

rachel uffner

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A FEW GOOD REASONS TO DROP OUT OF ART SCHOOL

BY ROGER WHITE



At U.S.C., traditional art education has been replaced by a more corporate emphasis on technology and innovation. Credit PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID BUTOW/REDUX

Nestled among the exhibition reviews and auction reports in contemporary-art journalism last week were scattered items about the Roski School of Art and Design, at the University of Southern California. On Friday, the first-year students in the school's M.F.A. program announced that they were all dropping out. "All," in this case, meant seven students: a small number, but, given the difficulty of getting students or artists to do anything together, the action was a feat of organization and solidarity. It was also a brave gesture—not heroic, maybe, but one made at a personal cost and resonant with the larger situation in art right now. The M.F.A. is not only a prerequisite for teaching art but a marker of professional seriousness in the art world: if you want to get your work into the Whitney Biennial, so the conventional wisdom goes, you're going to need a degree. Abandoning one on principle is no small thing.

In their open letter, posted to an art-education Web site, the U.S.C. Seven (as they were christened on Twitter) detailed the timeline that led to their decision to withdraw from school. Last December, their program director, A. L. Steiner, stepped down, and no replacement was appointed. Frances Stark, another senior faculty member, left shortly thereafter. In January, according to the students, meetings with the school's new administration (Roski appointed a new dean, Erica Muhl, in 2013) suggested that funding promises made to them during recruitment would not be honored. They would now be competing for the second-year teaching fellowships that they had understood to be guaranteed, and faced a potential doubling of their student debt. Reports of curricular changes in the offing led the students to suspect that Roski's

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

administration did not intend to retain, in recognizable form, the program that they had enrolled in.

“We quickly came to understand that the M.F.A. program we believed we would be attending was being pulled out from under our feet,” they wrote; prolonged negotiations with the administration had left them feeling “betrayed, exhausted, disrespected, and cheated.” Stark, the Los Angeles artist who left the faculty in December, echoed their sentiments. “The issues that led to this walkout, the lack of transparency or ethical behavior on the part of the U.S.C. Roski School’s upper administration, are precisely the ones that caused me to resign several months ago,” she told me. “I would also say that they are the big-picture elements here. The students felt lied to and mistreated by Roski leadership, and chose to distance themselves from that behavior.” (Muhl issued a statement countering the students’ claims, which noted that the Roski M.F.A. program “remains one of the most generously funded programs in the country” and that the school intended to honor “all the terms in the students’ offer letters.”)

The U.S.C. Seven’s decision to drop out is a vote of no confidence in the administration of one particular school—which, until the recent overhauls, had been among the most well-regarded graduate art programs in the United States. But is it also a rejection of what art school has become? The M.F.A. is recognized as the terminal degree for artists wishing to teach on the college level. However, as the art historian Howard Singerman has argued, more people now go to M.F.A. programs to learn to be artists than to learn to teach: getting the degree is a way to acquire the conceptual and social skills needed to navigate the professional art world. So, as tuition costs continue to rise and M.F.A.-bearers are produced in higher numbers each year, further outstripping the capacity of either the academic job market or the art market to absorb them, many teachers and students have voiced concerns about the future of the whole arrangement. (Full disclosure: I am a critic in the M.F.A. painting program at the Rhode Island School of Design.) For the U.S.C. Seven, the loss of two revered faculty members and an alleged higher debt load led them to opt out of the system.

The situation at U.S.C. is a small scene in a much larger drama, one concerning the place of art in the new, more corporate university order. Traditionally, art education has been a little too vocational to fit in with the rest of the humanities. But lately it seems that art education isn’t vocational enough. Or, at least, it’s out of step with the pedagogical model to which universities are turning in an effort to make their arts offerings both more alluring and more lucrative. Last fall, the Roski School of Art and Design inaugurated the U.S.C. Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation, a four-year undergraduate program designed to “empower the next generation of disruptive inventors and professional thought leaders across a multitude of global industries.” (Muhl serves as both the dean of Roski and the director of Iovine and Young.) The ultra-hip academy, where students learn about visual and audio design rather than art or music, and where coursework culminates at a mysterious experimental facility known as The Garage, was made possible by a seventy-million-dollar gift from its eponymous donors—both of whom recently sold their headphone company to Apple for \$3.2 billion, and one of whom is also known as Dr. Dre.

The Iovine and Young Academy is emblematic of this new model: a consolidation of technology, management theory, and design training intended to bring the arts into a productive relationship with the business world, and students into fruitful employment in the bosom of Big Creative. Its discourse is heavily inflected by Silicon Valley tech-speak and the upbeat abstractions of corporate lingo: disruption and innovation, sustainability and social responsibility. At the top of the bullet list is that elusive grail of the new economy: creativity. The California College of the Art’s M.B.A. in design strategy promises an opportunity to “master the tools to make change and move beyond profit.” The college’s methodology is collaborative and post-disciplinary. The Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, at Stanford, also known as the d.school, boasts classes taught by “a robust mix of faculty and industry leaders, combining disciplines like computer science with political science, and CEOs with elementary school policy-makers.”

These academic developments pose some questions for artists and students of art, among them: Is art a business of innovation? What is left for artists when creativity has been so thoroughly claimed by corporate interests? Over e-mail, I asked the former M.F.A. students what they were planning to do next. They responded as a group, and said that they wanted to continue exploring the many questions forced on them by their second, unexpected course of study in the political economy of art and the university. A heavy undertaking, to be sure, but they were heartened by the support they’ve gotten from peers and strangers. Through their Tumblr page, they have

received notes of encouragement from graduate students all over the world, scientists, opera singers, gallerists, poets, “and even young artists still in high school.”

This brings us to the value that often drops off the lists of those espoused by the new art-school programs. “The M.F.A. Program we entered in August 2014 did one great thing: it threw us all together, when we might not have crossed paths on our own,” the former Roski students wrote, a reminder that, before there is creativity (or disruption, if you prefer), there is something quaintly called community—which is hard to quantify, always there if you want to find it and can lead to all sorts of developments beyond professional success. They closed their letter with a call for like-minded individuals to get in touch, particularly anyone who “dreams not of creating a ‘better’ institution, but devising new spaces for collective weirdness and joy.” School’s out, forever.

An earlier version of this piece did not identify Roger White as a faculty member at the Rhode Island School of Design.