# II.

## ART AND FEAR

*Artists don't get down to work*
*until the pain of working is exceeded*
*by the pain of* not *working.*
— Stephen DeStaebler

THOSE WHO WOULD MAKE ART might well begin by reflecting on the fate of those who preceded them: most who began, quit. It's a genuine tragedy. Worse yet, it's an unnecessary tragedy. After all, artists who continue and artists who quit share an immense field of common emotional ground. (Viewed from the outside, in fact, they're indistinguishable.) We're all subject to a familiar and universal progression of human troubles — troubles we routinely survive, but which are (oddly enough) routinely fatal to the art-making process. To survive as an artist requires confronting these troubles. Basically, those who continue to make art are those who have learned how to continue — or more precisely, have learned how to not quit.

But curiously, while artists always have a myriad of reasons to quit, they consistently wait for a handful of specific *moments* to quit. Artists quit when they convince themselves that their next effort is already doomed to fail. And artists quit when they lose the destination for their work—for the place their work *belongs*.

Virtually all artists encounter such moments. Fear that your next work will fail is a normal, recurring and generally healthy part of the artmaking cycle. It happens all the time: you focus on some new idea in your work, you try it out, run with it for awhile, reach a point of diminishing returns, and eventually decide it's not worth pursuing further. Writers even have a phrase for it—"the pen has run dry"—but all media have their equivalents. In the normal artistic cycle this just tells you that you've come full circle, back to that point where you need to begin cultivating the next new idea. But in artistic death it marks the *last* thing that happens: you play out an idea, it stops working, you put the brush down...and thirty years later you confide to someone over coffee that, well, yes, you had wanted to paint when you were much younger. Quitting is fundamentally different from *stopping*. The latter happens all the time. Quitting happens once. Quitting means not starting again—and art is all about starting again.

A second universal moment of truth for artists appears when the destination for the work is suddenly withdrawn. For veteran artists this moment usually coincides—rather perversely, we feel—with *reaching*





that destination. The authors recall a mutual friend whose single-minded quest, for twenty years, was to land a one-man show at his city's major art museum. He finally got it. And never produced a serious piece of art again. There's a painful irony to stories like that, to discovering how frequently and easily success transmutes into depression. Avoiding this fate has something to do with not letting your current goal become your only goal. With individual artworks it means leaving some loose thread, some unresolved issue, to carry forward and explore in the next piece. With larger goals (like monographs or major shows) it means always carrying within you the seed crystal for your next destination. And for a few physically risky artforms (like dance), it may even mean keeping an alternative medium close by in case age or injury take you from your chosen work.

For art students, losing the destination for the work goes by another name: *Graduation*. Ask any student: For how many before them was the Graduate Show the Terminal Show? When "The Critique" is the only validated destination for work made during the first half-decade of an artist's productive life, small wonder that attrition rates spiral when that path stops. If ninety-eight percent of our *medical* students were no longer practicing medicine five years after graduation, there would be a Senate investigation, yet that proportion of art majors are routinely consigned to an early professional death. Not many people continue making art

when — abruptly — their work is no longer seen, no longer exhibited, no longer commented upon, no longer encouraged. Could you?

Surprisingly, the dropout rate during school is not all that high — the real killer is the lack of any continuing support system afterwards. Perhaps then, if the outside world shows little interest in providing that support, it remains for artists themselves to do so. Viewed that way, a strategy suggests itself:

> OPERATING MANUAL FOR NOT QUITTING
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> A. Make friends with others who make art, and share your in-progress work with each other frequently.
> B. Learn to think of [A], rather than the Museum of Modern Art, as the destination of your work. (Look at it this way: If all goes well, MOMA will eventually come to *you*.)

The desire to make art begins early. Among the very young this is encouraged (or at least indulged as harmless) but the push toward a "serious" education soon exacts a heavy toll on dreams and fantasies. (Yes, the authors really have known students whose parents demanded they stop wasting their time on *art* or they could damn well pay their own tuition.) Yet for some the desire persists, and sooner or later must be addressed. And with good reason: your desire to make art — beautiful or meaningful or emotive art — is integral to





your sense of who you are. Life and Art, once entwined, can quickly become inseparable; at age ninety Frank Lloyd Wright was still designing, Imogen Cunningham still photographing, Stravinsky still composing, Picasso still painting.

But if making art gives substance to your sense of self, the corresponding fear is that you're not up to the task — that you can't do it, or can't do it well, or can't do it again; or that you're not a real artist, or not a good artist, or have no talent, or have nothing to say. The line between the artist and his/her work is a fine one at best, and for the artist it feels (quite naturally) like there is no such line. Making art can feel dangerous and revealing. Making art *is* dangerous and revealing. Making art precipitates self-doubt, stirring deep waters that lay between what you know you should be, and what you fear you might be. For many people, that alone is enough to prevent their ever getting started at all — and for those who do, trouble isn't long in coming. Doubts, in fact, soon rise in swarms:

*I'm not an artist — I'm a phony*
*I have nothing worth saying*
*I'm not sure what I'm doing*
*Other people are better than I am*
*I'm only a [student/physicist/mother/whatever]*
*I've never had a real exhibit*
*No one understands my work*
*No one likes my work*
*I'm no good*

Yet viewed objectively, these fears obviously have less to do with art than they do with the artist. And even less to do with individual artworks. After all, in making art you bring your highest skills to bear upon the materials and ideas you most care about. Art is a high calling—fears are coincidental. Coincidental, sneaky and disruptive, we might add, disguising themselves variously as laziness, resistance to deadlines, irritation with materials or surroundings, distraction over the achievements of others—indeed as anything that keeps you from giving your work your best shot. What separates artists from ex-artists is that those who challenge their fears, continue; those who don't, quit. Each step in the artmaking process puts that issue to the test.

## VISION & EXECUTION

Fears arise when you look back, and they arise when you look ahead. If you're prone to disaster fantasies you may even find yourself caught in the middle, staring at your half-finished canvas and fearing both that you lack the ability to finish it, and that no one will understand it if you do.

More often, though, fears rise in those entirely appropriate (and frequently recurring) moments when vision races ahead of execution. Consider the story of the young student—well, David Bayles, to be exact—who began piano studies with a Master. After a few months' practice, David lamented to his teacher, "But I can hear the music so much better in my head than I can get out of my fingers."





To which the Master replied, "What makes you think that ever changes?"

That's why they're called Masters. When he raised David's discovery from an expression of self-doubt to a simple observation of reality, uncertainty became an asset. Lesson for the day: vision is always ahead of execution—and it *should* be. Vision, Uncertainty, and Knowledge of Materials are inevitabilities that all artists must acknowledge and learn from: vision is always ahead of execution, knowledge of materials is your contact with reality, and uncertainty is a virtue.

## IMAGINATION

Imagination is in control when you begin making an object. The artwork's potential is never higher than in that magic moment when the first brushstroke is applied, the first chord struck. But as the piece grows, technique and craft take over, and imagination becomes a less useful tool. A piece grows by becoming specific. The moment Herman Melville penned the opening line, "Call me Ishmael", one actual story—*Moby Dick*—began to separate itself from a multitude of imaginable others. And so on through the following five hundred-odd pages, each successive sentence in some way had to acknowledge and relate to all that preceded. Joan Didion nailed this issue squarely (and with trademark pessimism) when she said, "What's so hard about that first sentence is that you're stuck with it. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. And by the

time you've laid down the first *two* sentences, your options are all gone."

It's the same for all media: the first few brushstrokes to the blank canvas satisfy the requirements of many possible paintings, while the last few fit only *that* painting—they could go nowhere else. The development of an imagined piece into an actual piece is a progression of decreasing possibilities, as each step in execution reduces future options by converting one—and only one—possibility into a reality. Finally, at some point or another, the piece could not be other than it is, and it is done.

That moment of completion is also, inevitably, a moment of loss—the loss of all the other forms the imagined piece might have taken. The irony here is that the piece you make is always one step removed from what you imagined, or what else you can imagine, or what you're right on the edge of being able to imagine. Designer Charles Eames, arguably the quintessential Renaissance Man of the twentieth century, used to complain good-naturedly that he devoted only about one percent of his energy to conceiving a design—and the remaining ninety-nine percent to *holding onto it* as a project ran its course. Small surprise. After all, your imagination is free to race a hundred works ahead, conceiving pieces you could and perhaps should and maybe one day *will* execute—but not today, not in the piece at hand. All you can work on today is directly in front of you. Your job is to develop an imagination of the possible.





A finished piece is, in effect, a test of correspondence between imagination and execution. And perhaps surprisingly, the more common obstacle to achieving that correspondence is not undisciplined execution, but undisciplined imagination. It's altogether too seductive to approach your proposed work believing your materials to be more malleable than they really are, your ideas more compelling, your execution more refined. As Stanley Kunitz once commented, "The poem in the head is always perfect. Resistance begins when you try to convert it into language." And it's true, most artists don't daydream about making great art—they daydream about *having made* great art. What artist has not experienced the feverish euphoria of composing the *perfect* thumbnail sketch, first draft, negative or melody—only to run headlong into a stone wall trying to convert that tantalizing hint into the finished mural, novel, photograph, sonata. The artist's life is frustrating not because the passage is slow, but because he imagines it to be fast.

## MATERIALS

The materials of art, like the thumbnail sketch, seduce us with their potential. The texture of the paper, the smell of the paint, the weight of the stone—all cast hints and innuendoes, beckoning our fantasies. In the presence of good materials, hopes grow and possibilities multiply. And with good reason: some materials are so readily charged and responsive that artists have turned

to them for thousands of years, and probably will for thousands more. For many artists the response to a particular material has been intensely personal, as if the material spoke directly to them. It's been said that as a child, Pablo Casals knew from the first moment he heard the sound of a cello, that that was *his* instrument.

But where materials have potential, they also have limits. Ink wants to flow, but not across just any surface; clay wants to hold a shape, but not just any shape. And in any case, without your active participation their potential remains just that—potential. Materials are like elementary particles: charged, but indifferent. They do not listen in on your fantasies, do not get up and move in response to your idle wishes. The blunt truth is, they do precisely what your hands make them do. The paint lays exactly where you put it; the words you wrote—not the ones you needed to write or thought about writing—are the only ones that appear on the paper. In the words of Ben Shahn, "The painter who stands before an empty canvas must think in terms of paint."

What counts, in making art, is the actual fit between the contents of your head and the qualities of your materials. The knowledge you need to make that fit comes from noticing what really happens as you work—the way the materials respond, and the way that response (and resistance) suggest new ideas to you. It's those real and ordinary changes that matter. Art is about carrying things out, and materials are what *can* be carried out. Because they are real, they are reliable.





## UNCERTAINTY

Your materials are, in fact, one of the few elements of artmaking you can reasonably hope to control. As for everything else—well, conditions are never perfect, sufficient knowledge rarely at hand, key evidence always missing, and support notoriously fickle. All that you do will inevitably be flavored with uncertainty—uncertainty about what you have to say, about whether the materials are right, about whether the piece should be long or short, indeed about whether you'll ever be satisfied with *anything* you make. Photographer Jerry Uelsmann once gave a slide lecture in which he showed every single image he had created in the span of one year: some hundred-odd pieces—all but about ten of which he judged insufficient and destroyed without ever exhibiting. Tolstoy, in the Age Before Typewriters, re-wrote *War & Peace* eight times and was still revising galley proofs as it finally rolled onto the press. William Kennedy gamely admitted that he re-wrote his own novel *Legs* eight times, and that "seven times it came out no good. Six times it was especially no good. The seventh time out it was pretty good, though it was way too long. My son was six years old by then and so was my novel and they were both about the same height."

It is, in short, the normal state of affairs. The truth is that the piece of art which seems so profoundly right in its finished state may earlier have been only inches or seconds away from total collapse. Lincoln doubted

his capacity to express what needed to be said at Gettysburg, yet pushed ahead anyway, knowing he was doing the best he could to present the ideas he needed to share. It's always like that. Art is like beginning a sentence before you know its ending. The risks are obvious: you may never get to the end of the sentence at all — or having gotten there, you may not have said anything. This is probably not a good idea in public speaking, but it's an excellent idea in making art.

In making art you need to give yourself room to respond authentically, both to your subject matter and to your materials. Art happens *between* you and something — a subject, an idea, a technique — and both you and that something need to be free to move. Many fiction writers, for instance, discover early on that making detailed plot outlines is an exercise in futility; as actual writing progresses, characters increasingly take on a life of their own, sometimes to the point that the writer is as surprised as the eventual reader by what their creations say and do. Lawrence Durrell likened the process to driving construction stakes in the ground: you plant a stake, run fifty yards ahead a plant another, and pretty soon you know which way the road will run. E.M. Forster recalled that when he began writing *A Passage To India* he knew that the Malabar Caves would play a central role in the novel, that something important would surely happen there — it's just that he wasn't sure what it would be.





Control, apparently, is not the answer. People who need certainty in their lives are less likely to make art that is risky, subversive, complicated, iffy, suggestive or spontaneous. What's really needed is nothing more than a broad sense of what you are looking for, some strategy for how to find it, and an overriding willingness to embrace mistakes and surprises along the way. Simply put, making art is chancy — it doesn't mix well with predictability. Uncertainty is the essential, inevitable and all-pervasive companion to your desire to make art. And tolerance for uncertainty is the prerequisite to succeeding.