how many "amateur" participants perform music (theater and sports) at high skill levels often comparable to those of one who has full-time employment for the same skill.

will refer to market position and career status of a musician as an "amateur" or "professional career" so as to not confuse novice skill with amateur career status.[9]

How Do Popular Musicians Learn to Play?

Popular musicians are often self-taught and join ensembles long before their musicianship can be considered competent by any standards. Andy Bennett refers to rock music as a process exemplified by "self-recruitment and learning without pedagogy" (Bennett 1980:18) in early adolescence. Bennett (1980) and Finnegan (1989) stress the creation of rock ensembles in relative autonomy from adult supervision and instruction. Participants form bands among themselves and their peer groups, what he calls "networks of sociability" (Frith 1992:9). Mary Ann Clawson stresses that these networks are "contingent on the ability of a non-musician to recruit other non-musicians into the creation of a performance unit. In her study of local Boston bands, she found that 41 of 43 "first bands" were formed by groups of friends and acquaintances (Clawson 1999a:7). Bands often form to reflect media representations of rock bands in terms of number of players, instrumentation, band mates characteristics, performance style and appearance (Clawson 1999a:7) and early musical learning within the group comes from listening to songs from albums while individual musicians learn their instruments while rehearsing and in home practice to learn musical parts (Bennett 1980).

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[9] Stebbins writes that amateur/professional split is never as simple as a split between unskilled/skilled, unpaid/paid, part-time/full-time, freelance/institutionalized, local knowledge/wide knowledge, apart from colleagues/in dialog with colleagues, self-evaluating/generic standards and that at time both amateurs and professionals serve publics in the same ways (Stebbins 1979: 19-34). These distinctions are unclear in the careers of both popular musicians and fine artists. Continuing oversupplies of labor and few opportunities for full-time employment force both popular musicians and fine artists into "day" jobs, which would place them into the category of "amateur" somewhat arbitrarily.

There is no one level of musical competence associated with popular music. Each musician makes choices about musical training and levels of competence as relates to their values and hopes for participating in a specific genre. Genres that celebrate technical mastery of instruments and complexity of composition demand high levels of skilled musicianship from performers as the minimum requirements for participation (Walser 1993, Negus 1999, Bennett and Dawe 2001). High levels of musical skill are a defining aspect of the genre's musical aesthetic. Other genres have lower skill requirements for participations and some genres (garage rock, punk, indie music) have made the low skill level requirement a defining aspect of the genre's aesthetic. This is how community-based definitions about "competence" arise in popular music genres. Participants structure their acquisition of skill to match their desire to participate in the genre at the level of musicianship the genre necessitates.

Popular music as fine art: a virtuosic or amateur approach?

Much scholarship has focused on the debate between the artistic qualities and commercial factors of popular music (Hebdige 1979; Frith 1981; Negus 1999; Hesmondhalgh 2002) and in this section I would like to address how values about musical skill have helped shape this debate. Simon Frith wrote that rock since the 1960s has struggled to legitimate itself as a form of art in spite of the artist's creation and distribution of works in a mass market (Frith 1981:53). If art is believed to be the direct communication of creative impulse, how does a musician remain an "artist" when she enters into the marketplace? Frith argues two related theories of how pop becomes art – the auteur theory of creation and the high art value of the work. In the auteur theory, a band creates great music that is self-consciously and ironically situated in relation to its market potential, letting the creator wink to the audience through the commodity. Frith employs

the metaphor of a human subject within an inhuman system when he writes that artistic rock music "reveals the auteur within the machine" (Frith 1981:53). The use of the film theory term "auteur" suggests that for popular music to become art, it must be "directed" by a creative visionary who commands support personnel in service of the artistic idea. This premise has been critiqued in two ways: that vertically integrated music corporations interfere with the individual artist's output (Becker 1982: 21; Negus 1999) and the more general critique of authorship that has been a hallmark of postmodern literary theory (Barthes 1967; Foucault 1969), in which a creative work is viewed a cultural product and not the work of a single solitary individual. Frith suggests in his other theory of pop into art that when audiences must "process" a work of popular music, not just experienced immediately as entertainment, the music can rise to the level of art (Frith 1981:53). Pop becomes art either through the conceptual strength of the artist or the strength of the conceptual work's effect on audiences.

Fine-art minded popular rock musicians and audiences of the 1960a and 1970s era held these values about popular rock music becoming art, and they changed rock music to reflect these values. To them, this signified progress for popular music, which begat the genre progressive rock[10]. Frith writes that progressive rock ultimately served the interests of capital by bringing so-called working class rock music into middle class consumption. For the record companies:

> The term tied in with their attempts to differentiate their stars from the mass of pop performers, to service the student market: increasing promotional emphasis was placed

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[10] Critics alternately referred to progressive rock as "art rock" at the time. In the in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll,* critic John Rockwell describes "art rock" as the canonical texts of rock music's golden age: conceptually driven and album-length works are often described as having "risen above" the level of commodity to become "art" (in Henke 1992). I have chosen the term "progressive rock" instead of "art rock" to avoid confusion and to stress the idea held at the time that "art" in popular music equaled "progress" away from earlier forms of rock n' roll.

on musicians' technical skills, on their instrumental artistry, their willingness to experiment, their unwillingness to be bound by formulas or conventions.… The new institutions of rock 'n' roll (LPs, stereo, concerts) and the new and affluent middle-class market supported "intelligent" musical values – improvisation, virtuosity, stamina, originality. [Frith 1981:74]

Progressive rock became an elite taste for middle-class consumers in a mass market through its conspicuous display of "intelligent" musicianship, which Frith describes as both conceptual rigor (experimentation, originality) and its highly skilled musical display: virtuosity and stamina.

The punk scene of the 1970s challenged the progressive rock aesthetic on a number of grounds including the rejection of conspicuous displays of musical virtuosity. Rock critic Lester Bangs, a proponent of punk's overthrow of 1970s popular music elitism and pretentiousness (Bannister 2006) defined the punk ethos as a mix of assault, minimalism and ineptitude (Heylin 1993:3; Gendron 2003:233). Punk's brand of minimalism was distinctly tied to musical "ineptitude," a type of self-conscious amateurism that celebrated displays of unskilled, "amateurish" musicianship. Much scholarship has shown how punk's myth of amateurism as a method to musical originality was naturalized among musicians, scene participants and the media (Laing 1985; Marcus 1990, 1999; Bannister 2006). Punk's value of rawness and the spontaneity of live performance was said to be a way to avoid any type of mediation (Thornton 1996). Punks believed that mediators were both material and immaterial, and they included large venues, music industry bureaucracies, professional musical technologies and technical or conspicuously conceptual approaches to musicianship and performance (Auslander 2006; Bannister 2006). This contributed to a "myth of purity" in which the genre was spontaneous, uncommodified and uncompromising with market forces (Arnold 1995; Marcus 1999). The purity myth was punk's primary ideological weapon against the slick, highly technically-skilled

professionals who spent months perfecting their "sound" in big-budget studios (Fonarow 2006:63) and whose musicianship was thought to be technically virtuosic but lacking in "immediacy," a philosophical term for direct experience and here implies the believe in unmediated transmission of expressive performance between musician, music, and listener. Any outside force – from technology to cognitive processes developed by education – can mediate and thus interfere with immediate experience. Punk's version of "competence" was a display of conspicuous musical amateurism that privileged immediacy. Punk followed Romantic, folk and hippie ideology that valued the innocent, youthful or naïve making "primitive" or "amateur" works (Keightley 2001, Bannister 2006) and in all of these ideologies there is a value on the lack of formal education and cultural refinement. In punk, institutionalized or social knowledge itself can be a form of mediation. Punk's particular iteration of this value was often a conspicuous anti-intellectualism.

Indie iterations of punk values for musical competence

Music by art-educated musicians reflects many of the aesthetic values of indie music, which is an historical inheritor of many of punk's attitudes about musicianship, novice participation and sociability. Wendy Fonarow writes that indie picked up punk's negative reaction to virtuosity in progressive rock and called for a return to the "primal traditions and excitement of rock and roll" (Fonarow 2006:32). Indie follows punk by shaping its aesthetic values about musicianship, sociability, and market worthiness in opposition to what its performers perceive to be "mainstream" popular music values. Indie musicians' construction of authenticity, like that of punks, resides in the belief that raw, simple and under-produced musical sound suggests closeness, intimacy, and truth (Fonarow 2006:42). What makes indie music

significantly different than punk music is indie's conspicuous display of intellectualism, manifested in conspicuous amateurism as a form of intellectual superiority over slick mainstream music (Cavanagh 2000:177). This creates a conflicting aspect of indie's display of musicianship: the genre's musicians are conspicuously amateur but make self-conscious gestures to intellectualism in their musical approach.

Fonarow writes that while "indie" connotes an independent, anti-corporate market position, its core aesthetic belief is in diminutiveness. The small, personal and immediate are values placed on the musical skill, musical production, community and business practices, which stand in contrast to perceptions of mainstream popular music as enormous, distant, unspecialized, and corporatizeed (Fonarow 2006: 63). Indie as a genre is known for a particular aesthetic approach towards sound, which Wendy Fonarow describes as "shambolic" music, which is "primarily guitar rock or pop combined with an art-school sensibility" (Fonarow 2006:40). To illustrate her definition, Fonarow asked British indie fans how they would describe a typical indie sound:

> The sound of indie is characterized as "fey jangly guitar pop" (L.P. age seventeen), "chiming melodic guitar pop" (NME, May 12, 1992), or "anoraky Sarah bands" (R.G., age twenty-five). The anorak, also known as a parka, is a simple jacket considered to be synonymous with wimpiness (Thorne 1993: 124). Sarah was a record label based in Bristol that released one hundred singles, most of which were considered to be delicate, effeminate, sugary pop songs, often criticized for being cloying. Still another indie music fan described the genre as "badly played and poorly sung, because the emphasis is more on the overall sound rather than on musicianship" (M.D., age twenty-eight). [Fonarow 2006: 40-41]

Fans discuss the genre with an "art-school sensibility" as a mix of non-traditional depictions of masculinity (fey, effeminate, wimpy, delicate) with a musical aesthetic that values "overall sound" instead of well-played instruments and skilled vocal technique. Male fine artists have

long been feminized in culture (Falkon and Waugh 1972, Cooper 1986, Saslow 2001, Bergling 2001) and male indie participants' effeminate "artsy" presentation is one way that the genre marks its difference from punk's typical construction of maleness. While other scholars writing about art-educated musicians have focused on questions of market relationship (Frith and Horne 1987) the place of popular musicians within the art avant garde (Gendron 2003) and artist-musicians' role within the post-punk musical lineage (Reynolds 2006), none have traced art-educated musicianship since the punk era. Indie is not just a great inheritor of punk aesthetics, but has become the primary genre in which art-educated musicians currently participate (Frith 1987; Bennett 2001; Fonarow 2006; Reynolds 2006).

The central aesthetic position of indie musicianship is against structured institutional traditions and in favor of individual, self-taught and informal pathways to learning, especially approaches of the outsider, the naïve or otherwise uneducated (Fonarow 2006:42). Many indie fans consider the bands they like to be lacking in technical proficiency and view this as a positive attribute. Fonarow writes that, "One of the most damning insults that can be leveled at a musician is to be called a 'muso,' implying a technically proficient musician without spirit or emotional attachment to the music he or she plays" (Fonarow 2006:43). The definition of a "muso" is almost identical to an earlier quotation in which art education scholar Michael defines uninspired fine artists as those who rely on technical skill but whose artist works have no "soul." Indie musicians who obtain an intermediate or higher level of musical proficiency must push their musicianship into gestures the community will appreciate as new, inventive, or experimental and not display elements of traditional rock virtuosity. This approach to developing style permeates every division of indie musical labor but is most often recognized in guitar performance because of the instrument's longtime association with masculinity and virtuosity.

Fonarow writes that "eschewing guitar solos is a regarded by most as a moral issue. Guitar solos are seen as self-indulgent, pretentious, narcissistic displays often likened to masturbation" (Fonarow 2006:67). Indie musicians often avoid the label of "pretentious" or "muso" by creating styles that seem novice but are actually carefully crafted and skillfully played. In this way, a "knowing" audience, one well versed in the convention of amateurism, can appreciate a musician's simultaneously amateurish sound and covert musical skill.

Indie music also presents guitar sounds and the overall texture of the band as lo-fidelity both in live settings and on recordings. Coming from a punk aesthetic that rejected mainstream popular music's slick production style, indie music has a raw, under-produced quality that suggests amateur home studio recording equipment. Fonarow points out that "occasionally even established and popular performers release four-track or eight-track recordings as opposed to the industry standard of twenty-four tracks. There is also a financial aspect to releasing eight-track recordings; sometimes bands do not have the funds to finance extravagant high-end studio productions" (Fonarow 2006: 41) but also discuss the deliberately under-produced sound of indie bands. In an era of professional quality home studio recording technology, lo-fi sound is an obviously manufactured style decision on the part of the musicians that shows simplicity as a fundamental indie style, not just an economic necessity.

The low level of musical skill needed to participate in the indie community gives audiences a sense that they too could participate if they so desired. Following the value of diminutiveness and everydayness that characterizes all indie music processes, there a deep conflict in the notion of an indie music celebrity, which both fans and musicians attempt to resolve by continual and conspicuous displays of everydayness. As a band becomes larger, it must make choices about marketing, advertisement, media, promotions, videos, licensing

agreements and other opportunities that may alienate indie fans. The alienation comes from indie's deep distrust of popularity (Fonarow 2006:64) and suspicion of, "mass market success as a pollutant of artistic purity (Harris 2003: xv). Cavanagh points out that indie fans justify their abandonment of bands who transgress the boundaries of the smallness aesthetic on the charges that popularity is unethical, and that bands that are not popular are "morally superior" to those who are (Cavanagh 2000: 177). In a sense, the only potential for success within the indie ideology is to fail. Bands that have failed because of their refusal to exploit their commercial prospects when they were popular among indie fans or failed to have popular indie support because their music was not part of the current taste are later heralded by indie historians in a series of "beautiful loser" clichés including: under-recognized, ahead of their time, unknown legends (Azerrad 2001; Cavanagh 2001). In this way, the indie aesthetic allows bands to acquire prestige and cultural capital but rejects their use of cultural capital to gain economic capital. The rejection or failure to achieve economic capital then becomes its own form of indie cultural capital. Thus "incompetent" indie music business decisions become part of the larger "amateurism" indie aesthetic.

Indie record labels have come to symbolize not just independence from the vertically integrated corporate business model of music production, but as an alternative to mainstream music aesthetic value. Music on mainstream record labels is thought by indie producers and consumers to be bloated, safe, clichéd and banal (Fonarow 2006:65) due to the perception of a corporation as a bureaucracy that places many layers of mediation between musicians, music, and audiences. Indie music aesthetics uses this critique of mainstream popular music to show itself as the intellectual high ground. In this way, indie aesthetics are like contemporary

conceptual art aesthetics, valuing artistic expression over market concern and developing conspicuous amateurism as a visual aesthetic connoting intellectual depth and a technique to critique both the larger art world's commercialization. Indie musicians, however, cannot escape their origins in and complicit with mass culture so cannot fully reject popular culture. Instead indie music aestheticians use their self-identified intellectual superiority and ideological opposition commercial interest as a form of cultural capital with which they demand status as the refined arbiters of popular music taste. They consider themselves the elite creators of esoteric-minded yet popular art within the larger commercial field of popular music production and make conspicuously amateur, conspicuously conceptual indie music for audiences "in the know." This contradictory set of commercial and fine art aesthetic believes and populist and elitist musical practices makes indie the perfect practice for young artists frustrated with their own complex and contradictory values about fine and commercial art production, populism and elitism, and the display of competence or amateurism. These are my subjects, the art-educated and pop music practicing.

Section 3: Ethnographic Conversations with Two Art-Educated Popular Musicians

In this section I present two ethnographic interviews conducted with New York City-based art-educated musicians Rob Corradetti and Lalena Fissure. I have selected segments of the in which art practice was mentioned explicitly as the logic behind a musical practice or when a musical practice was juxtaposed to an art practice. We discuss aspects of musical composition and conceptual aspects of popular music practice. Using models of creator/skilled personnel and indie participation, I also analyze the way in which these two artist-musicians rationalize their creative control in a group setting.

Rob Corradetti of Mixel Pixel: Collage Technique and the Artist/Laborer Divide

Rob Corradetti graduated from the University of Delaware Department of Fine Arts & Visual Communications with a Bachelors of Fine Arts and is the lead singer, songwriter, and guitarist for Brooklyn-based indie pop band Mixel Pixel. Mixel Pixel self-released their early albums but three years ago signed with an indie label (Kanine Records) with major label distribution (Universal Music Group). They have toured nationally in support of established indie music veterans. He considers himself an artist and works as a freelance graphic designer and in retouching photography. He increasingly refers to popular music as his primary vocation.

Corradetti began Mixel Pixel as a home recording project when he was a freshman in college and estimates that he recorded 300 songs before he began thinking of the project as more than a hobby. Those early songs, according to Corradetti, were just, "me messing around with my four track" while "sitting at home recording stuff by myself" (Interview, March 25, 2005). At that time he was making art and music simultaneously but, "never saw them as going together."

Without musical partners, formal musical training, or intention to play his work for a wide audience (a common narrative of indie songwriter's early music experience), Corradetti made music that did not fit it into standard popular music song structures:

> Back then I never really thought about my intentions with music and what I was trying to sound like. They were just these collage projects, very much done at home in the bedroom for an audience of three friends. I had no intention or desires like, "I want to make a rock song" or "I want to make a computer song that's going to make people want to dance." [Interview, March 25, 2005]

Like many indie musicians, Corradetti delineates the space of his studio recording – his bedroom – as a spot of intimacy for his earliest musical compositions and like indie musicians he says his initial audiences were small and friendly. Using an amateur "collage" recording technique, he did not have an intention or desire to reproduce standard popular music structures like rock songs or dance tracks. While many young studio tinkerers stumble upon sound collage as an unusual audio technique that offers potential non-standard musical structures, Corradetti identifies his interest in collage as something coming from his art training. Now recording and performing for six years, Corradetti still uses collage as composition technique:

> *Daphne Carr: Does your art-training influence your current song writing?*
>
> Rob Corradetti: Well, I have an easier time thinking about music from an art perspective, in terms of colors, textures or shapes. I just kind of grab whatever's around – instruments, toys, objects – and get sounds out of them. To me it's making a collage out of sound fragments. It's like each song is its own collage expressing one whole world, but not like a story, more abstract. One song we might try to put across a psychedelic feel, a 60s feel, a whole aesthetic that I can make from referencing all these things, these sounds or bits of melody. [Interview, March 25, 2005]

Corradetti refers to his musical composition process as being informed by an art perspective and talks about musical composition as a form of visual composition. His use of descriptive fine art language to describe musical sound indicates that Corradetti organizes his thoughts about musical composition based on visual metaphors (Feld 1981, 1984; Porcello

2004). He employs his reflective and descriptive language learned from his fine art "visual literacy" training and days of performing crits in art school. Like a conceptual artist, he first envisions a collage-based abstract "world" structure for his composition. He then searches for the correct "sound fragment" that he thinks matches his art concept of "color" to a musical concept "color." Art training informs not only his composition but also his speech about composition.

Sound fragments are collected from "whatever's around," an offhand way of describing a set of sound-making devices ranging from objects to instruments whose purpose within the composition is to offer specific timbral, melodic or rhythmic elements that can reconfigured and arranged by Corradetti. The value of the instruments lies in their ability to produce sound fragments, not as the primary mode of Corradetti's expressive practice. They are like Bransford's broken pencil, instruments liberated from their skilled application and placed in a new context. Corradetti achieves his "aesthetic" or "feel," his idea of what the composition should sound like, through the juxtaposition of harvested fragments from instruments for his collage studio technique.

Originally a secondary technical process, the recording studio has been adopted as its own instrument by musicians, critics and scholars. Recording engineers and record producers are now considered artists in their own rights (Kealy 1979; Becker 1982, Porcello 2004) and have been used to advance an auteur model of popular music production (Frith 1981). Corradetti separates the work of Mixel Pixel into two categories based on types of work done for the project: the one who has ideas/author/songwriter/engineer/producer and the participant/musician/live performer. Mixel Pixel, which originally was the name of his bedroom tinkering project, is now the name of his band, but he still believes they are somewhat separate entities:

Daphne Carr: Is Mixel Pixel a band?

Rob Corradetti: I do all the recording, but they play parts. They want to be more of a band. It's constantly changing and I can never get a grasp on what I'm doing. Definitely it's a band, like when we play live its different. Mixel Pixel live band is its own thing and home recording is its own thing. We're trying to bridge the two things. We recreate about one half of the songs live and live they sound a little more rock oriented. On stage we also have drum machines and samplers (Interview with Rob Corradetti, March 25, 2005).

In discussing the division of labor within Mixel Pixel, Corradetti delineates a clear distinction between creators and participants in creative work. He suggests that the band members are not entirely comfortable with this division, they "want to be more" of a band, a participatory indie band. Corradetti's model of musical production is different – it resembles an artist/support personnel division in which Kai and Matt were hired to realize home recording song plans for a live audience. Within the live band context, Corradetti selected guitar and lead vocals, the two traditional power positions within an indie music ensemble. Kai and Matt were both chosen because of they were in Corradetti's acquaintance circle and played in other indie bands. The live band "recreates" half of the recorded songs and these songs differ from the recordings by being more "rock-oriented." Corradetti adapts only the compositions he thinks will work for the band's instrumentation and said that he must rearrange the songs from their recorded collage-sound to a more traditional rock sound because of the band's limited ability to reproduce the full range of recorded sound. He adds what he can through the use of samples and drum machines that he can program in advance, further controlling the live realization of his work by setting all the tempi and structures for the songs. In the studio, Corradetti uses Kai and Matt's labor only to "play parts" or musical fragments that will become part of his eventual composition. He does not allow them to participate in the composition process.

Matt and Kai's desire to "be more of a band" arises from their indie value of participation

but Corradetti's value is on the integrity of his artist's vision. The clash between helping an artist realize his goal and wanting to have some freedom of expressive performance is common among skilled support personnel who have envisioned themselves as creators during their training (Becker 1982:78) and in our interview Corradetti acknowledges their dissatisfaction with the current skilled creator/skilled musician division of labor. His solution thus far is to incorporate more of their musical interests into his palette of available sounds. Discussing the interests of the rest of the band, he said, "I think our new music is going to have more violin on it. Kai's a really proficient violinist and she's also really into Nintendo Game Boy music. I think she's going to provide both of those thing in the future" (Interview, March 25, 2005). In songwriting, Corradetti still has artistic control of the selection of material but he increasingly allows his personnel to offer the source material. As the project evolves from a bedroom solo collage project into a semi-professional indie music ensemble, Corradetti maintains his control as the conceptual leader of the band while incorporating traditional aspects of indie music aesthetic and ideology into his composition and performance practice.

Lalena Fissure: Reconciling the Conceptual in Popular Music Practice

Lalena Fissure has a Master of Fine Arts from the Pratt Institute and is the lead singer, songwriter, and guitarist for the Brooklyn-based pop-rock band the Color Guard. Color Guard is a local band that self-releases music on their own Suziblade label, and has been on a few regional tours. She is a full-time freelance illustrator and information graphics designer for print media. She first studied art at a fine arts high school and continued to make art while she studying journalism at University of Texas, Austin. In 1999 she enrolled in the Pratt MFA program because she knew it to be the most conceptually driven path in a "very open" school. "It seems

like in a lot of graduate programs there's one department that's the catch all department – like at Yale it's sculpture. If you do sculpture you can do whatever, like films and new forms and conceptual work. That was the painting department at Pratt. I didn't really paint much" (Interview, July 8, 2005). Fissure says she went into "painting" because she was not the kind of person who worked in one medium, but rather matched the medium with her idea. Ideas take precedence to her:

> I guess I just wanted to figure out who I was artistically, what my aesthetic was, and what my interests were. I found that there are some people who can sit down with some materials and play around with them and see what happens, and then there's other people, like me, who have a vision and they'll make it. I'll have a sketch and will go find the materials. [Interview, July 8, 2005]

Fissure found that she worked best as an artist when she envisioned a conceptual framework an added whatever materials make sense to realize the work. For her, mechanical skill is in service of the idea. During her time at Pratt she experimented with sculpture, film, animation, installations and a series of mass-produced consumable products (fortune cookies). While she liked making the works, two experiences she had outside the Institute convinced her that fine art was not the correct career path for her. First she had an art-related job that convinced her that she did not want to participate in the art business:

> My first internship was at this SoHo gallery Fredrick Petzil. I remember this collector coming in and Fredrick basically explaining what they should buy and why it was a good work of art. It really affected me that this person who has the power to put food on the table of an artist doesn't really care about what they're buying and doesn't know anything about it. I just said to myself, "You shouldn't have to read books, and you shouldn't have to have someone tell you what you should like." That kind of discouraged me from the whole thing. [Interview, July 8, 2005]

Fissure articulates two interrelated critiques of the art world in this statement. The first is a classic critique of an art object as a scarce commodity that is valued economically instead of artistically by its owner, who treats the work as an investment. The second is that the purchaser

is convinced of a work's value by an outside force – a gallerist who is both a concerned economic party and a cultural intermediary serving as an interpreter of the art's conceptual worth for potential buyers. Fissure imagined herself as an artist who had work within this system of exchange and was frustrated by the use of Petzil's use of critical language about art's meaning to drive its sale. She is also frustrated that the buyer cannot "see" the worth of the work, meaning that he or she was unknowledgeable in esoteric contemporary art. The experience changed her value of fine art and expectation for how it should engage audiences. For her, fine art shouldn't have to be explained and should not have to be understood through scholarly "book" approaches.

At the same time of her art education and internships, Fissure began playing in bands, first with the Hissyfits and then with her own band, the Color Guard. She said that she realized music was her passion even before graduating with her MFA and that it was fulfilling in exactly the ways the art world was disappointing to her. Here she articulates a common value within punk and indie music participation, that of public performance as a direct and immediate form of sociability that did not have an analog in fine art practice. She often found herself lonely in her fine art production. I asked, "[Carr] What did being in the band fulfill for you that making fine art didn't? [Fissure] One, more immediate gratification. Two is collaboration. You could do that with visual art, but I guess when you put that together with immediate gratification of playing music" (Interview, July 8, 2005). Fissure sees the performance of music in a sociable setting as a form of pleasure that she did not have in her art practice. Other informants voiced similar feelings[11] about the visceral pleasure of popular

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[11] Jesse Bransford on performance while studying at Parsons Design at New School. "I did a couple of performances as an undergrad and there's no analog to the satisfaction of playing live with a band. It was

music performance and compared this aspect of popular music favorably against the relative isolation of professional art practice[12].

To this she added a third aspect of popular music that fulfilled her in a way art did not – a sense that popular music has a populist appeal: "Everybody has an opinion about music whereas a lot of people if you ask them on the street do you know anything about art, they feel like they shouldn't even talk about it, which I think is really sad" (Interview, July 8, 2005). For Fissure, a key difference between popular music and fine artwork is the terms by which it is understood by everyday audiences. Because the contemporary fine art world values conceptual practice, the method by which aesthetic value is assigned to these works is through intellectual, not immediate or visceral, processes. Fissure, like someone with a punk aesthetic, sees intellectualism as another form of mediation between the works and their audiences.

The problem for Fissure in making popular music was how to resolve her rejection of the conspicuously intellectual contemporary fine art discourse on conceptual art with her own pleasurable experience of making conceptual fine artwork. While at Pratt she craved immediacy and sociability and so started a punk band, the Hissyfits. Later with Color Guard, she found a way to present her idea of what conceptual work could in a popular music context. She refers to her solution as writing "accessible" catchy pop made from "a limited palette:"

> I like being accessible, but I like being *different* and *not cool*. I have my own definition of cool. That's why we play catchy pop songs but have ideas no one else would have. It's like working with a limited palette. Say you have colors that range from yellow, green and into the blues, you don't have any reds or purples or oranges or anything. It's a

so visceral. I was never in a good band, they all kind of sucked. One was funny, but quality wasn't an issue. Being there and being in a temporal environment where it seems like something's at stake."

[12] While the conceptual approach makes it possible for artists to delegate some parts of the art process (usually secondary roles) to other people, skilled technicians or unskilled laborers, it has still not been an especially fruitful practice for truly collaborative or group work of the type that an indie band model of group sociability offers.

challenge and part of it is about accessibility. I'm not really into art bands. Sonic Youth I like a lot of their stuff but it gets to where it gets a little too heady. In order for it to be art, it has to be something you can't snap your fingers to? I don't agree with that. Andy Warhol would not have that. [Interview, July 8, 2005]

Fissure addresses her choice of musical genre as a reflection of her desire to appeal to a broad audience. She equates "accessibility" with the writing and performance of songs in a generic and traditional form (pop songs) and further asserts that she wants audiences to like them by suggesting that she attempts to make them "catchy." Fissure's employs a simile that relates her choice of musical genre to the choice of materials in fine art: catchy pop songs (one type of song in popular music) are like choosing specific colors from all available colors. The simile does not fully work because color is a small organizing element to an artwork and "catchy pop song" is a fairly specific structural definition of the type of musical work. Fissure's main point comes in the next sentence, when she compares her art education-into-music process to those of fellow art-educated band Sonic Youth[13]. Other art-educated bands get too "heady," which in the context of her quote implies that they present themselves as conspicuously conceptual, as self-consciously "anti-pop" in that she cannot snap her fingers to its beat.

To be an art-educated indie musician who chooses finger snapping "catchy pop" is, for her, to be "not cool," because many indie bands that emphasize their art-educations do so as a rationalization for the disruptive sonic qualities in their work (Frith 1987, Gendron 2003). Fissure reveals her favored type of conceptualism in her invocation of art's Prince of Pop: If Andy Warhol would "not have" music that made obvious its deep conceptual framework (Sonic Youth) then he might have music that kept hidden its conceptual framework (the Color Guard). Warhol's celebration of pop was always bound in the mystique of his deadpan presentation. Did

[13] Sonic Youth is a four-piece band originally from New York City in 1981. Guitarist Lee Ranaldo studied film and Kim Gordon graduated with a degree in fine art from Otis College for Art and Design in Los Angeles (Azerrad 2001).

he really mean his art to be vacuous and surface-obsessed? Because he would not reveal his intent, it was up to the audience to decide. In this way, audiences can see both art and pop, experience it as conceptual and immediate. For Fissure, Color Guard is similarly, wonderfully ambiguous in its meaning.

Fissure experienced a great sense of relief in her crossover from art practice to popular music practice. Growing up with artist parents, she was told that she would one day be a successful fine artist who would "show in galleries" and "be famous" with work "worth lots of money." She said that as a young adult she believed that, "only fine art, showing in galleries, is a valid noble career for artist. Commercial art is selling out" (Interview, July 8, 2005). As in Bourdieu's model of family's part in the reproduction of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984:244), the Fissure family inculcated Lalena with a value for esoteric fine art education at a young age, helped shape her values about high art and fostering expectations for her to make fine art as a career. Throughout college she used her highly trained mechanical skill along with her conceptual faculties to make work that would fulfill those expectations and reproduce her family's values. After completing her MFA, Fissure realized that she preferred to make her art career in commercial art and that she wished to place her individual creative expression within a popular music framework.

Popular music provided her a framework in which her low level of mechanical musical skill was not a barrier to participation. Indeed, she relished her punk amateurism or as she refers to it, "outsider" status, as a way to make the act of creation fresh and fun:

> Lalena Fissure: There's something liberating about applying your creative desires to something that you haven't put a whole a bunch of expectations on yourself for. When you think that for your whole life "this is what I have to do" and "this is how I'm going to make my life meaningful" it gets really heavy. You put a lot of pressure on yourself. And then you discover something else and say, "This is just as fulfilling and I never thought of

this before" and I have no expectations of myself so let's see what happens. You're a novice - you're an outsider all of a sudden. If you study something so much it can get really tedious. You think too much and it's not fun anymore.

Daphne Carr: Does study about something impede your ability to make work?

Lalena Fissure: For me it can. It's anxiety. It doesn't carry over into music, although increasingly it does because I've been doing it longer you know. Now I kind of wish that I had studied music formally because I'd be a better player now but on the other hand I know that the whole reason I like it is because I didn't study it. [Interview, 8 July 2005]

She argues that deep knowledge of a practice's conceptual aspects (history, theory, development of skill) inhibits her ability to make work. The intellectualization of practice makes work 'tedious' and "not fun." With anxious expectation of an art career as "noble" calling and a deep distrust of fine art intellectualism as a way to drive away everyday audiences and lure potential buyers, Fissure gave up contemporary fine art practice and now applies her education in two ways: making commercial art with a high degree of skill but with little space for individual expression, and making popular music with a low degree of skill and a high degree of individual expression. Her ambivalence about musical skill in the final quotation shows how fragile and in negotiation her relationship of deep knowledge is to the desire for visceral pleasure. As someone who values education and personal growth, Fissure wishes for further music training but says she does not want formal knowledge of musical technique, music history, or composition methods to become mediating factors between herself and her musical performance. Thus far, she has not sought out any formal musical training and remains an intermediate level of technical skill on the guitar.

Fissure is the primary songwriter for Color Guard, and like Corradetti, locates the greatest similarities between her art process and her music process of song construction. Here Fissure discusses songwriting both as a time-based and as a spatial creation:

When I'm making a song, I use a lot of the same skills or approaches as I would with a visual piece, like ideas about composition and about balance in textures of instruments and dynamics. I like to have parts that change within a piece. I like something to be interesting from beginning to the end, or maybe to relax for a little while and then get really exciting. Then something you didn't expect will happen. That's sort of my approach with art as well. I think about how if something happens once in a song, I want it to come back even if it's for a few seconds in the same way that I'd want to balance out one color with maybe a similar color on the other side of a composition, it helps with continuity.

The song doesn't always have a form to it, exactly, it's just a bunch of ideas, along with the mood and maybe a few ideas about how different instruments should sound. [Interview, July 8, 2005]

Fissure composes song, to employ an art-metaphor, as rough sketches like those Bransford called "sketches for future work." Unlike Corradetti, she does not envision "a whole world" in which various fragments will be cut and pasted. Instead she has a loose idea of what materials and processes – instruments or dynamic changes – she wishes to use for her next version of the work. The whole band works on the next version of the song. She considers them creative collaborators, not secondary personnel, and does not consider it necessary for the final version of the song to always bear obvious traces of her authorship:

Sometimes it completely changes when I bring it to the band and that's one of the exciting things about doing music. I can have something in my head and you can only think of it one way, like "Well of course this is how the song sounds." Then when three other minds get together and interpret it, it can be really interesting. Sometimes I say, "you know, this is really not where I want this song to go" but other times "oh, okay, I never other of that. That's equally cool." [Interview, July 8, 2005]

Fissure speaks like many indie songwriters who share song sketches with their bands and let the group decide which parts to develop into structured songs. As creative leader, Fissure could chose to push her own opinions about her songs and make her bandmates play parts that conform to the conceptual framework for the song she has "in her head." As an indie music participant, she does not do that, but instead shares her creativity with the group and allows it to become common property, subject to change at constructive suggestions of her band mates. In

this way, Fissure has incorporated both of her value systems fully into her current popular music practice, finding pleasure in playing deadpan catchy pop among friends for local Brooklyn audiences.

During our conversation, Fissure laughed when I asked her if she would ever give up one practice for the other. "Music is my passion," she said, and "I like to say, 'Art just pays my rent.'" (Interview, July 8, 2005). Corradetti's vocation is increasingly popular music, although he was quick in our conversation to call himself an artist. "It was always like art, art, art and music was in the background. Now music is towing me along and all the art I make is generally for music, like for posters and flyers or CDs. I find that making art for my band is really fun, like it's a really good way to be creative" (Interview, March 25, 2005). Both Corradetti and Fissure have sought the most meaningful ways of presenting their creativity, first through fine art and now through music. It is impossible to understand their musical practice without attending to the ways in which art processes and ideologies have shaped them as creative individuals.

Conclusion

According to Blacking, the precondition for musicianship is, "perception of sonic order, whether it be innate or learned" and this sonic order, "may be created incidentally as a result of principles of organization that are nonmusical or extramusical" (Blacking 1973:11). In this thesis I have discussed musicians whose perception of sonic order is organized through dual cognitive systems: one that was shaped by fine art education and one that was shaped by indie music ideology. Like Blacking, I locate the socially constructed idea of "competence" as a principle determinant of how members of a culture organize the assignment and production of work and so have discussed the complicated, sometimes contradictory definitions of "competence" that have arisen out of the fine art and popular music worlds. Becker writes that breaking from convention in an art world can have a significant impact on all other aspects of the art world, and I have shown how the shifting values towards the display of "highly skilled" instrument use has fundamentally changed both contemporary fine art and popular rock music, creating oppositional genres, methodologies, and aesthetics within each. In attempting to resolve the art/commerce split in contemporary practice, both fine art and popular rock music have created genres that consider themselves aesthetically motivated, intellectually superior, and exempt from critique as "commercial" – conceptual art and punk/indie are these genres, and both display conspicuous amateurism part of an aesthetic defense.

The value of amateurism in contemporary fine art and indie popular music eased Rob Corradetti and Lalena Fissure's crossover from fine art practice into popular music practice. Once they began playing music, they both found that the practice of popular music solved

problems they had with fine art, providing immediacy and sociability. They also found art training had useful functions in popular music practice, especially in musical composition. On a larger scale, Fissure uses her art education to rationalize her aesthetic choices in popular music, defining her sonic and sociable self in a lineage in the deadpan "commercially friendly" Pop Art tradition of pop songs and community participation. Corradetti sees himself as conceptual master, framing his sonic and sociable experience around a division of labor that values the originator of the idea. His live band is one realization of the conceptual framework he records at his home studio. Corradetti and Fissure have applied their fine art education to popular music practice and come up with two almost completely different musical and social practices. In this way, it would nearly impossible to relate the two on musical terms alone but proves fruitful when evaluated in terms of art education's impact on popular music practice.

The aim of this paper has been to show how art-educated indie musicians intermingle fine art practice with popular music practice and how both practices provide useful frameworks through which their popular music practices can be understood. It is my hope that this type of scholarship shows how relationships in popular music practice can be drawn from outside the study of popular music itself, and that this type of work can offer significant insight into general questions about musicians, musical processes and the social context of music. In this paper, ethnography shows how popular musicians conceptualize, rationalize and practice music through dual cognitive systems and that an ethnomusicological approach to these dual systems helps reveal meaningful relationships between people making seemingly disparate musical sounds.

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