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Commencement Talk
San Francisco Art Institute
May 21, 2107

What I have to say will be short but not necessarily sweet.

After a colleague suggested that I just give the same speech as someone previously has (I suppose because many are of the feel good kind) I went online to commencement speeches.com to look for available commencement speeches and found many of these typical ones:

Life Is Beautiful
You are the Greatest Class Since Last Year
You will change the world. You can do anything.

Not Exactly what I was looking for or what I think you really want to hear. You're too smart and cynical.

The theme of my remarks is something more like this: Moving from the "school" of "me" to the "world" of "them" without giving in to the world's insistence on creating you in its image

Some of you and even more of your younger colleagues who will be commencing after you–have craved "safe spaces" at SFAI where you would be comfortable with both expressing and being "yourselves" and some of you found that safe space in your own way. You want to critique the world. You began this in SFAI critique. At the same time you want safe spaces. And you want to capitalize on the world you critique. (This might not be so shocking—Edouard Manet, arguably the first modern western painter, eagerly sought to profit from the world he put into question). But in the call for safe spaces, maybe we are foreclosing real critique. Your work invokes identity but as something to be expressed and thus accepted. Is this question what Art should be about? I think you are too talented for easy, comfortable positions.

There is a difference between creative respect and safe spaces. Willingness to disagree with critical interlocutors—why not? Of course there are limits. Nothing wrong with that. It's not either/or.

Things become more problematic when the suggestion is that an entire university or college should be a safe space. Should campuses be "safe spaces" in which ideas, words, and artwork (i.e. the world) that make some students uncomfortable are simply not allowed to exist? The world is uncomfortable. Quite frankly, what I see in the world of "them" is not a "safe space" for artists.

Maybe this is a good reason to now leave the safe, denatured, parental and therapeutic world that sometimes passes now as "art critique".

Many artists want to make "challenging" work but at same time they are challenged or perhaps need to be challenged by the world. Artists think they are creating something new, but, at the same time, are part of the continuous modern trajectory of a paradoxical existence in the world. Alas, many artists are "hurt" and feel vulnerable by society while also inhaling its resources. Emblematic is the ambiguity of artists who want safe spaces to exist and who want people who make them unsafe to buy their work.

The question still exists for many artists whether they can make works which somehow exceed or differentiate themselves from the norms of even "progressive" political and cultural movements, or more appropriately, from everyday life—and in doing so remain "critical".

Many of you as artists make works that attempt to mark your way out of this contradiction of everyday life and that is the point for some. In these cases, under the intensity of experimentation, works ask whether there is a place where everyday culture has not reached. Art aims to be that place; an elsewhere which exceeds the commonplace assumptions of raw everyday politics and culture.

But what we really know is that under the sway of today's life, politics, institutions, and economic challenges, art is normalized by those challenges even as we awkwardly strive to make art in critical relationship to them.

Art, then, never just appears; it is always subject to the management of its appearance by culture and politics. This is how Art takes place in our culture: appropriated, and managed by institutional interests. And you as artists are too. How then do artists cope with this reality: living in relationship to them, with them, or opposed to them?

How can artists open up to the possibility of our being moved out this place to where we think we are —to an elsewhere? It's by being part of the world yet being apart from the world—in short, being "critical": listening to them, having the courage to speak back to them and expect something in return from them. If the possibility of becoming an artist is only within the structure of everyday life and how it represents art–what it is and what it does–in working at art, an artist must work within and against that, which inevitably informs their vision of art. Yes, it's your peculiar situation to sustain a practice while being caught up in-between the systems of everyday life.

Artists and their art as expressions of differentiation from our dominating economic, political and social systems and by the appropriation of art within these systems find it difficult to easily critique **and** be part of the violent and unjust structure of the everyday.

This is what leaves us stranded as "in-between". We are condemned to exist in the world by negotiating its institutional orders while at the same time seeking to remain resolutely enthralled to notions of being different.

This necessary collusion and collision between artists and the institutional orders that manage art is an essential part of being modern, which in itself is a critical engagement with these institutional orders.

While this all seems very complex and paradoxical, it's actually quite clear and potentially productive: If the experience of Art making is no longer at the outside or even the edge of institutional representation but very much within managed culture, then it is the occurrence of art itself (simply that it exists), how the work is constituted, and how it happens which defines its possible life.

Whether our multiple double lives in which we as makers are burdened with, can be more than a half-life remains the question for our artistic practices (but not our actual selves) and acknowledgement of the very existence of everyday life is a requirement for our being, power, need, and fulfillment.

Despite these paradoxes there is no other place we can be right now; we have no other choice.

Good bye and I'll see you in the future, which I hope does not exist in the present.

Thank you and good luck.

This talk is inspired by the article "Managing Tradition: The Plight of Aesthetic Practices and Their Analysis in a Technoscientific Culture", published in Visual Culture, edited by Chris Jenks, Routledge, 1995