A Personal Note on the State of the Arts in Academia

by Jason Franz, Manifest Creative Research Gallery and Drawing Center

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With the news just out about the closing of the American Academy of Art College in Chicago, the closing of the University of the Arts in Philadelphia in dramatic fashion a month ago, and the decision by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) to cease both undergraduate and graduate degree programs earlier this year, it is becoming ever clearer that something is shifting in the world of the arts in academia. Given Manifest's genesis from within and close ties to this world it seemed fitting, and perhaps timely, for me to share our perspective.

First, the decline of arts in education is not an isolated occurrence. We shouldn't be surprised. We've watched for years as the arts, especially the visual arts, have been de-prioritized in primary and secondary education. Is it any wonder there may be a corresponding delayed reaction to it in higher education? But it doesn't stop there. We've also read the stories in the news, perhaps less dramatic but no less significant, about art programs at smaller institutions eliminating majors, consolidating, and eliminating tenured faculty lines, and so on. (Manifest's darkroom program and budding printmaking program are being created with the cast-off equipment from various institutions.) This doesn't stop at the fine arts. The humanities in general are, it would seem, an endangered specie. Yet daily we see proof of the *desperate* need for the critical and creative thinking and true cultural literacy such programs foster. This crisis, if I can call it that, is a viral response to something larger, a systemic breakdown, the paradoxical fragmentation of culture within modern American society. Just look at the world around us, at the uncertainty and ground-shifting. I would speculate that most of these correlations are probably related to similar if not the same causations. If current high level writing in the news is in any way accurate, Democracy is at risk. (As an arts thinker I have begun to consider the arts to be a form of sentinel specie, a canary in the coal mine of society. Where goes art, there follows society—the arts reveal where society is going, or has already gone.) Witness the death of expertise, and "the cult of ignorance" for a broad diagnosis.

Manifest is not a degree-granting institution, but is itself an arts education organization founded by teaching artists and students coming out of several related academic realms. The students were reacting to the lack of something in society their research had revealed to them—so they set out to fill that gap. The artists were faculty reacting to the subtle institutional movements they witnessed in the microcosm of academia first hand and up close, but which they also sensed as indicators of the larger movements it turns out we are now seeing magnified today across academia and society twenty years later.

For my part of the founding of Manifest those twenty years ago, I had the good fortune to represent a breadth of academic backgrounds. These included my years as both an undergraduate and graduate student here in Cincinnati, over a decade on staff at the Cincinnati Art Museum starting in the late 80's working in exhibitions and closely with curators, conservators, and administrators, and fifteen years combined on faculty at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, the University of Cincinnati College of DAAP (both the School of Art and School of Design), and Xavier University. Two of those schools, the Art Academy and DAAP, are also my alma maters. I was both a student and then a professor at the Art Academy when it was a Museum School, attached physically and spiritually to the 100+ year old Art Museum. I am so lucky to have all of these institutions as a foundation that has informed my role through two decades running this organization. I say lucky because the institutions represent a wide spectrum from independent college to private Jesuit university to a very large state university. At a closer look they provided other ranges of awareness too, including that of design to fine art, freshman to senior, adjunct to tenure-track, and school to museum.

Thanks to this fertile ground of the arts, today Manifest is the employer, training ground, and research publisher for students and professional degreed artists, among members of a broad community, who develop their studio skills and teaching abilities and are then recruited to teach in our larger sister institutions. For example, in just the past month it was a sizable cohort of Manifest staff, resident instructors, and long-time

regular participants in our programming who made up a good number of teachers for the week-long DAAP camps for teens at the University of Cincinnati. Manifest's programs also attract artists from across the country to relocate to Cincinnati, aspiring to expand their professional skills, and further their careers (with 30 resident artists hosted across over a decade so far) many of whom also eventually teach for area institutions of higher learning.

Society needs a healthy arts ecosystem. Healthy means more than just a firehose of visual stimuli, thinly veiled political propaganda, or publicized narcissism. Currently there seems to be an imbalance in the arts in higher education, with a tendency to *industrialize* education (which may or may not work for other disciplines, but it certainly does not work for the fine arts). Arts institutions by their very nature must adequately reconcile their 'institutional' nature with the spirit of the arts itself. There is an underlying risk that art may cease to be what it is when boxed, labeled, and marketed to an audience of customers, and the same is true with education.

Manifest's work to solidify its emergence as a keystone institution in the region, and fill a critically important gap in the arts ecosystem, has its roots in my time at the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Art Academy. These two formerly-joined institutions were, in a real sense, the parents of Manifest. As they have evolved and progressed to become much different since my time there the space between them has grown, leaving a compelling vacancy. This is not just a local trend. It was only recently that I realized this empty space, present also in the world at large, is what Manifest was created to solve. With our vibrant studio program serving over 5,000 participants a year, and exhibition schedule that has featured works by more than 4,000 artists (a great many of them faculty and college students) from all 50 states and nearly 50 countries our organization completes a missing piece of the academic puzzle from *outside* of academia.

For the end-user formal higher learning only lasts for four years, sometimes six, and occasionally eight. However, for societies it lasts for decades if not centuries by virtue of the residual benefits of learning, of cultural nutrition provided by the fertile ground represented by the presence of serious institutions as foci for aspirational learning. In support of this, artists, whether graduates from college or self-taught, need a community for life, and academia needs a reservoir of skill, knowledge, and philosophy to operate as a counterpoint, or a culture bank for when it is needed. In this way, Manifest serves as a kind of Academic Resource Center.

In observing the atrophy or outright collapse of some arts institutions around the United States, we reflect on our own mission, our faith in the artist-founded goals we carry forward, and the importance of the places where our roots start. At Manifest we believe it is essential to have ongoing conversations about quality, what it means in art, and why it is important to society. The process of immersion in a culture of independent learning and aspiration is working here, and in the end, this is what matters. Visual literacy, critical thinking, and respect and appreciation for skill *matter*. As our fellow institutions undertake their evolution, and address the challenging currents of these times, we salute them, thank them for holding on where they can, and do our part to carry the art spirit forward.

The arts will not thrive without a number of things, and one of them is genuine support in the form of exceptional and direct philanthropic generosity which underpins the *nonconforming* creativity that is unique to this aspect of society. Invest in and reward steadfast vision. Have faith in the art spirit.

I urge you to do what you can to support an overall healthy arts ecosystem both locally and across the country. There's a lot more relying on it than meets the eye.

Jason Franz

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