

**The Post-Art School Transition:**  
*A Journey Through Incompatible Worlds*

A Thesis in  
The Department of  
Art Education

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## **Abstract**

### **The post-art school transition:**

*A journey through incompatible worlds*

Andréanne Abbondanza-Bergeron

Through the combination of arts-based research and qualitative research, this thesis explores how artists react and adapt to the transition between art school and the professional art world. The research is done through a self-study and interviews with six young artists, recently graduated from university. The findings suggest that artists are social beings. They trained to be so at school in an environment that combines exchanges with peers, regularly-scheduled encounters, and available workspace. They then move to a professional art world, which they tend to approach with a pejorative view. The young artists also find themselves in a society where face-to-face contact and time for exchanges are less and less frequent.

The transition can therefore come as a shock and most find it difficult. Students who have a strong personal artistic practice or those who have a job connected to the milieu seem to have an easier time negotiating this transition. What is the hardest is the loss of one's network of colleagues, teachers, and friends. A real post-art-school shock can be identified when this transition is combined with moving to another city, which is often the case for students who return to their home city or move to another place after their studies.

This research suggests that an education more grounded in real life, with more information given on the career and business side of an art practice, as well as a focus on the development of a professional artistic practice, seems to be what could most improve the current art education curriculum.

The emotional experience of the transition is embodied in this thesis' arts-based component, the artwork *Disconversation II - Social Nest*, presented at The Centre des arts actuels Skol, Montreal, February 18, 2010.

## **Acknowledgements**

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And finally, thank you to all the participants in this research

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Photos and video stills by Andréanne Abbondanza-Bergeron, Fanny Abbondanza-

Bergeron, André M. Bergeron & Juan Alvarez

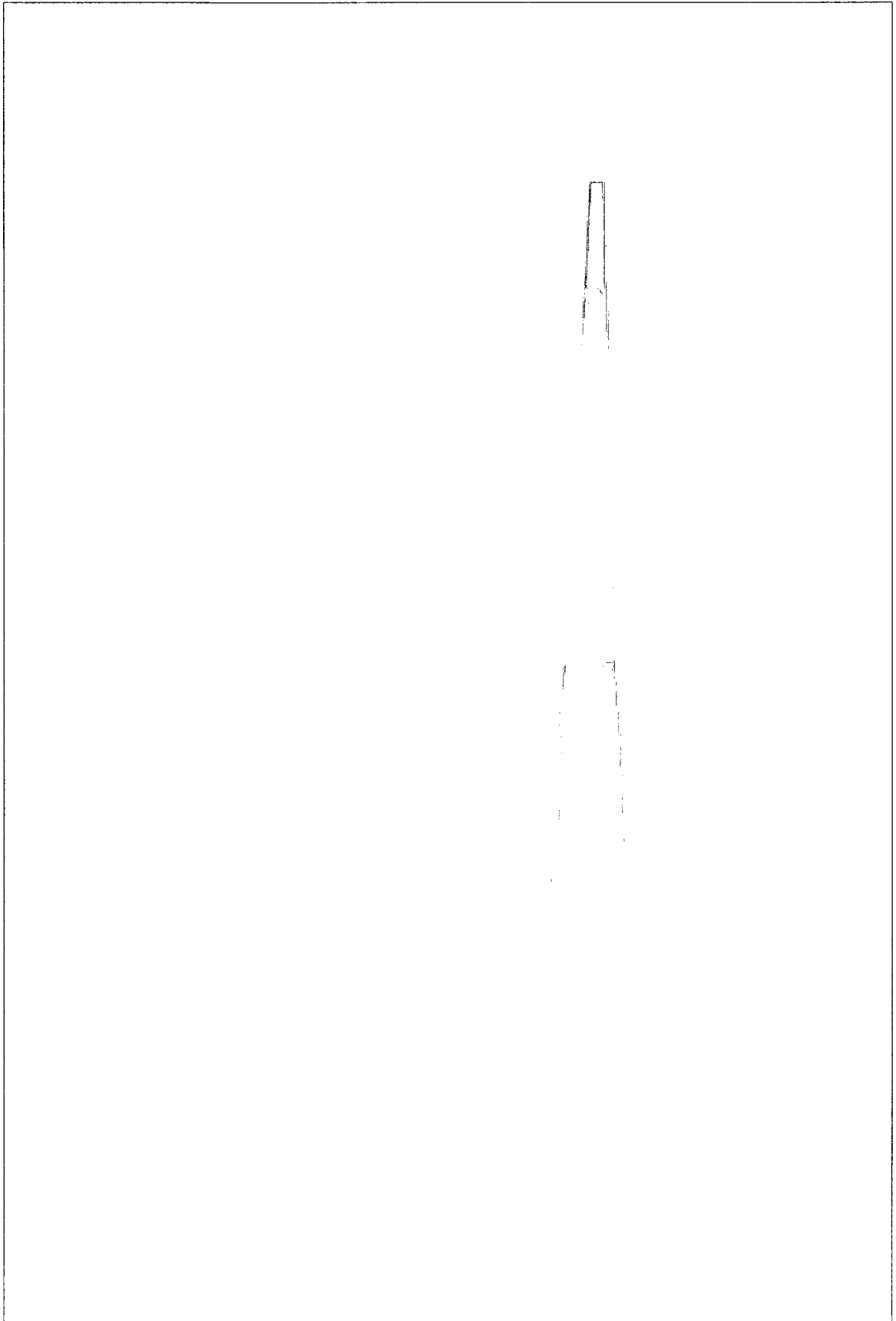
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## **Preface**

This thesis on the *The Post-Art School Transition* has been explored via two distinct approaches. The first part of this document will present the artwork that has been created, first as an exploration of the subject through self-observation, and finally in response to the thesis findings. The second part will present the results of the qualitative research that investigated fellow artists' perceptions on the transition between art school and the professional art world.



**Artwork**



## Artwork

How do artists react and adapt to the transition between art school and the professional art world? As the starting point to researching this question, I created an artwork exploring my own experience of this transition in order to better understand it, and therefore be more apt at subsequently investigating the subject with other participants in a qualitative research project



This artwork, *Disconversation I*, played with aspects of disconnection and the challenges of establishing a conversational encounter. Following the May 14, 2009 presentation of this version of *Disconversation* at Market Gallery in Glasgow, Scotland and the gathering of the data from the interviews and its analysis, the artwork evolved. Seeing that the main conclusion emerging from my findings was the social need of young artists for contact with others, I decided to present a second version of the work that would offer such a platform for exchanges.

Such was *Disconversation II - Social Nest*, presented at Skol, an artist-run center located in the Belgo Building in Montreal, on the evening of February 18th, 2010. The large scale, two-room installation included an on-going performative element during the two-hour presentation.

I situate my performance installations within the current trend of art practice described by theories of relational aesthetics and participatory art. Artists working in a manner akin to mine include Rirkrit Tiravanija (Bourriaud, 2002), as well as Canadian artists Sylvie Cotton (Cotton, 2010) and Devora Neumark (Neumark, 2007). Nicolas Bourriaud, author of *Relational Aesthetics*, describes:

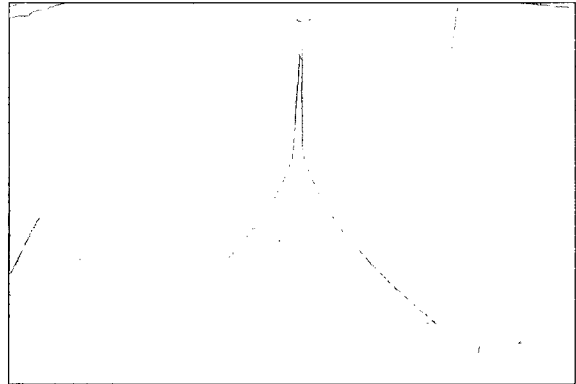
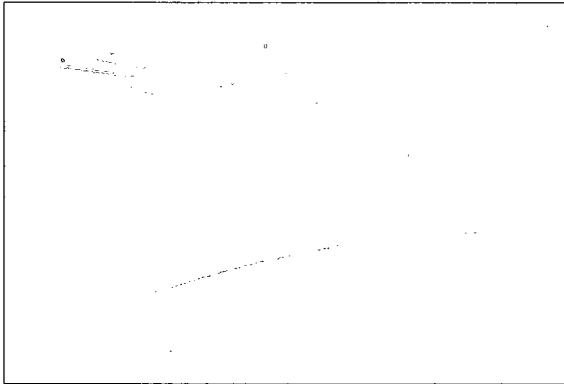
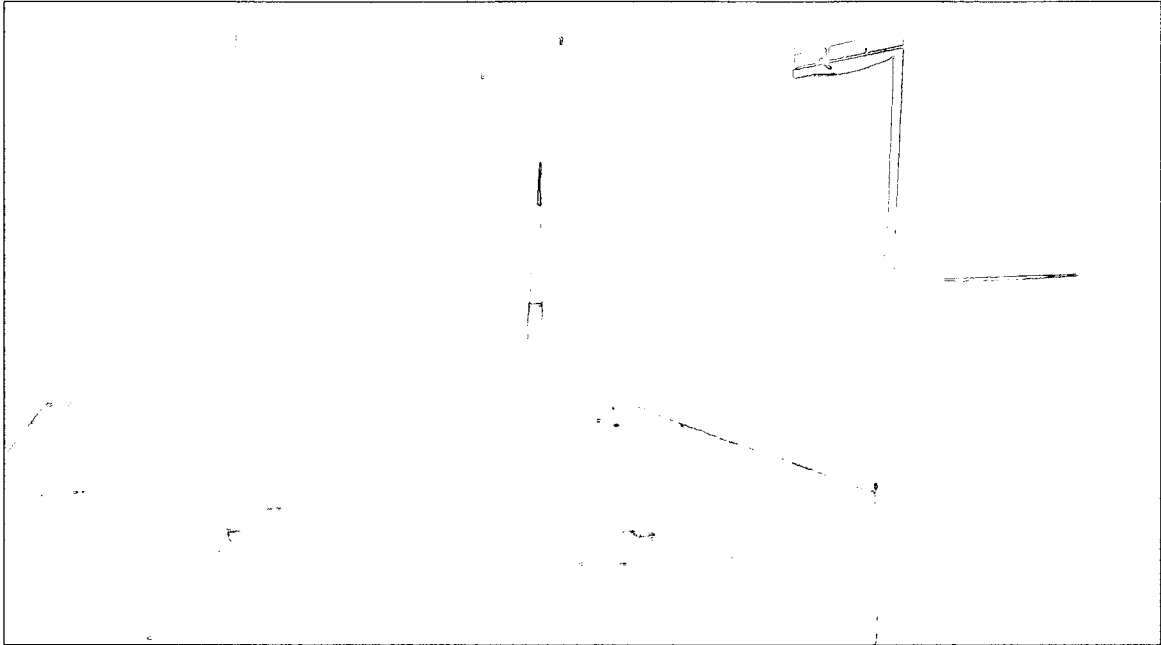
What [artists] produce are relational space-time elements, inter-human experiences trying to rid themselves of the straightjacket of the ideology of mass communications, in a way, of the places where alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality are worked out.

(Bourriaud, 2002, p.44)

Participatory art was the focus of a recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa entitled *Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer*, whose curator was Josée Drouin-Brisebois.

Whether immersive environments, sculptures that engage an embodied spectator or encounters that promote interaction with other viewers, all these works may be considered in relation to the recent interest in participatory art practices; which may stem from reactions to conservatism, to the disconnections felt between people and the growing influence of technology in the everyday. (Drouin-Brisebois, 2008, p.26)

*Disconversation II - Social Nest*, is represented here through images of the work and the text of the event hand-out, written by artist Owen Eric Wood.



## Disconversation II - Social Nest

*Text by Owen Eric Wood*

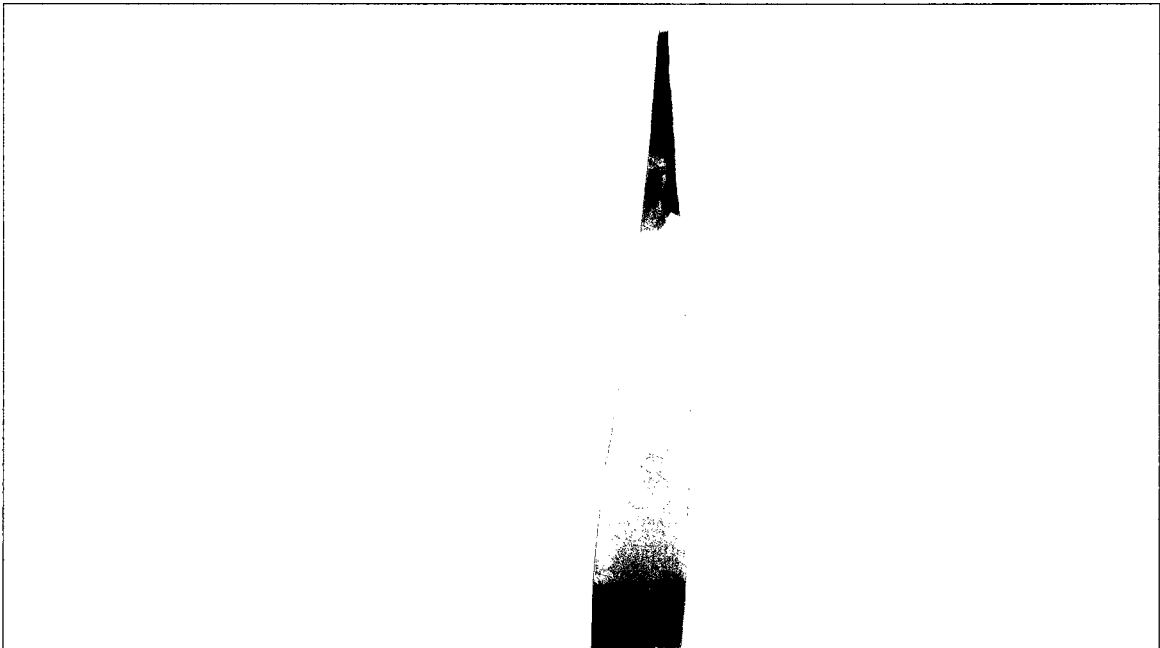
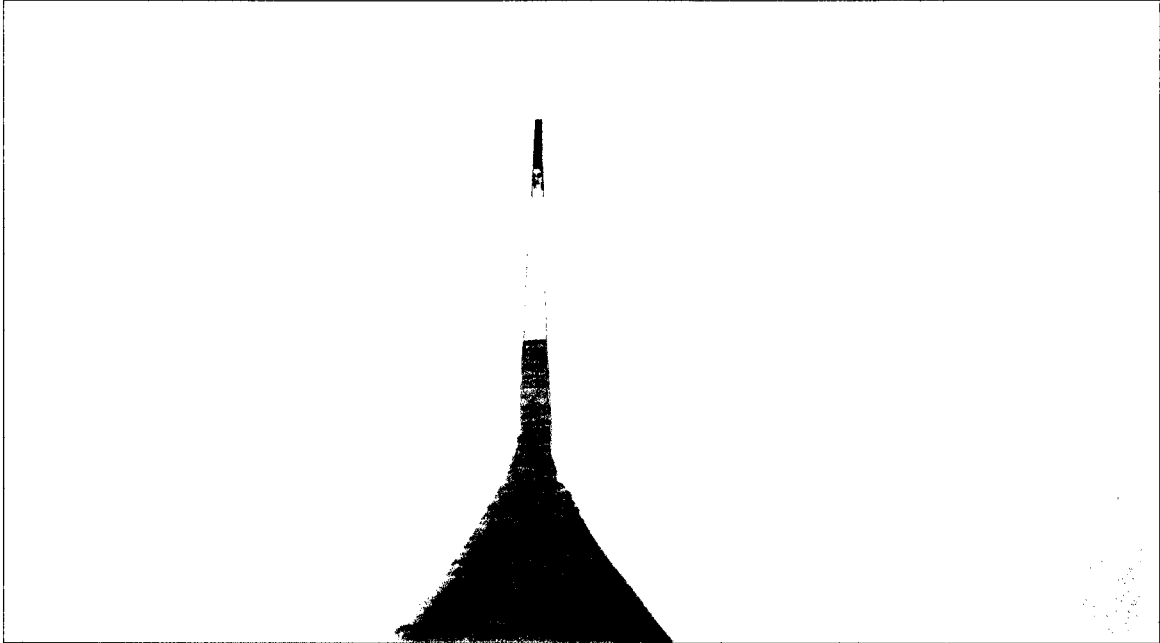
*Disconversation II - Social Nest* is a transitional experience where the gallery is divided into markedly different spaces. Dominated by a massive minimalist structure that slices through the room, the first space represents the artificially-segmented environment of art institutions, whereby the viewer and the art object are clearly defined. The viewer is set apart, left alone to contemplate the visual message being conveyed by the two curved walls before him. There is no hint as to the context of the piece, no description or artist statement, indeed no artist, to help understand the meaning.





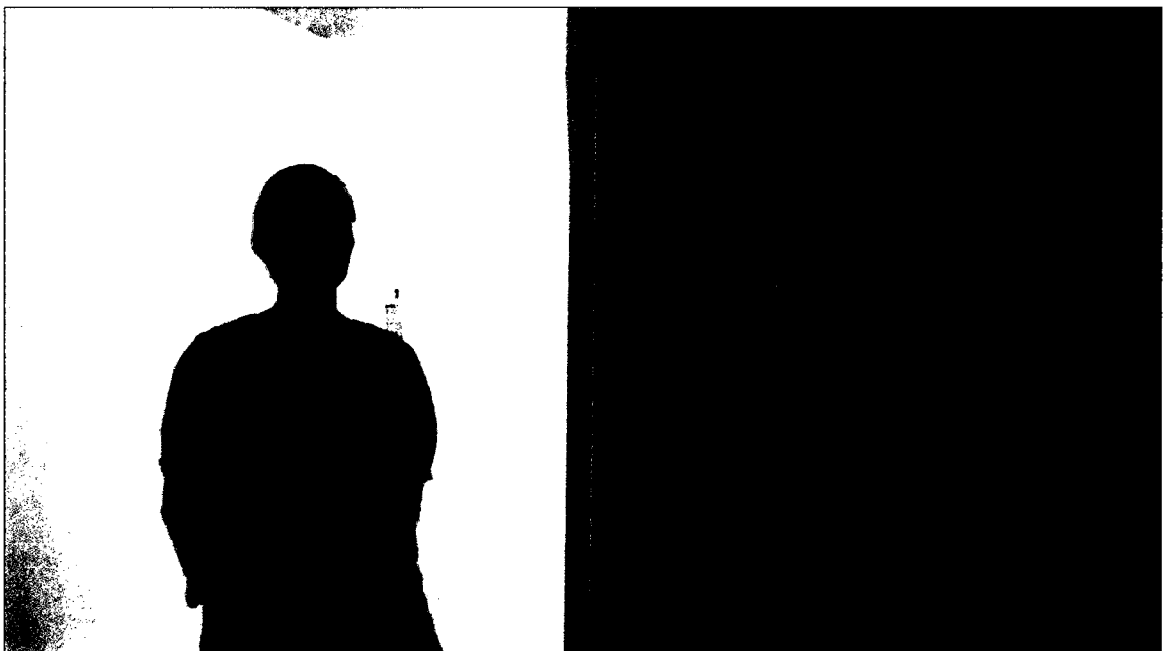
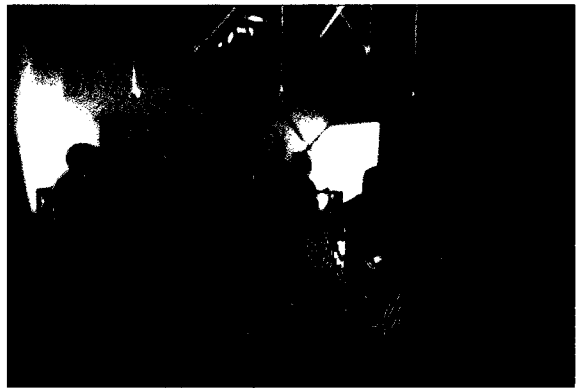
It is only when viewers realize that the form is actually a passage way into a second space that they are enlightened. In fact, it is this process of discovery in itself that is the piece. As viewers squeezed through the soft funnel created by fabric hanging from the ceiling, the artist greets them with a warm welcome, a friendly hand to help them find their way.





On the other side, they find themselves in an informal setting - a social nest - where the cold, isolating scene of the gallery space is replaced by a safe and secure shelter. As more and more people are drawn to the second space, the sound of their conversation becomes louder and their energy builds, attracting people in from the first space. However, as comforting as the space is, everyone must eventually leave, returning to the outside world.

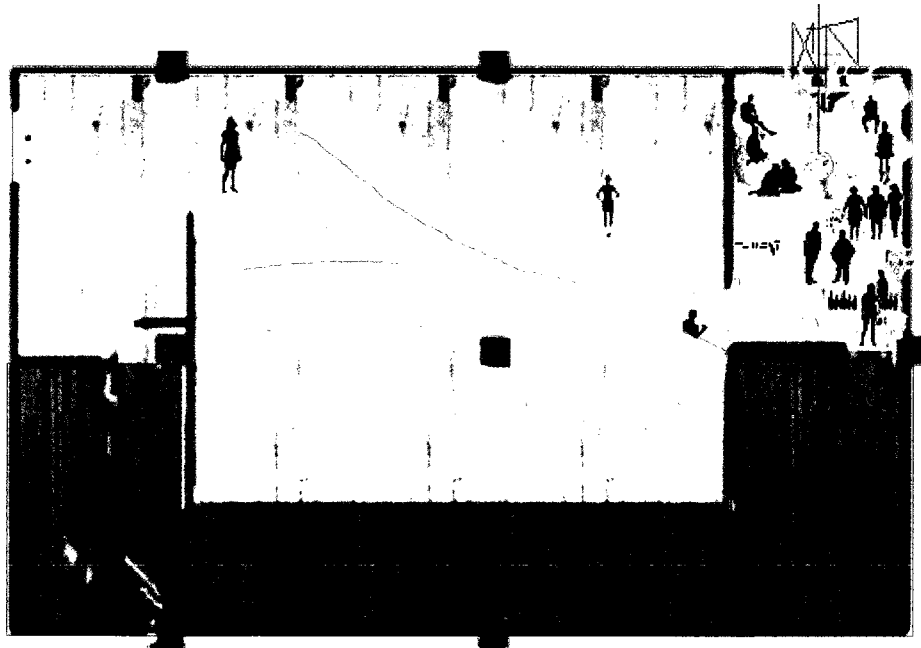






Andréanne Abbondanza-Bergeron's *Disconversation II - Social Nest* emphasizes the importance of the communal human exchange. Inspired by a comparison between the life during art school and after, when the art student must enter the "real" world, her piece touches on a much larger theme within society. When people gather, there is an exchange, and these relationships stimulate mental activity even if the connections last only momentarily. The energy of the collective grows exponentially.

The public reaction to Disconversation II - Social Nest was very much as I had envisioned. When the people entered the gallery, they faced a large sculptural element, made of two curved fabric panels extending across the entire room. There was an initial hesitation as viewers were unsure what to think of the piece. Then, when they became aware that there was more going on than a mere object to observe, the uncertainty shifted as viewers contemplated how to interact with it. Looking through the tight gap between the the fabric panels, they could catch a glimpse of a person (the artist) waiting in the entrance to a second space. Was the sculpture in fact a passageway? The approach taken by practically all participants was to first look on one side of the fabric wall and gradually walk along it, then go to the other side and do the same; finally, they would come back in the middle, see the artist, and hesitate before deciding whether or not they would dare go in. It took about 15 minutes for the first person to pass through.



*Preliminary sketch*

While the tension was felt in the gallery, people would ask in a whisper if they were allowed to enter and whether they should actually go in. After the first person walked in, the rest slowly trickled forward, some still with a lot of hesitation and caution even after they knew it was allowed.

Once I welcomed them to the small back room, people started talking, exchanging, often with new acquaintances. The position I took, apart from when I was letting people in, was to turn my back on the crowd, while at the same time closing the entrance by standing in the doorway. From that location, due to the lighting, I could see the silhouettes of all the visitors roaming from one side to the other of the larger gallery space before taking the plunge in, whereas they could only see white fabric, unless they pressed their nose against the fabric panels.

The crowd of about 20-25 people stayed in the small back room on average for one hour and a half, an extremely long time as mentioned by one of the visitors who said he had never spent so much time at an opening. Many were surprised to learn how much time had elapsed. A lot of comments were made spontaneously by participants about their experience. One mentioned that it was nice to spend a simple moment like this talking. Many recognized the dichotomy of the two separate spaces, the formal vs. the casual. Once the main crowd was in the small space, it took less time for newcomers to join in as they were attracted by the sound of conversation coming from inside.

What was unexpected for me was the position that I had created for myself. I was on the threshold of the transitional experience that I have been researching with this thesis. I felt exactly the same as when I had to finish my BFA, torn between the community, the people with whom I could converse with, with whom I was attached to. On the other side was the unknown, the large exterior world. The experience I created for myself was the exact opposite to the one experienced by the participants. Not having planned the ending of this performance in advance, it suddenly at that moment seemed quite clear what I had to do. I had to let them go and move forward into the unknown. Once I had a sense that the last visitor had arrived and I felt that the piece was now able to sustain itself on its own due to the intensity of the conversations, I slowly and discreetly made my way out toward the outside world. Anecdotally, I felt the need to quickly change my clothes (from my all-white costume to my regular street clothes) and rejoin the crowd immediately, literally (and maybe metaphorically) finding a back door back into this environment. I felt my own need to be in this social nest among the visitors, friends and peers.

**Research**

## Introduction

*An artist is by nature a social animal*

This is a bold statement at the beginning of this essay, but one that, following my thesis research, reflects the main conclusion that has emerged from my findings. I am of course borrowing Aristotle's quote, "Man is by nature a social animal." (Aristotle, Saunders, & MyiLibrary, 1995) The general stereotype would make one believe that an artist is an introverted solitary figure in his or her studio, this solitude necessary to the creation of his or her work. Or as stated by curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud: "The reigning ideology would have the artist be a loner, imagining him solitary and irredentist." (Bourriaud, 2002, p.81). What I found through my research is that one of the most important needs for young artists nowadays is the exchange with others.

This research started with a desire to explore the experience of young artists in the transitional period between art school and the professional art world. To first understand this transition, we must understand the setting. Therefore, I have, through literature, self-observation and interviews, traced a portrait of the **art school** and the **art world**, in present day **society**. The art school presents itself as a combination of community, time and workspace, where exchanges are frequent and convivial. The art world, in contrast, is perceived as a hermetic and formal place from which young artists feel somewhat disconnected. All of this takes place in today's society offering fewer

exchange opportunities and less time than in previous generations. It is a fast-paced environment where responsibilities add up.

Having set the stage, I will then examine in more detail the actual transitional experience to look at how artists react and adapt to the **transition** between art school and the professional art world. The observations for this essay come from my own personal experience, as well as from interviews done with six young artists who graduated during the last five years from art school (bachelor's or master's degree). All attended Concordia University or Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) (see methodology in Appendix II). This transition appears for many to be difficult: "Students are torn between incompatible worlds, whether they realize it or not." (Birnbaum, 2007, p.50). Some even experience what could be called a post-art-school shock. For a few, this transition was facilitated by certain adaptive strategies.

These **adaptation strategies** (what made it easier for certain students) will therefore be explored. After looking at those strategies, we will then be able to hypothesize a **missing link** in the current curriculum that could have better prepared these students to this transition. Finally, possible **improvements** will be proposed in order to offer concrete recommendations to this situation.



## Art School

For the purposes of this study, the 'art school' is understood as a university offering intensive studio-based studies supported by academic work in art theory and art history, at the Bachelor's or Master's levels (the Master's degree was until recently the terminal degree in studio arts). Both universities attended by the participants in this research offer a balance between studio practice and theoretical knowledge, and are not focused on vocational training. The graduate level emphasizes critical thinking and research on top of the student's studio production.

My interviews with six graduates enabled me to explore the art school's social environment and its contributions to students. During those interviews, three main points came out in almost every participant's answer to the question: What do you miss most about school? The first and main point is the contact with others, the community:

*C'est une réflexion au quotidien, c'est de présenter mon travail à des gens, même si c'est un travail qui est en cours, avoir des commentaires, avoir du feedback sur ce que je fais, puis être aussi placé dans dans un contexte où la performance est quand même importante, je trouve que ça l'a un côté très stimulant [...] faire des liens, développer des relations avec d'autres artistes, je trouve ça intéressant.*

(Interviewee 6)

These exchanges were often extending outside of school: "Notre gang en maîtrise on était assez dynamique puis assez en contact, on se voyait souvent après les cours, on

s'écrivait des courriels à chaque fois que quelqu'un avait des projets, [donc] j'étais assez impliqué dans le groupe de collègues." (Interviewee 4)

The interviewees also mentioned another aspects they missed about art school; time.

They emphasized the value of school's regular schedule:

Certain people that I met there, and that I had relationships with, and that I saw on a regular basis, and I think that is probably the thing that's important is seeing people on a regular basis. To see people every week and have that time whether you needed it or not to kind of interact and share ideas and stuff like that, so the regularity of it I miss. (Interviewee 2)

And finally, some interviewees mentioned the longing for the workspace and facilities that were available to them at school.

The main point mentioned by the interviewees - contact with others - is central to the art school education system. The training received at school is based on conversation and exchange. Architecture teacher Mark Wigley depicts well the functioning of an art studio classroom dynamic<sup>1</sup>:

Even though each student in the end submits and presents a project, it is a collective production where much of the impulse for the project is coming from the other members of the student group and from the teacher. In other words, the studio is a form of intelligence, in which students appear to produce projects, but

of course the project is being shaped also by the group, discussions of the group. So the studio is a good model for a kind of collective operation, which gives way to a singular name, singular signature. (Wigley, 2007, p.269)

As this description shows, the studio classroom is now organized around what Lori Kent (2005) calls the “culture of conversation.” We learn through discussions. This dialogue is further enriched by the intergenerational exchange also happening at school:

Different characters and generations (cannot but) relate to each other at the academy. Experience and knowledge, then, ought to be understood not as possessions and capital, but primarily as social relations. And the mission of the academy would be to produce experiences by provoking illuminating relations. (Verwoert, 2007, p.105)

This type of education affects most artists in Canada today since 84 per cent are trained at a university. A recent study on the socio-economic status of Canadian visual artists conducted in 2009 by the Art Gallery of York University found that “[v]isual artists are extremely well educated [. . .]. Over 84% have at least an undergraduate degree, and almost 45% have graduate degrees (compared to 23% and 7% of the total labour force, respectively). (Maranda, 2009, para. 10) In his book, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Howard Singerman observed that since the 1970s, art training at the university has boomed. It is now the norm for young artists to be educated at university (Singerman, 1999).

Certain settings and conditions seem particularly conducive to rich interactions and could have, in my opinion, something to do with the reputation certain schools develop as cradles for a multitude of successful artists. One such example is Goldsmiths in London, U.K. One teacher described this setting:

The golden period of Goldsmiths was when the people who became so successful there just had a chemistry between them. The school, for a very short time, was in a particular building in which you had the art library, all the studios, all the workshops, the bar, and the canteen. And I could come in in the morning, check in here, check in there, go up through the studios – and in fifteen minutes, I'd seen everything that every student had done in the school since the last time I was there. That was unbelievably useful, this kind of powerhouse of a place where everybody was rubbing up against everybody else. And that seemed to generate a certain kind of companionability. (Baldessari & Craig-Martin, 2009, p.43)

This concentration of exchanges has been studied by other researchers in the context of large cities and appears to correlate with creativity. They have found that the population density “correlate[s] with measures of innovation, as strangers interact with one another in unpredictable ways. It is the ‘concentration of social interactions’ that is largely responsible for urban creativity, according to the scientists.” (Lehrer, 2009, para. 30)

Transferring this to an art school context suggests that the more facilities are concentrated in the same space (without reducing the size of workspace), the more students have opportunities to meet, and the more creativity will be generated.

One essential ingredient seems to be the inclusion of social spaces for informal gatherings. Or as put by Daniel Birnbaum: “Food can be as important as philosophy: The best teaching may happen during meals. (A good canteen is helpful)” (Birnbaum, 2009, p.245) This is something I have personally experienced when my sculpture classes would extend for a few hours at a pub nearby, allowing the conversation to continue in new and interesting paths.

## Art World

Leaving art school, the young artist finds himself or herself in the 'professional' art world. My research aimed to discover how other artists perceive and describe that world. In his book titled *Art Worlds*, sociologist Howard Becker proposes a definition of this context:

Art world is commonly used by writers on the arts in a loose and metaphoric way, mostly to refer to the most fashionable people associated with those newsworthy objects and events that command astronomical prices. I have used the term in a more technical way, to denote the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for. (Becker, 1982, p.x)

When asked about the art world, the interviewees' definitions generally centered around the institutions where art is shown, the people that constitute the network around those institutions, and sometimes – but afterward – the artists creating the artworks. Only one started the definition around the artist, and later the network surrounding it: "Ce qui fait en sorte que tu puisses produire de l'art." (Interviewee 6)

One salient point that came out of the interviews was the judgmental and critical nature of the terms used to describe the art world: "false sense of elitism," "protectionism," "protect their own circles, protect their own cliques and their own interests," "what is

seen from the outside as an elitist, capital-driven, academic, pseudo-intellectual cult,” “discouraging, lot of bureaucracy, a lot of paper work, lot of superficiality, egos, people trying to climb the ladder, play the game, lots of rejections,” “inaccessible,” “milieu assez fermé,” “difficile...” (Interviewees 1,3,4,6)

The term “real world” was often used unconsciously, substituting for the term “art world” and setting up a distinction from the world of the art school. There was also an uncertainty about the boundaries and inclusion to that world. Most of the research participants were not sure if they could consider themselves part of the ‘professional’ art world. The sense of inclusion was often associated with exhibition records and shows being accepted – peer acceptance was therefore a pressure that could be felt. For the moment, most interviewees perceived the art world as a hermetic one.

However, on a more positive note, another point that came back in almost all of the interviews was the freedom that was gained once outside of the school context in order to work on one’s own projects: “La liberté qu’on prend dans une pratique est vraiment plus présente depuis que je ne suis plus à l’école.” (Interviewee 4) Similarly, another research participant suggested:

Ce qui s’est amélioré c’est la liberté, parce que à un moment donné, moi, réaliser des projets qui ne m’intéresse pas vraiment, avoir à travailler certains thèmes, oui des fois c’est intéressant de forcer la note puis de s’en aller dans telle direction, ça nous permet d’explorer certaines choses, mais à un moment donné c’est pas

ça qui me poussait le plus à travailler. J'avais besoin de liberté, j'avais besoin de faire des choses pour d'autres raisons. Je voulais que mon travail sorte de l'école.

(Interviewee 6)

While a characteristic not mentioned by the interviewees, some writers propose globalization as a key feature of the art world. The Internet greatly changes our network nowadays. The local scene is no longer the only one approachable for emerging artists, we are uprooted and our opportunities are as broad as the network is. In the essay compilation *Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century*, many authors address this issue.

Indeed, as the Internet continues to flatten time and space into a scan that erases the "horizon" (the classical metaphor of both spatial depth and temporal aspiration), young artists are faced with a deracinated landscape [a context in which they feel uprooted]. How to steady this mobile map, in which one's own presence - one's personhood – is without discernible evidence or locale?

(Lauterbach, 2009, p.89)

Compared to the limits of a single person, "the means that the collective uses are organizationally complex and specialized, beyond what any individual artist could manage." (Cotter, 2006, para.11) Faced with this, the young artist leaving school feels pretty small.



As Holland Cotter (2006) puts it in his New York Times' article The Collective Conscious, "Why does such a big deal look so small?" (para.1) This is a contradiction artists are faced with: even though the world seems small due to the speed and extent of digital communication technologies, it is made bigger since the artist is suddenly faced with an art world that spans the globe.

## Society

My own observation supports the truism that in our society face-to-face exchanges are becoming fewer and further between. We live in a fast-paced world, where interactions are happening more and more often through intermediate ways of communication – cell phones, e-mails, Internet, etc. We rarely take the time to sit down with someone and have a conversation. Filmmaker Werner Herzog has also observed this:

I see a rigorous correlation between the explosion of instruments of communication, cell phones, the Internet, virtual reality, and the amount of human solitude, existential solitude. I can't fully explain it, I can only observe it. More people are withdrawn, and they are incapable of real dialogue. The 21st century will be the century of solitude. (Groen, 2009, para.12)

This solitude greatly affects young artists, as my interviewees and I have all personally experienced. All participants mentioned that they had fewer exchanges with others once outside in the 'real world.' The exchanges were often more at a professional level, in a job context.

I keep in touch with [a] couple of other people that are continuing their art practice, but I do notice that when we do get together, because it's so minimal, it becomes almost kind of a how to survive in the art world bitching session for the first couple hours because when you have no one else to talk to about it you kinda

need to get that out of your system. Because we are not seeing each other on a regular basis you end up spending a lot of time on that. (Interviewee 2)

“I spend my life alone in my studio [...] I’m not nearly as social as I was at school.”  
(Interviewee 5)

At the same time, two of the participants mentioned ‘quality over quantity’ when it came to contact kept with colleagues (and friends): “although I’m interacting with fewer people those fewer people are higher quality.” (Interviewee 2)

Interviewees often mentioned post-graduation obligations and responsibilities as a cause of reduced exchanges with others. These were described as “certainly less. Life has a way of taking over when you have responsibilities in the real world.” (Interviewee 1) “My time is really limited, I have a full-time job [...] my evenings are always taken up by family responsibilities, I go to less events and I spend less time making work.”  
(Interviewee 3)

The responsibilities here are also combined with a perception widely spread in our capitalist society that an occupation that does not achieve a monetary gain – which is often the case for the practice of young emerging artists – is not a priority. This leads to “[...] the devaluation of work as a non-economic value, to which no development of free time corresponds.” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.84) Not only is the young artist struggling with the most difficult economic part of his or her artistic career and a feeling of isolation

due to the departure from the academic community, but his or her occupation as an artist is also generally perceived as non-profitable financially, and therefore not useful. It is in this context that the young artist begins his transition between art school and the professional art world.

## **Transition**

The starting point of the research was my personal experience of transitioning between the art school environment and the looming, unknown art world. Finishing my BFA in Studio Arts at Concordia University, I felt panic. I was unprepared and clueless as to how to approach the professional art world. I was unsure as to how to face this global network, but most of all, I was afraid of losing the context for discussions and feedback I was receiving from my colleagues and professors in the studio classroom. This conversation context was also the place where most of the ideas for my art making emerged. My ideas came during class, fueled more by the mix of a multitude of ideas than by the topic of the discussion itself.

When asked if they were ready to leave school, the majority of the interviewees said yes, some even couldn't wait to get out. But was the transition easy or hard? For almost everyone, it was hard. It seemed easier for those who had done a Master's degree, and therefore had already had one transitional experience and had more experience as an artist in terms of their own practice and exhibition experience.

The transition this time around has been easier because after doing a second degree I feel much more confident that I'm doing the right thing and I have a lot more tools at hand, not physical tool but kind of professional, mental, philosophical tools for developing my career. (interviewee 3)

It also seemed easier for the few who had a job related to the art milieu, and for those who had developed their own personal artistic practice (work ethic, discipline, etc.), independent from the school context. Some took it philosophically, not expecting the transition to be easy:

I wouldn't say it was easy, and I think I'm still doing it, but I didn't expect it to be easy, the transition between an academic institution and the real world is such that you have to realize that the world, the real world, is really different and if you are going to survive in it then one of the main things you have to do is work as an independent artist because you don't have teachers giving you deadlines, you don't have a grading system that is suppose to give you some sort of grading system of your work; in the real world that doesn't apply. Getting As and Bs is meaningless. For me it has been hard but I've been prepared for it. (Interviewee 2)

What was the hardest – for others as it was for me – was losing the network of peers, friends, instructors, as well as losing the workspace and facilities. The interviewees who had not developed their own personal artistic practice (in contrast with work tailored and fueled by class assignments) had a harder time. Where a real shock can be identified is when this transition coincided with the move to another city after art school:

Certainly you know one of the things that happens with schooling is sometimes you go to other cities to do your schooling and then you return home or you return to another city or you take another opportunity and then you kind of start over fresh. That was my experience coming from my undergraduate studies out

west, coming home and being alone and having to try and integrate, trying to get involved, trying to participate. (Interviewee 1)

Another interviewee that had to live through this double transition – moving and leaving school – even mentioned depression:

I found life outside of art school gray and boring and I couldn't talk to anybody and I became massively depressed and had a really hard time. [...] I was used to being in a place where I had hundreds of other art students around me and people who wanted to go for a beer and talk about what you're doing and really be able to use each other's ideas and their encouragement to keep sane and without that I felt weird. [...] so I got depressed and my art practice became really private.

(Interviewee 5)

Studying in another city is frequent for many artists today. Many of my colleagues from school were not originally from Montreal and many left after their degree, possibly going through a post-art-school shock of their own and struggling to develop strategies in order to cope with the transition.

## **Adaptation Strategies**

As seen in the previous section, there are some strategies taken by participants that seem to ease the transition from art school to the professional art world. Two main points stand out: developing a personal professional artistic practice and having a job related to the field.

A personal artistic practice can be understood here as a professional practice method, a discipline, a continuity of one's practice that is regular, personalized, and for one's self – in comparison to work done for class assignments. The methods used vary from one person to another.

I made it a point [...] to at least dedicate, seriously dedicate one day, to [my] art practice. That meant, take the day, go and see shows, take the day, go make art, take the day, stay at home and research stuff, just one day being selfish and working on your own stuff and your own interest and that was my survival technique when I first got out of undergrad. (Interviewee 1)

J'ai toujours, toujours gardé un travail sur mes cahiers de dessins vraiment très vivant c'est quelque chose qui m'a aidé à continuer puis à me sentir toujours dans le milieu même si au quotidien j'étais pas très en contact avec les gens du milieu puis avec des espaces puis je faisais pas toujours des projets, mais j'étais toujours en train d'écrire, j'étais toujours en train de dessiner. Je voyais ça comme me donner du travail pour plus tard. (Interviewee 6)



Those who seemed to have the easiest transition were those who had already started to develop this practice during their school years:

I think the main thing I did to prepare for the real world is that when I was in school I never did anything just half-assed. Every project I did was different for every different class and I pushed myself forward and I created my own set of standards for myself to meet because I knew at that time that the standards inside of school do not relate to standards in the real world [...] when I was in school I pushed myself to make my work meet a professional standard and said: could this show in a real gallery or am I doing something half ass to pass the class? Passing was never enough for me. I wanted to do more than what I was expected.  
(Interviewee 2)

The interviewees who did not develop their personal practice now have to do this in order to pursue their artistic careers, something that adds to the toll of the transition. One mentioned having to “*déscolariser [sa] pratique.*” (Interviewee 4)

Having a job related to the arts, whether it’s teaching, working for an exhibition center, or serving as an artist’s assistant, seems also to help the transition because it creates an opportunity for exchanges and a constant contact with the field. “Teaching was a nice opportunity also, because then it really gave me practice at exercising the skill that I had and knowledge that I had and share it.” (Interviewee 1) One suggested that choosing a teaching career could allow her to minimize or bypass the problem of

transition: "I realize that I need to do what I can to stay in art school for the rest of my life so I'm going to my masters and do my PhD if I can and I'd love to be a prof."

(Interviewee 5)

Looking at a career as an art educator has certainly been one of my own strategies in order to work in close proximity with the dynamic population found in art schools.

Some other strategies that I took to adapt to the transition was to seek networks, groups and collectives, information through conferences, panels, or books, register for email mailing lists of events and calls for applications, become a member at an artist-run center, etc. Participants have adopted some of these strategies as well. Specific strategies mentioned included: being a member of the "Quebec craft council, galleries, small art groups," "artists association," "Quebec illustrators coop," "online communities," "Vidéographe, an artist-run center," "networking; reading; building a website; going to openings," attending "workshops" (accounting, running a small business), etc.

(Interviewee 1,2,3,5)

## Missing Link

If we look at the transitional experience of the artists interviewed, we see it was a difficult one. Therefore, something is missing from their preparation in order to face this transition. When asked the question: In art school, did you learn how to sustain yourself as an artist, both creatively and professionally? All interviewees were unanimous: creatively yes, professionally no.

The lack of education grounded in real-life experiences seems to be what most of them felt was lacking. One participant mentioned that academia is equal to a theoretical world. "There is a big difference between reading about something and practicing something and actually applying it to a real-life scenario." (Interviewee 2) He is not the only one. This came up several times during the interviews, as a fundamental questioning of our present approach to and experience of art education. Similarly, in the book *Art School: Proposition for the 21st Century*, author Bory Groys observed this reality:

Now, as ever before, education suspends the student in an environment that is meant to isolate him or her, to be exclusively a site of learning and analysis, of experimentation exempted from the urgencies of the outside world. Paradoxically, the goal of this isolation is precisely to prepare students for life outside the school, for 'real life.' (Groys, 2009, p.27)

What is it then that students wish they had been able to learn at school? On this point, many of the answers differed, but they all centered on professional tools, such as “basic tools of networking and grant writing and how to do your taxes [...] tools to help artists to have self-sustainable careers.” (Interviewee 3) Others pointed to copyright, budget, promotion, pricing, representation by a gallery, etc. In my experience, it seems that the BFA program rarely included such topics, unless it was part of a special, extra-curriculum conference organized at school. I felt that using the words ‘business of art’ or even ‘professional career’ was taboo. This knowledge is necessary in order for artists to develop an all-encompassing professional practice. Without this information, we were left to blindly find our way in order to comprehend and deal with the complex network and the business side of the art world. There is a certain amount of information that is not being passed on in school that could be useful to young artists. “I spent six years in art school in this city and I don’t know most of the galleries around here which is sort of embarrassing. I should. It’s shameful.” (Interviewee 5) Even though it could be argued that students should take the initiative to get to know their milieu, is it not also partly the school’s responsibility to show them the way?

In terms of courses offered on these subject, Concordia University has one undergraduate class, ARTT 399B: Body, Arts, & the State, that focuses on the socio-institutional presentation of the art world and a practical grant writing exercise. At UQAM, two end-of-study undergraduate courses, AVM5700 and AVM5701 focus on creating an exhibition, one as a group, the other individually. (see Appendix I for course

descriptions) This list does not of course include teachers' initiatives in their classes to cover some of this material with their students.

Even though interviewees all mentioned they felt prepared creatively by school, there is a notable difference in terms of transitional adaptation between those who had developed a personal artistic practice and those who had not. Artist and art educator Paul Ramirez-Jonas denounces that "[w]hat doesn't really ever get discussed [at school] is how to develop a creative practice." (Madoff (Eds.), 2009, p.317) This seems to be another missing element in the education of certain young artists. One interviewee noticed that:

Some [students] had a real false sense of their own worthiness in some ways, they'd been built up to believe that they were doing this great stuff and some of them flew, pretty good and lot of them fell. Lots of them had a real hard time because, they might have been hot shit at school but when they got out they realized they didn't have either the skills or the ambitions to keep going.  
(Interviewee 1)

This situation is not particular to the arts; it also touches other fields of study. Transition between school and the work place is a major issue and has been looked at with respect to a variety of fields. However, most research focuses on the time it takes for graduates to find their first job as the success criteria, such as studies by Statistics Canada (Gluszynski & Shaienks, 2009). This very straightforward road to a single 'job' is not the path usually taken by art school graduates nor necessarily an indication

of success. A conversation on the subject with a clinical psychologist revealed many similarities between the experiences lived by both psychology and art graduates in the sense that they are both self-employed professionals once outside the school. And even though a psychology student thoroughly learns the field and how to work with clients, the fact remains that once outside school, other skills are needed in terms of setting up an office, doing taxes, generating publicity, etc; things that are not necessarily taught during university studies. (A.M. Bergeron, Ph.D., personal communication) One interviewee mentioned a commonly recited anecdote of the Canadian art world, that only one in ten art school grads still considers him- or herself a practicing artist 10 years after graduation, although a specific, current study confirming this information has yet to be found. Still, the suggestion is that maintaining a professional practice is very challenging. What, therefore, can be done to improved the situation?

## **Possible improvements**

Various improvement suggestions were brought up by participants, and are presented here alongside interesting teaching examples from art educators in North American and European contexts.

One fact that was stated by one of the interviewees is: “Just because you go to art school doesn’t mean that you are going to or that you want to or even that you should become a professional artist afterwards.” (Interviewee 2) This is a reality that needs to be taken into consideration in curriculum planning. The education needs to suit all sorts of students who will not all take the same road afterwards. More than one interviewee stated that they “firmly believe that we make our education our own.” (Interviewee 1)

Art school is such that you have to figure out what you want to get out of it and then you have to figure out how to get what you want out of it, because nobody is just going to hand you anything, nobody can know what you need to get out of it, you have to be independent in that part of the education. (Interviewee 2)

This way of thinking is shared by other art educators, such as Tobias Rehberger:

The first thing you have to teach beginning students is what the school can offer them, as well as what it can’t offer and what it shouldn’t offer. [...] In the end you have to make them understand that they have to find out for themselves.

(ElDahab, 2007, p.137)

However, I believe it is the task of art educators to help students in this reflection, and once they know what they want, to help them achieve their goals. Even if it takes more time, individual meetings with students during class time could be one way to do this. The main missing content from school identified during the interviews was the lack of grounding of assignments in 'real-life' contexts. Therefore, the participants felt that the content of classes should be more grounded in real-life experiences:

Ça serait d'inclure certaines activités qui sont en dehors de l'école mais dans les cours, que ce soit plus facile d'intégrer, même si c'est un travail très élémentaire ou quoi que ce soit, de mieux intégrer ça à la production ou au contexte académique. Ça serait de faire en sorte que les élèves soient à la fois plongés dans un milieu, dans un contexte de création autonome, mais à la fois en étant à l'école et en étant supportés, je pense que ce serait de faciliter un peu cette espèce d'hybridation entre la vie en général et puis la création et le système académique. La frontière qu'elle soit plus flexible, poreuse. (Interviewee 6)

One concrete example suggested by three of the participants is the inclusion of an art exhibition in a professional context as part of the curriculum. This experience would give students skills that they would need in order to prepare an exhibition, but also help them develop a network that extends outside the school context. As mentioned before, this type of class is offered at UQAM (see course description in Appendix I):

Je pense que ça [organiser des expositions dans le cadre d'un cours, mais à l'extérieur de l'école] peut préparer des étudiants, ça les prépare à monter une exposition autant au point de vue technique que logistique, préparer sa



communication, préparer la diffusion du projet, préparer l'installation tout ça, mais aussi ça aide à créer un réseau de contact qui est à l'extérieur de l'école.

(Interviewee 4)

If everyone had to have a show somewhere and they had to go out and find a venue and they had to go out and install their work and curate a show and have a vernissage [...] because then we'd talk about it and we'd network with that in mind and we'd learn about the venues in the area. We just never talked about that in class. (Interviewee 5)

This is a view shared by other art educators, specifically Willem de Rooij and Simon Starling, teachers at the Städelschule Fine Arts academy in Frankfurt, Germany:

[...] it's important for students to experience what it is like to show their work outside the studio. I think a work is not finished until it is presented and I consider a focus on exhibition practice a vital part of any art school's curriculum. (de Rooij & Starling, 2007, p.201)

If we think back to the vision of the professional art world, it was viewed as hermetic, closed; there was distrust, and a sense of non-belonging towards it. However, an early inclusion in this world could help students understand it by observing it first hand, rather than merely in theory alone. Better understanding the milieu may also help students make contacts and could eventually lead to employment opportunities that would ease the transitional experience. Of course, finding exhibition venues is not an easy task and flooding these institutions with individual art student's solo shows might

be problematic. Group shows could be a good compromise. One could argue that the mere attempt to have a show (to put together a portfolio, to write an artist statement, to research venues, and to actually go through the application process even if rejection is the outcome) whether every student succeeds or not at mounting a show is not as important as having the skills to try to do it.

Another point mentioned by the interviewees was the lack of information given at school pertaining to the business side of art, the professional career tools. However, this information is needed by students, who both ask for it and appreciate it:

I had one teacher, one prof, who sat down and explained to us, gave us the list of people who will give you grants and how to write a proposal and how to present yourself as an artist and it was the most useful thing that I learned at art school.

(Interviewee 5)

This example shows that little time seems needed in order to make a change in a student's education, therefore this content does not necessarily need to be in competition with the artistic content of the class.

Another task I see for art education in order to prepare students better is to help them develop a personal artistic practice, independent from school assignments. It is of course not something that can be taught using one model for all. But by sharing their own personal strategies, teachers could propose various examples. The following tactic is used by Dennis Adams, teacher at the Cooper Union art school in New York:

I spend a lot of time talking with my students about artistic doubt and how it can be used in productive ways. Two things that I think are common to most artists are flashes of wild artistic ego and its sudden falloff into doubt and regret. This can be especially crippling for younger artists, who sometimes don't know how to negotiate those highs and lows that are very much a part of what we do as artists.

(Adams, Bos and Haacke, 2009, p.262)

By doing this, not only is the teacher helping students define what kind of skill and preparation they should get from school, but also give concrete examples on how to apply this knowledge on their own later on. These testimonies would also cover various types of practices, from artists represented by commercial galleries to ones that present experimental-based works in alternative spaces, giving students a palette of stories to learn from as broad as the number of teachers they will have. Of course, in order to serve as an example for their students, teachers would need to have a professional practice of their own.

Finally, once outside school, there are other solutions that could help adapt to the transition. A job related to the field is one that has been mentioned already. Another one is to recreate the setting apt to the convergence of workspace, time, and conversation by setting up a studio space shared by many artists; a strategy took by artist Dana Schutz, a New York based painter, at the end of her studies:

After school I moved into a studio building with a group of friends from school.

We really helped each other in terms of building out our studios, sharing resources

and information. Also, having feedback in the studio was so valuable, just having someone there to say, 'No, you are not crazy.' (Madoff (Eds.), 2009, p.295)

All of these improvements could help with the difficult transition students have to face.

## **Conclusion**

How do artists react and adapt to the transition between art school and the professional art world?

Artists are social beings. They are trained this way at school in an environment that maximizes exchanges with peers, that is timed by encounters on a regular basis, with available workspace. They then move into a professional art world they generally tend to approach with a pejorative view. The young artists also find themselves in a society where face-to-face contact and time for exchanges are less and less common.

The transition can therefore come as a shock and most find it hard. Students who have a strong personal artistic practice that they were able to develop during their school years, or those who have a job connected to the milieu, seem to have an easier time negotiating this transition. What is the most difficult is the loss one's network of colleagues, teachers, and friends. A real post-art-school shock can be identified when this transition is combined with moving to another city, which is often the case for student going to study elsewhere.

If students are not prepared for the transition between art school and the art world, what is missing from their education? There seems to be a lack of education grounded in real-life experiences as well as not enough information given on the career and

business sides of an art practice. The question of how to develop a personal professional artistic practice also needs more attention.

What, therefore, can be done? As art educators, we can help students define what they want to get out of school, how to get it, and afterwards help them develop their own personal artistic practice independent from the school, by sharing one's own personal strategies and offering possible examples to our students. We could ground more class's material in real-life experiences, for example, organizing the class around the actual presentation of an exhibition in a context out of school, like what is being done in certain courses. More information could be given on how to develop self-sustainable artistic careers once outside school by talking about things such as grant and application writing, copyright, contracts, etc. Such courses are more often given in professional schools where physiotherapists, psychologists and the like are trained.

Inside and outside the school context, young artists should focus on developing their own personal artistic practice. In order to help them in the transition, they could try to find jobs that are related to the field. They could also group together in order to share studio spaces and therefore keep in regular contact with peers and to share resources.

Seeing that facilities and possibilities for contacts are a big issue, cultural organizations could offer studio spaces that would provide a certain in-between platform for students to begin the process of becoming professional artists, combining technical resources, cheap studio rentals, and a fertile ground for idea exchanges so needed by artists today.

In the end, it seems that students who really want to pursue their career in art will go and get the tools they need. What art school can do is make those tools known and available to those students during their training years. "The school is a temporary space, intended to give young artists the theoretical and practical tools to navigate an ever-changing now themselves. In the end, that capacity to navigate on one's own is what it's all about." (Birnbaum, 2007, p.50) Art educators can help by preparing their students for this world, but in the end, the students might need to be kicked out of the nest in order to find their own wings.

As a young artist in the middle of the transition between art school and the professional art world, this research, both through the artwork and the written paper, has helped me better understand where I am in the middle of this difficult transition. Through the work of creation, research and reflection, I feel more in command of tools needed to better deal with the situation. This personal experience will later be of use for me as an art educator in order to better prepare my students to go through the same transition they will have to take in their turn. I hope the elaboration of this research through my performance installation and this text may also be useful to emerging artists negotiating their own transitions, or art educators facilitating those of their students.





## Endnotes

- [1] Wigley refers here to art education in Germany, different from the general North American approach, e.g. the diploma model in Germany vs. the BFA-MFA model in Canada. The German 'Diplom' is a degree comparable to a Bachelor's and a Master's degree combined where the student is followed by one main teacher for the entire length of their studies. However, both kinds of experience and class dynamics are similar.

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## Appendix I - Course Descriptions

### UQAM

- AVM5700 Projet de fin d'études (12 cr.)

Les objectifs de ce cours sont les suivants: concevoir et réaliser un projet de synthèse centré sur une problématique personnelle; intégrer ses savoirs théoriques et pratiques à son projet esthétique; exposer, soutenir et discuter les idées qui fondent sa pratique; développer des activités d'écriture; planifier et réaliser collectivement une présentation publique du travail de création.

Réalisation de projets personnels, de leur conception à leur présentation publique. Activité d'écriture qui s'élabore autour de la démarche, de la présentation du travail et d'un texte de synthèse. Séminaire théorique: méthodologie de conduite de projet(s), problématiques artistiques et les différentes formes d'insertion de l'oeuvre dans le milieu.

- AVM5701 Activité de synthèse (6 cr.)

Les objectifs de ce cours sont les suivants: concevoir et réaliser un projet de synthèse centré sur une problématique personnelle; intégrer ses savoirs théoriques et pratiques à son projet esthétique; exposer, soutenir et discuter les idées qui fondent sa pratique; développer des activités d'écriture.

Réalisation de projets personnels. Activité d'écriture qui s'élabore autour de la démarche, de la présentation du travail et d'un texte de synthèse. Séminaire théorique: méthodologie de conduite de projet(s), problématiques artistiques et les différentes formes d'insertion de l'oeuvre dans le milieu.

## Concordia

- ARTT 399B | Body, Arts, & the State : Section Two 2010

### COURSE OUTLINE: 2nd TERM

Some 15 years ago the Department of Studio Arts established the 6 credit course **ART 499 Professional Practices for Artists**. This course was designed to provide students with a good grounding in a number of the standard, career base knowledge sets they require to facilitate their career as working “Professional” artists. However, notwithstanding the importance of skills such as grant writing, portfolio preparation, or the proper formatting of a CV, it was later realized by the faculty that the content of the course had to be substantially upgraded to reflect the social complexity of the art world that had emerged during the post-1960’s era in Canada, Québec, and the art world at large. Consequently, the course renamed *The Body, Arts, & the State* to reflect a some of complexity of the philosophical, historical, and socioinstitutional issues that bracket professional practices like grant writing. As the teacher of the 2nd term I have established three objectives for this section of the course,

1. Provide an introductory grounding in the history into some of the practices that form what the American sociologist Howard Becker, named in his 1984 monograph “Art Worlds,” the “art world.”
2. Provide an introduction to the *present* socio-institutional context of the art world.
3. Provide an intensive, working experience of grant writing. In particular, the writing of the most difficult of grants presently available to artist’s today – the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council* (SSHRC) and, its provincial counterpart, the *Fonds québécois de La recherche sur la Société et la culture* (FQRSC).

## Appendix II - Methodology

This studio-based thesis uses a combination of arts-informed research and qualitative research to explore the research question: how do artists react and adapt to the transition between art school and the professional art world?

The arts-informed research is done through a self-study approach (Sullivan, 2006) (Piantanida et al., 2003). This method uses “art as a mode of self-exploration” (Piantanida et al., 2003, p.188). “Arts-informed research brings together the systematic and rigorous qualities of scientific inquiry with the artistic and imaginative qualities of the arts.” (Sullivan, 2006, p.25). The second part is a qualitative research that explores participants’ experiences through multiple case studies using interviews. (La Pierre, S. D., & Zimmerman, E., 1997) The methods used are taken from the field-oriented book: *Research methods and methodologies for art education*.

*Participants.* The participants in this exploratory qualitative study are six artists recently graduated from an university art school: three recently graduated from a Bachelor’s degree program; three recently graduated from a Master’s. For the purpose of this research, the participants are limited to those who have graduated or left school within the last five years. They studied either at Concordia University or UQAM.

*Interview.* A semi-structured interview was prepared based on my personal experience and the literature already cited and explored whether a similar post-art-school shock was experienced, and the solutions that were found by the participants to adapt to the transition. Three reasons were hypothesized as the source for my own reaction to the transition. These were compared to participants’ answers to see if they identified those same reasons – a) the conversational focus of the studio classroom at the institution; b) the globalization of the art world; c) the loss of face-to-face communication – and if they identified others. The alternatives found by the interviewees have also been compared to see if they match those I have found – to seek networks, groups and collectives, and find information through books and conferences – and if new ones were found. The semi-structured interview also explored the participants’ views and connections to the art world and their opinions on curriculum changes to help the adaptation of students in the transition from art school to the professional art world.



*Procedure.* The participants were contacted from a pool of Concordia and UQAM alumni. The same researcher interviewed each artist individually, using the same interview framework. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed (the transcriptions found in the essay are direct translations with no modification or editing unless specified). Immediately after each interview, the researcher took down notes that could complete the recorded information.

*Analysis.* Once all the interviews were conducted, the answers were compared to my own experience and the literature on the following points:

- Transition to life after art school (for instance, did the graduates experience post-art school shock)
  
- Reasons that affected the transition
  - o Does it match the three reasons
    - a) the conversational focus of the studio classroom at the institution
    - b) the globalization of the art world
    - c) the loss of face-to-face communication
  - o Other reasons identified
  
- Interviewees' adaptation strategies
  - o Do they match the alternative of the researcher – to seek networks, groups, collectives, and information.
  - o New strategies that were found.
  
- Views on the training given at school and opinions on curriculum changes to help the adaptation of the students' transition from art school to the professional art world.

*Results.* Results allow us to see whether the experiences are similar to the researcher's, and therefore whether the reasons and alternatives hypothesized have been confirmed by the participants in the study. They allow us to see if some of the reasons or alternatives seem more important than others. They also allow us to explore other reasons or alternatives invoked. Finally, they make it possible to examine the participants' views for an improved curriculum.

*Conclusions.* From these findings, a conclusion was extracted in order to attempt to illustrate the transition of artists from art school to the professional art world and possible improvements to ease the transition to the professional art world.

## Appendix III - Questionnaire

- When I use the term 'art world,' what comes to mind?
- What constitutes your art world and your connections to this world?
- How did you experience the transition between art school and the professional art world? Was it easy or hard?
- What actions and solutions did you take to adapt to the transition?
- How do you find the professional art world?
- In art school, did you learn how to sustain yourself as an artist, both creatively and professionally?
- Did you feel prepared to be an artist when you graduated?
- Did you feel ready to leave school?
- What do you miss most about school?
- What did you find was lacking, or improved once you were out of school?
- How did you interact with others inside school?
- How do you interact with others outside school?
- Are you part of any networks, groups, collectives, or other?
- Are you exchanging with others less, more, or the same as when you were at school?
- Is your art-making process influenced by interactions with others?
- What are your career goals?
- What are you presently doing as an occupation?
- What do you think could be improved in the art education curriculum in order to better prepare students to the transition from art school to the professional art world?