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New M.F.A. Programs Focus on Art in the Public Realm

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Art is no easy thing to define, but a professional studio art education has long been a more straight-forward affair. Students learn skills, theory and art history on the undergraduate level, while those in Master of Fine Arts degree programs are provided time, space and mentoring to become better artists. Pretty open-ended, because art (again) isn't any one thing.

A new phenomenon, however, is taking place on the graduate level at a growing number of university art departments and independent art schools. These institutions are offering more specific training to students based on their particular interests. For example, New York's School of Visual now offers two MFA options for fine artists -- the first is a traditional

program (MFA--Fine Arts) and the second is one focused on students involved in interdisciplinary artmaking (MFA -- Art Practice). "The traditional MFA is media-specific; you are a painter, you are a sculptor, you are a printmaker, and you study those processes intensely," said David Ross, the chairman

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of the Art Practice MFA program. "The Art Practice program is for artists working in more hybrid areas, incorporating a number of different media or selecting the particularly medium based on what they are trying to accomplish at a given time. Many schools now see artists choosing to define themselves post-conceptually, in which the idea comes first and the medium comes second, and these artists are more difficult for the traditional program to accommodate."

The choices are even greater at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where fine art graduate students may obtain MFAs in photographic and electronic media, "curatorial practice," multidisciplinary artmaking (Mount Royal School of Art), painting (Hoffberger School of Painting), sculpture (Rinehart School of Sculpture), studio art (a low-residency program) and "community arts." According to Kenneth Krachek, director of the community arts program, stated that "all the programs are supportive of each other, but they each have their own momentum and solar system." Other MFA fine art students at the school "don't interact much with us."

Then there is a growing number of schools that only offer nontraditional MFAs, such as the University of California at Santa Cruz, which offers its Master of Fine Arts in Digital Arts and New Media, or Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York that has an MFA in electronic arts, while Godard College in Plainfield, Vermont has a low-residency MFA program in Interdisciplinary Arts. The Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon has an MFA in Visual Studies program in which "students respond to the art world's constant evolution with rigorous creative and critical investigation" -- that presumably means inter- or multi-disciplinary work in the fine arts. For its part, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has a Master of Science in Visual Studies program, "focusing on the development of artistic practices that challenge traditional genres as well as the limits of the gallery/museum context." Presumably, students know what that means before they would apply to the program.

One of the most intriguing of these new MFAs is the "community" or public arts programs, which caters to artists seeking to create art in the public realm. The specific aim of these programs is not spelled out but open to a range of possibilities -- the artists design and build a public artwork, the artists work with members of an actual or virtual (online) community to design and build something, the artists develop artistic means of engaging the community in some cultural or social issue, the artists learn to be art teachers working outside of the schools, and there are other goals as well.

"The art world has changed," said Craig McDaniel, director of graduate programs at the Herron School of Art and Design at Indiana University in Indianapolis, which launched a Visual Art and Public Life MFA in 2008. "Artists are not so focused on being alone in a room trying to create something. Now, we see a project-based practice in which artists are looking to do various things in the public sphere." Students in this Herron program are still artists, pursuing some type of artwork, but they aren't spending as much time in a studio producing as their more traditional MFA counterparts. Their focus is not so much creating something that can be exhibited in a gallery or even in a public square as it is developing projects in association with various business, community, cultural or governmental partners.

McDaniel stated that governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations regularly contact the Herron School of Art and Design, seeking students from this MFA program whom they can commission for public art projects. Students then compete with each other, and sometimes with professional artists not connected to Indiana University, to develop winning proposals. For instance, Jodie Hardy, a 2010 MFA graduate who was born in Osceola, Indiana and currently lives in St. Joseph, Michigan, won the commission from Community Hospital North in Carmel, Indiana to erect an outdoor artwork near its main entryway. Her work was a 15' tall, 30' wide steel structure titled "Close-up" that had a series of wood panels on which passers-by would see enlarged images of a human hair from one vantage point and a blood vessel from another. The hospital paid for all materials and provided a small honorarium for Hardy.

The 60-credit program includes courses in project management, proposal writing, grant writing and budgeting. "We're not saying that our graduates will have a career as public artists," McDaniel said. "It's very likely that they will have to piece together a career that includes showing work in galleries, public art commissions, some other job like teaching or managing an arts agency or an arts project. In the first half of the 21st century, artists have a need to be nimble and work on several different fronts."


The content of the artwork or arts activity that students create or develop is more at the heart of Maryland Institute College of Art's Community Art MFA, according to Kenneth Krafchek, who stated that students are expected to focus on issues involving "social justice, inclusiveness, dialogue, cross-cultural dialogue, community building." On the other hand, the Social Practice concentration of the California College of the Arts' MFA program is more in the direction of creating public artworks, according to Ted Purvis, chairman of the social practice graduate program. "The program attracts quite a few public art


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assistants, for whom this is an opportunity for them to step up and do their own thing." No one medium is emphasized more than any other, as the program is open to interactive or other new media, (street) performance art, sculpture, something called "guerilla architecture" and "urban interventions."

The Contemporary Art Practice MFA at Portland State University in Oregon also highlights socially engaged art, and coursework examines issues in "sociology, anthropology, social work, journalism and environmentalism," while the Los Angeles-based Otis College of Art and Design's graduate (MFA) degree in "Public Practice" aims to help artists produce artwork that engages members of a given community. In truth, that same political and social consciousness pervades the school's more traditional MFA in fine arts, in which students "develop a 'personal vision' that has been filtered through history, gender, sexuality, culture and politics."

These new proliferating MFA programs are attempting to capture, and perhaps give some structure to, the evolving contemporary art world in which being interdisciplinary is increasingly becoming the norm and where interdisciplinary means not just a combination of art media but an awareness of the social, cultural, economic and political context in which art exists. Carnegie Mellon University School of Art recently began offering a required graduate seminar in "Contextual Practice" as part of its studio art MFA program -- "supervised student-initiated projects connect artistic practices with a larger public sphere (typically off-campus and outside the art world)" -- rather than create an entirely new MFA category. It remains to be seen whether a new breed of art school graduate is overly specialized, overly generalized or on target in addressing the cultural requirements of our time.

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...and yet the art these programs produce is almost exclusively redundant riffing on an empty international style.

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Art critic Jerry Saltz complained recently about the constant rehashing of old ideas that art schools produce. <http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/venice-biennale-2011-6/>

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