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FOSTERING CREATIVITY IN THE LAND OF CONFORMITY: LESSONS LEARNED

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FOSTERING CREATIVITY IN THE LAND OF CONFORMITY: LESSONS LEARNED

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ABSTRACT:

Generally speaking today's most successful schools of art, design and film in the Western world are fueled by original creativity, personal expression, open critical exploration, self-motivation and interdisciplinary collaboration. Newfound wealth in societies across Asia is fostering the development of the arts, including the establishment of new schools of art, design and film. This paper presents some of the fundamental challenges presented by the creation of avant-garde creative centers in traditional societies that are somewhat new to this type of activity. The case study used to exemplify some of these challenges is the first professional art, design and film school in Singapore, founded by the author in 2005 at the Nanyang Technological University.

1. THE CHALLENGE

In 2005 I was invited by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) to be the Founding Dean of a new School of Art, Design and Media (ADM). NTU is one of the two major national public autonomous universities in Singapore. This invitation seemed at the time like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create from scratch a BFA degree-granting professional school. The opportunity was made more alluring by the genuine institutional enthusiasm and by the more than adequate funding already in place to pursue this adventure. I refer to it as an adventure because at the time, if successful, this was scheduled to be the first 4-year professional art, design and film school ever to be established in Singapore. We were going where no one had gone before. The challenges nevertheless seemed quite significant, including:

- The limited role that the arts had played in this young, conservative, and prosperous city-state.
- The relatively small local professional creative communities.
- The tradition of institutionalized censorship, especially in the arts and media.
- The uncertainty of whether the project would materialize in a society that had not always particularly encouraged artistic ventures.
- The local aversion to being different, to critiquing the work of peers, to challenging authority, to expressing emotions or to speaking one's mind especially in public.
- The fact that the host institution for this new art school was a monolithic engineering-oriented technological University.

Being someone who enjoys a good challenge, I accepted NTU's offer and moved from Los Angeles to Singapore. I was ready for the adventure and felt well prepared in spite of the multiple obstacles. I was trained as an artist and years earlier I had spent a decade in academia, at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. At Pratt I had helped create, as Founding Chair, what at the time (1986) was the first American BFA/MFA program in computer animation and digital arts. My own educational background was interdisciplinary and intercontinental. As a young man I considered science but enrolled in Sociology at the National University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City, where I was born. About a year later I won a national painting competition and after that I could not picture myself working as a sociologist: I wanted to be an artist. So I dropped out of the university and was lucky to get a job as an apprentice to a prominent art director. Shortly thereafter I moved to Barcelona, Spain, where I attended a European-style art academy. After a couple of years I decided to transfer into an American-style art school, and eventually completed my undergraduate and graduate studies in New York City. In addition to my training and my entrepreneurial spirit, I said to myself, I had grown up reading Japanese haiku poetry and eating the Chinese sweet-and-sour pork dish that my mother mastered throughout my childhood. And so my South East Asian adventure started.

Soon after my arrival I realized that creating a new art school in Singapore would pose a dual challenge: practical and philosophical. At the practical level we had to take care of massive issues such as recruiting faculty against the clock, developing curricula in the most swift of ways, and building traditional and digital studios in the shortest amount of time. Singapore has a long and proud tradition in efficient manufacturing and process management, and this quality shined brilliantly as we moved through the practical stages of the approved plan. Solving the philosophical challenges, however, was not as efficient as solving the practical ones.

The early discussions were not about deep aesthetic issues or about theories of interactive cinema but simply about the nature of creativity and about what an art school is or should be about. Issues included the distribution of studio vs. lecture credits throughout the curriculum, the role played by an art portfolio in the application process, the extreme importance of learning drawing as a basic artistic tool, or the experiential hands-on nature of professional BFA-style studio education.

I realized early on that my new environment had a limited understanding of how artistic creativity had been typically fostered in art schools throughout the twentieth century. Much of what my teammates and I proposed was quickly and routinely compared to “the way things have been done in Engineering.” This overwhelming lack of familiarity with issues that were second nature to us propelled me to research the genesis of the contemporary art, design and film school, with the hope that my findings would be compelling and convincing.

In addition I also realized that two further issues could complicate the relatively straightforward challenge of building an art school from scratch. First, the University was starting to undergo its own institutional soul-searching trying to transition from a mostly-teaching engineering university to a research university. In this delicate transitional context the small challenges of building a new art school, representing less than 1% of the university’s population, seemed even smaller. Second, the educational blueprint of Singapore was modeled, and still is in many ways, after the British educational system. I was proposing a BFA/MFA studio-based environment, with hints of European art school, that was mostly compliant with the standards of the American-based National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD). It became obvious that launching six BFA professional degree programs would require the reconciliation of some of the deep philosophical differences between the American and the British approaches to art school.

This task involved discussions not just about art education, but also about elementary, secondary, preparatory, and university educational systems.

2. THE PROFESSIONAL ART SCHOOL

The genesis of professional art schools as we know them today started centuries ago. I use the term art school in a loose and inclusive way. I say art school rather than saying art school, design school and/or film school.

During the Middle Ages the guilds, or unions, of artisans and craftsmen established accepted standards that enhanced the quality of their products and their practice. During the Renaissance master artists employed and mentored young apprentices, some of whom eventually moved on to creating their own studios and enterprises. These guilds and studios eventually led to the creation of European art academies throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The Accademia di San Luca founded in Rome in 1577 is possibly the earliest example. Art academies were for the most part artist-run educational institutions, but for centuries art academies remained on the periphery of universities. The two oldest universities today, for example, the University of Bologna, Italy, and the University of Oxford, England, were founded respectively in 1088 and 1096. During the 19th century art academies widened their focus, giving birth to early inceptions of interdisciplinary art schools. In 1816, for example, the Paris-based Académie de peinture et de sculpture (Academy of Painting and Sculpture) merged with the Académie de musique (Conservatory of Music) and the Académie d'architecture (Academy of Architecture) to form the Académie de beaux-arts (Academy of Fine Arts). The Bauhaus school in Germany went a step further when it proposed and implemented between 1919 and 1933 the integration of the traditional fine arts with disciplines that had been considered

applied arts until then. It was also in 1919 that the Moscow Film School was founded.

In the late 19th century it became common for groups of artists to splinter from the official Academy, because they found their guidelines too academic and stifling, and to create alternative organizations. The Salon de Refusés of 1863 in Paris and the Armory Show of New York City in 1913 are two well-known early examples of this trend. Both events revolutionized the art of their time. As time went by the dialectic interaction between formal academies and informal experimentation enriched artistic practice. Throughout the twentieth century a few art academies throughout the world evolved into avant-garde multi-disciplinary centers of creativity and innovation. At the same time the consolidation of art schools into the world of higher education continued as the role of art and media increased in modern society. Some academies, for example, became institutes. Other academies and institutes were absorbed by existing universities or became fully accredited institutions of higher education with the power to grant academic degrees that were previously granted only by universities. A few traditional universities, recognizing the educational and financial potential of art programs, initiated successful art, design and film colleges, schools or departments of their own.

3. THE ROLE OF CREATIVITY

Explaining to non-experts the genesis of professional art schools throughout the centuries helped to make the idea of creating an art school seem like an achievable goal. But defining creativity was an entirely different story. Active discussions and opposing points of view flew back and forth.

Numerous dictionaries offer clear and compelling definitions of creativity: a "creative power or faculty," and "ability to create," says the Oxford English Dictionary. "To bring into existence (God created the heaven and the earth (Gen 1:1)," "to produce through imaginative skill," "to make or bring into existence something new," "something created rather than imitated," according to The Merriam-Webster Dictionary. A few of the early discussions at NTU about creativity revolved around the issue of "proper amount" of creativity. It seemed to some that "too much" creativity could lead to aberrations such as creative financing (getting around legal limits) or creative accounting (deceptively arranged to defraud). Along the same lines, some also questioned whether nudity was really necessary when teaching live figure drawing.

Overall everyone seemed to agree that creativity was a good thing to teach students, but opinions on how to teach it or how people learn it or develop it, were fragmented. A particularly memorable request was one to develop a flawless method for being creative that could be repeated over and over. Something akin to an assembly-line style of creativity...

We know, as individuals working in the creative professions, that a magic creative formula that works every time simply does not exist. Creativity or the ability to create, in my opinion, can only be summarized or transmitted as a general method, as a loose collection of guidelines. As part of this inquiry into the nature of creativity I was invited in late 2005 by the Singapore Design Council to make a public presentation about the topic. Among other things I talked about the ten issues regarding artistic creativity and its practical implementation that I thought were significant at the time in the local context. The public event hosted by the Singapore Art Museum was lively, standing room only, and full of discussion. I didn't expect my simple ideas to be so provocative. This is a summary of the ten points.

1. Open inquiry and critical questioning can be powerful tools for creativity and for change. Encouraging people to ask "why?" is encouraging a source of creativity.
2. There are many types of creativity, not just one. Let them all bloom, as they usually feed each other, multiplying the results. The right brain-style complements the left brain-style.
3. Overly formal classrooms and workplaces cramp the artists' style. Artistic creators prefer relaxed environments and casual dress codes. Loose the ties as quickly as possible.
4. Creativity and rebelliousness often times go hand in hand. Generally speaking creators must somehow move away from the old in order to create something new. Providing creators with breathing room fosters open-ended experimentation and allows creativity to grow. The benefits derived from this freedom to create are difficult to quantify, but the approach almost always pays off.
5. Creativity can't be rushed. Time is essential for the gestation, development, production and refinement of an original creative idea. Creators need time to create high-quality, mature and well-developed works. Creativity grows like a tree: one starts by planting a seed, taking care of it every day, for years... then the tree blooms and yields fruit. Even the Hollywood conventional wisdom is aware of this simple fact: "Fast. Good. Cheap. You can only have two."
6. Creativity does not happen in a void. Being original implies deep knowledge of what others in the field and related fields have already created. Investing the time to learn about prior works of art, design and media is an invaluable tool for creativity.
7. Advanced academic degrees do not always provide a proof or a guarantee that someone is or will be creative. Many

recognized and successful artistic innovators lack advanced degrees: Pablo Picasso and Steven Spielberg, to name just a couple. Creating elaborate theories about art does not always yield good art. "Talk is cheap" and "the proof is in the pudding" are two of my personal favorite aphorisms in this regard.

8. Much of contemporary culture is about building bridges between popular culture and the refined forms of artistic expression. The connections between low art and high art are essential for a dynamic creative culture.

9. Managing creativity is not as easy as it looks, it requires careful "gardening." Learning how to manage the creative process and the creative spirit is an art that usually takes years to master.

10. Drawing and writing are powerful tools to be used during the creative process. Children who are taught how to express their ideas through drawing and writing have a higher chance of developing their creative abilities than children who are not.

4. THE INITIAL PROPOSAL

I joined the university just a few months before the much-anticipated scheduled launch of the new school, and an efficient plan was required. Four individuals had previously been engaged in this effort, but the results had not satisfied the University. A sense of urgency dominated, and the time for high discussion was limited. The ideas that guided my initial 5-year proposal are summarized here. Many of these were implemented during the first three years of the school.

- To establish an interdisciplinary school offering six 4-year BFA professional degrees each in a specialized field: Digital Animation, Digital Filmmaking, Digital Photography,

Interactive Design, Product Design, and Visual Communication.

- To promote an interdisciplinary approach, building bridges between disciplines in art, design, film and media.
- To attract a mixture of international and local faculty, with an emphasis on professionals with significant teaching experience. Few senior faculty at the time seemed interested in joining the early stages of an experiment-in-progress, so I focused on hiring young Assistant Professors whom I considered promising.
- To select incoming students based on a combination of a portfolio or demo reel (a new criteria at the time in the context of Singaporean universities), academic scores, an essay, and an aptitude test.
- To teach within the traditional hands-on studio approach but enriching it with an additional digital dimension. To learn by making and by experiencing. To master a craft. This seemed appropriate as Singapore had a limited tradition in the practice and the valuation of craft. Coincidentally the “experiential approach” that is, and has always been, at the core of art schools was at the time being rediscovered and popularized by business schools across the world.
- To offer a mandatory Foundation program during the first year, particularly in light of the limited prior artistic experience of most incoming art students. This program had, and continues to have, four distinct areas (Drawing, Color and 2D Design, 3D Design, and 4D Storytelling) that are complemented by both Western and Asian Surveys of Art History.
- To explore collaborations with the Engineering programs. The Experiments in Art and Technology from the mid-1960s

in New York were a constant personal point of reference, but the early stages of this collaborative effort at NTU had limited success. The new art faculty members were busy building the school and the engineering faculty members were just starting to learn “what artists do.”

- To place an emphasis on developing individual and original creative voices within the local and regional context.

During its first semester of operation the School of ADM employed about 20 full-time, part-time and visiting faculty members. The initial enrollment was 108 students. This figure was of auspicious significance as 108 is also the number of rebellious outlaws in “Water Margin” (水滸傳), also known as “Outlaws of the Marsh,” one of the four classical Chinese novels. About two thirds of those 108 students came from the Junior Colleges (JCs), the academically-inclined secondary institutions, and a third from the Polytechnics, the vocational secondary institutions. The range of skill and talent was diverse.

During its first three years the school delivered the mandated enrollment quotas and the prescribed growth rate. Student enthusiasm was high, as their work was sweeping prizes in local competitions. The end of the third year marked the first occasion when we showcased the best student work from across the school. The results could hardly be more encouraging and some stunning works could be seen throughout the show. By then the faculty had doubled in size, the student population had more than tripled, and over 100 new courses had been successfully developed and taught. Creativity, and the methods that we had chosen to foster it, seemed to be working.

But during the School of ADM’s second year of life the University announced that the new school would soon move from being a Dean-led school to being one of three Chair-led schools grouped under a newly formed College of Humanities,

Arts and Social Sciences. The University also announced several new academic agendas intended to highlight science and research at NTU. Curricula across the institution would be modified to accommodate these goals. These and other similar developments made me wonder if I would be able to successfully execute the 5-year plan that I had proposed when I was appointed Founding Dean. After a month of much introspection, and nearing the end of my first 3-year contract, I decided that my contribution to leading the new school of artistic creativity was as done as it would be under the new circumstances. It was time to bring my Founding Dean adventure to a close.

5. THE AFTERMATH

The early dream of having a Singaporean national professional school of art, design and film is today a reality. Something that once seemed out of place is today a part of the daily landscape. This accomplishment makes me proud, and it also makes everyone else involved proud. The new school is the result of a collective effort, and the hard work and dedication of many individuals, groups and agencies. The School of ADM today has graduated over 220 young professionals. Its current enrollment is about 620 students, and it employs over 70 visiting, full-time, and part-time faculty members. The school continues to offer six BFA degrees.

Art instruction continues to gain prominence in Singapore. The Art and Music Elective Programs continue to expand at the Secondary level and in Junior Colleges under the aegis of the Ministry of Education (MOE). An independent secondary School of the Arts (SOTA) was created in 2008 under the sponsorship of Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA).

The dream lives on.