UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Creative Liberty:
Animation Education, Artistic Authorities, and the American Dream

DISSERTATION

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for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In Anthropology

by

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DEDICATION

For Brandon and Cleo

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VITA
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Creative Liberty: Animation Education, Artistic Authorities, and the American Dream

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Professor Tom Boellstorff, Chair

Creative Liberty explores the mysteries that emerge at the intersection of online art education, the animation industry, and aspiration in the context of insecurity. Principally, this dissertation addresses three key paradoxes about contemporary animation education and the students who eagerly choose to pursue unregulated self-organized online learning instead of a more traditional education at an accredited art school. Organized into a three-act structure that mimics the storytelling conventions of feature animation, I ask: why might artists willfully pursue educational insecurity; and how does their awareness of that insecurity, both real and mythological, inform their choices in pursuit of career? In the first paradox, I examine why might animation have such an uncertain career pathway despite being an established profession since the early 1900s. In the second paradox, I explore why so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career. Finally, I investigate the paradox that the animation industry is a tumultuous, insecure environment that demands high volumes of work for unpredictable pay while also being the same environment many animators staunchly defend as they explain their place in the industry. To address these paradoxes, I followed a cohort of 40

online animation students across various online platforms and classrooms as they engaged in an intensive yearlong study with hopes of joining the animation industry. Along the way, I also interviewed online art instructors, social media artists, and animation industry workers to acquire a clearer understanding of the contemporary online art education landscape and the animation industry more broadly. Overall, this dissertation engages with themes of learning and myth-making across social media platforms to contribute to anthropological understandings of education, precarity, and aspirational labor.

THE PREQUEL

Introduction

Animation is a thrumming palimpsest of contemporary American folklore. It's built from a unique mixture of story-beats and heartbeats that transform imagination into filmic production through intensive, collaborative labor. The physical production of animation in the United States —a workflow that has been adopted globally—owes much of its structure to studio spaces Disney and his contemporaries constructed in the early 1920s. These spaces reflect a strong nationalist interest in techno-cultural production blended with a critical art education that find its origins in the French atelier. From Muybridge's zoetropes to Disney's seven dwarves, the flexible definition of "animation" as a series of sequential images depicting movement has produced many stances on the art form's true origin (Torre 2017). However, "animator" as an achievable, recognizable profession was established in the US by the late 1920s. Consequently now in 2024, the "animator" nears its first centennial anniversary. But for the young animation student, the path from career hopeful to professional animator is amorphous. This fact presents the first complexing paradox in a story about paradoxes: why might such an established tradition have such an uncertain career pathway?

The question "how to join the animation industry in the US" spawns many different answers and few professional animators share the same educational history. Most do, however, share similar story beats: training, review, debut, and application. That is, many professionals have followed a patterned trajectory from initial art training, to criticism and networking, to portfolio development finally culminating in successful job applications. But, what is art

training? When should one debut their first portfolio? Who is willing and qualified to offer fair criticism? The answers to questions like these remain frustratingly opaque for the young artists. These mysteries are compounded by the fact that many new students are now electing to pursue a nebulous self-directed education over attending a formal art school for animation. Since art and animation schools acquire prestige through their ability to secure students a place in the larger workforce, this fact introduces the second paradox: why would so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career?

The history of the animation industry is replete with tense labor disputes. As technology changed creative authorities frequently disagreed on how best to use those technologies. New groups entered the workforce, audiences changed, companies went bankrupt, production moved overseas, and contracts failed renegotiations. Mismanaged interpersonal relationships may result in blacklisting. Canceled projects can leave artists abruptly out of work. As recently as 2022, The Animator's Guild (TAG) rallied to protest unfair labor practices surrounding the production of animated shows for streaming services like Netflix. In short, the animation industry's history displays a clear narrative of volatile work. This final fact presents the third paradox: The animation industry is a tumultuous, insecure environment that demands high volumes of work for unpredictable pay. Yet this is the same environment many animators staunchly defend as they explain their place in the industry.

Creative Liberty is an inside look at the struggles and joys of the animation industry, that encircles the question: why might artists willfully pursue educational insecurity; and how does their awareness of that insecurity, both real and mythological, inform their choices in pursuit of career? Methodologically, this research followed a cohort of 40 animation students as they

pursued their dream of entering the US animation industry. I recruited these participants at an online event called LightBox Expo in 2020 and subsequently engaged in a year-long multi-sited ethnography that "followed the people" across multiple social media platforms and online courses ultimately culminating in LightBox Expo 2021 (Marcus 1995). My participants were all adults aged 18-40 years old and American. Some had prior art education experience, but all identified LightBox Expo 2020 as the catalyst for their journey since they intended to use event to discover online courses to enroll in and begin networking with working animators.

For participant observation, I enrolled in the same courses they did, joined their Discord servers, followed them on social media, and checked in weekly with as many as I could. I participated in group drawing sessions, submitted my work for critique, and interviewed the course instructors when possible. I recorded the works people made and logged their feelings about their progress. To gain a better understanding about the world into which these students desired to integrate, I tempered the student's excitement with industry insight when I could. Using some of the connections I made at LightBox Expo, I also interviewed art directors, working artists, and formally educated animation students. This research was completed almost exclusively online with the exception of the worker's rights rally I attended in Burbank, where I spoke to several animators about their concerns with the industry.

Unlike many hopeful animators, the students I followed elected to pursue a self-directed education relying on an amalgam of YouTube videos, Discord classrooms, art competitions, and paid mentorships to achieve the skills necessary for industry work. Along the way, the cohort expressed their anxieties about the future, the real and imagined creative authorities they believe block their access to the industry, and their frustrations with learning art online. The resulting

ethnography reveals a story about paradoxical aspirations, professionalization, online education, and the American Dream.

To embrace the spirit of contemporary animation, I assembled my dissertation into a three-act structure which aims to combine the tempo of American storytelling with field data and scholarly literature pertaining to digital anthropology, the anthropology of labor, and the anthropology of education.

ACT 1

Chapter 1: Opening Image

When does an art student become an art student? Chapter 1 explores Lightbox Expo, an annual convention dedicated to students and professionals in the animation industry. The cohort meets and explores online education options before committing to a year of intensive study. From the earliest inklings of studying art to becoming an art student, this chapter analyzes the contemporary landscape of art education.

ACT 2

Chapter 2: The Big Deal

The cohort enters its first online art class hosted by a popular and influential social media personality. This chapter examines the role social media art influencers play in contemporary online art education. It argues that how and what knowledge they disseminate shape a shared dreamscape wherein students work towards an envisioned fantasy about industry work. This fantasy forwards the work and ingenuity of important

people, while eliding that most animation is highly collaborative.

Chapter 3: Discord Community Learning Center

How does art education on a platform like Discord differ from a traditional atelier? How do users form communities, receive criticism, and prepare to debut themselves as professional artists? This chapter examines how students create hierarchies of knowledge on Discord that mimic art school critique circles.

Chapter 4: Professionalizing Perfect

As the cohort prepares to enter the job market, several question if they are ready. Professionalizing Perfect examines how students struggle with criticism and anxiety about the quality of their work. It explores the way in which students come to value skill over other aspects of job readiness resulting in narratives about artistic and personal growth.

ACT 3

Chapter 5: Battle Lines

The cohort receives troubling news. As they prepare for their place in the industry, The Animation Guild announces a protest in Burbank. The cohort must face the reality that their dream career might harm its workers. This chapter argues that the history of the animation industry is built from labor disputes which people willing integrate into

narratives about animation being difficult, but creatively rewarding to justify unfair practices.

The Sequel

The story ends where it began: Lightbox Expo. This conclusion reviews the cohort's impression of their "art journey" and reveals the final answer to the three paradoxes: the chance to create outweighs its constraints. It argues that animation companies in the United States embody a uniquely American version of storytelling that balances a Protestant work ethic, outsourced labor, and the American dream.

ACT 1
Chapter 1: Opening Image

Introduction

In early September 2020 thousands of online attendees participated in an online-exclusive animation convention titled LightBox Expo. The programming was shaky. Scheduling ran behind, paid attendance was difficult to verify, and participants needed high levels of digital literacy to manage the many platforms the convention was hosted across. Specifically, virtual panels appeared on Twitch, YouTube, Zoom, and Instagram live, among others. The dance required between panelists and attendees to make sessions possible appeared at first to be unworkable as various tech issues and scheduling delays plagued the convention. Yet, according to the many hosts, panelists, and attendees I observed and interviewed, the convention was an unqualified success. It was not only the nascence for this project, but it also galvanized hundreds of students to pursue online art education. Thus, LightBox prompted the fundamental theoretical and practical underpinnings of this research. In regard to practice, it was from LightBox Expo that I recruited my first participants: roughly 40 amateur art students ages 19-36 years old who all expressed interest in joining the animation industry, but who had no formal training in art for animation yet.

Theoretically, LightBox Expo sat at a nexus of curiosity. Unlike academic conferences, the primary objective was not knowledge dissemination, and the primary audience was not professionals. Rather, LightBox Expo had adapted to its abrupt online pivot following the Covid-19 lockdown in an interesting, but not wholly surprising way. Its founder, well-lauded

concept artist Bobby Chiu, launched Schoolism in 2007 - an online platform for art education where students could pay to watch pre-recorded lessons from industry professionals. Schoolism's About page describes itself as a "democratized education" that is "by artists, for artists" ("About Schools"). In an interview with Grayden Laing for the Canadian Animation Blog, Chiu describes his core ethos for Schoolism by highlighting affordability and accessibility as its key features. By focusing on online content, Chiu asserts that "Artists should all be able to afford the top education and we should be able to do this without taking out giant loans that take years to pay off" (Laing 2015). These themes—affordable, student-focused online learning—would carry into Chiu's second project, LightBox Expo, a convention in 2019 for artists interested in the entertainment industry.

In essence, LightBox Expo distinguished itself from other conferences, and even other animation conventions, by catering to an audience of aspiring industry workers rather than established professionals. In fact, LightBox Expo's principal sponsor, Procreate, a popular digital art software for the iPad, is known for its affordability amongst beginner artists. In other words, having a principal Procreate sponsorship over its industry standard competitor Adobe suggests that LightBox Expo aimed to service students and aspiring artists instead of veterans. Strategically, this positioning also worked to attract students to Chiu's other service, Schoolism. But while the first-ever LightBox Expo in 2019 entertained these objectives, the 2020 online-exclusive LightBox Expo made its focus on education abundantly clear by enlisting numerous social media art influencers as its main panelists. As a result, LightBox Expo 2020 was richly populated with digital art world celebrities pulling in their own fans who consisted of social media literate animation enthusiasts ready to seek the next steps to secure work.

To summarize, LightBox Expo presents the following facts: there is a considerable audience of aspiring artists whose interest and monetary support is enough justify an arts for the entertainment industry expo, sustain multiple online art schooling platforms, and prop up the careers of numerous social media art influencers turned educators. That is, the ecosystem of online art education is made possible by aspirants and their idols like those seen at LightBox Expo. At the same time, this landscape is not consistent, homogeneous, or unequivocal in style, structure, or instruction. Online art students and educators thus create, maintain, and integrate into a system with no guarantees and minimal regulations. When compared to the long history of art education, and even the abridged history of animation education, modern online art schooling emerges as a complicated choice for aspiring animators. It is a choice that leverages affordability and accessibility against legitimacy and the likelihood of a career. Furthermore, it tasks students who have extremely limited knowledge with industry expectations to develop their own curriculum and discipline without reliable direction or reward.

It is my intention to use this chapter to explore the mysteries which buttress this fact and address what I have called the first paradox about contemporary art education: why might such an established tradition have such an uncertain career pathway? Among these mysteries include a) what are the structures and ideologies that allow for a convention like LightBox Expo to exist and flourish, b) how has the landscape of online art education formed, and finally, c) what is informing students decision to interact with various online learning platforms and become students.

Mystery 1: How History and Structure Build New Art Networks

From its inception, Chiu intended LightBox Expo to be a departure from convention. The inaugural 2019 LightBox Expo webpage proudly announced that "aims to connect fans with the artists and creators behind their favorite films, animation, games, TV shows and illustrations. LightBox Expo is a place for an aspiring artist to come and learn and be inspired" ("A Show For Artists!"). This brief description hints to three subtle positioning moves that distinguish LightBox Expo from other similar expos. These three movements correspondingly scale to three distinct structures that figuratively and literally hold the expo together. The first way LightBox Expo positions itself away from other conventions is its focus on fandom by claiming to connect "fans with the artists and creators" behind their favorite media. This framing is notably different from LightBox's closest competitor, the Creative Talent Network (CTN) Animation Expo, which has been operational since 2009 and focuses predominantly on connecting people already within the industry. That said, LightBox Expo is not devoid of industry connections, and also positions itself as being a place for "aspiring artists." This means that unlike purely fan conventions, like Anime Expo, attendees are encouraged to see themselves as producers of media and not just fans or consumers of it. Finally, LightBox Expo places a keen interest on learning and being "inspired." Structurally, LightBox Expo aims to provide services that thusly satisfy these three categories (fans, artists, and job-seekers). The three major types of content hosted at LightBox Expo are correspondingly a meet and greet artist alley, workshops and tutorials, and studio-led panels and booths. This content appeared both at the physical LightBox Expo and at its virtual equivalent demonstrating a commitment to both fans and artists. The result is a convention that is not purely fandom, job-hunting, or education. Rather it is a blend of all three producing an event that I inaccurately assumed attendees would find unfocused and confused. Would fans enjoy an

event that is heavily populated with people seeking education and skill-building? Would aspiring artists be interested in an event where panelists frequently focus on their enjoyment of films rather than share secrets about their production? The answer to both was a resounding yes. But, how did a convention like LightBox Expo come to be? This section is a brief look at the historical and contemporary landscape of animation in the United States.

In the 1940s, Russian film theorist and director Sergei Eisenstein wrote several reflections about his time in US visiting with Walt Disney. He said of Disney, "I am sometimes frightened when I watch his films. Frightened because of some absolute perfection in what he does. This man seems to know not only the magic of every technical means, but also all the most secret strands of human thought, images, ideas, feelings" (Eisenstein 2017, 5). For Eisenstein, Disney was a hero exuding all the "same grace, ease of gesture and elegance" as his signature character Mickey Mouse (Eisenstein 2017, 4). By the time Eisenstein met Disney in the late 1930s, Disney had already acquired critical acclaim for his fantasy film *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Not only was Snow White a technological marvel, but it also galvanized the world of feature animation; a genre of art that had previously been relegated to shorts for children. Variety called it an "inspired and inspiring," work that "once the true artistic merits… are universally proclaimed and accepted adults will crowd the youngsters out" (Flin 1937, 17). But it is difficult to read these words and not wonder for whom specifically was Disney capturing the secrets of "human thought, images, ideas, feelings?" In reality, after leaving a bleak and tumultuous Soviet Union, Eisenstein had already been primed to view Disney as hero. Disney was a man, who after growing up in poverty, doggedly pursued his passion for storytelling. His works were so influential that the earliest Japanese animation—an industry now

known for being categorically un-western—started with tracings of Disney cartoons (Cavalier 2011). Contrary to popular belief, however, this heroism was not an image Disney cultivated on his own. Rather, Disney was enabled to be an idealist by a country desperate for visionaries.

Animation in the United States started around the turn of the 20th century as largely an individual sport. Cavalier (2011) and Furniss (2009) both do a commendable job documenting the minor changes in technique that pushed early animations to grow in length and scope. But by the 1920s, something had started to change. Fordism, or the idea that production could be broken down into discrete parts to increase the speed of output, began to pervade other industries. Disney and his friend-turned-rival, Ub Iwerks, as well as the Fleischer brothers, were among the first to capitalize on this growing trend by dedicating specific workers to drawing, color, and sound. Culhane's autobiography about his early time in the animation industry, *Talking Animals and Other People* (1986), captures the vibrancy of this pioneer filmmaking as animators and artists with big personalities continued to shape the scene.

As workers left their positions, new workers were hired with those specific skills to replace them. Studios formed to support these new teams and unify animations behind specific brandings. New legal actors and policies negotiated copyright, distribution, and content. Each new link required new specialized skills creating new systems of education and careers. In the briefest terms, this is how the US made its animation industry. From individual artistic experimentation to capitalistic production, animation steadily grew its labor force and audience throughout the 1930s. Then World War II happened.

In his 1993 historiography *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons From the Sound Era*, Smoodin traces the impact of the US military history on film and particularly animation. There

was a keen government interest in using cartoons to unite Americans with divergent backgrounds in "ideological consensus about the war" (Smoodin 1993: 4). The belief was that American animation could instill pride at home, encourage US ideals, and back patriotism. Disney's story of grandeur and determination emerges from this backdrop. As other studios struggled to stay afloat amidst economic strife, Walt Disney Animation Studios only accrued more prestige and larger audiences. Disney did make critical creative decisions and he did relentlessly pursue his passion projects even when his team challenged him. But, overall Walt Disney and the Disney story about a man with a nearly divine grace and elegance for displaying human thoughts and feelings was largely a product of American folklore supported by a government willing to finance any great inventor who could be a symbol for the American people. Disney is a rags-to-riches story, but it is one that is careful to consistently underscore the humanistic and artistic elements of the narrative. The legend proclaims that Disney became a success because of his love for art and story instead of his shrewd business dealings.

The history of animation is about a lot more than Walt Disney and in fact, scholars' and historians' focus on his him is one of the first things animation studies professor Pilling (1997) critiques in the introduction to *A Reader in Animation Studies*. She argues that the little research about other animations "reflects its commercial marginalization" brought about by the general assumption that cartoons are mostly comedy for children (Pilling 1997, xi). These critiques are valid, but I bring up Disney's legacy to explore the ideological underpinnings of the earliest animation education. The idea that animation is about humanity, art, and story continues to impact art education today. The dissemination of knowledge is changing from physical art schools to digital courses, but the ethos behind that education remains similar to Eisenstein's

essays in the 1940s. That is, a great artist can balance "technical means" with "human thought." Joining the animation industry is not exclusively about career. Rather, there is an assumption that animation workers should have an intrinsic love for storytelling. This idea is present in the founding principles of LightBox Expo. As I noted earlier, one group LightBox Expo intentionally aimed to appeal to was "fans."

In this abridged history I show that fans and aspiring artists are not necessarily two distinct groups. There is a precedent tracing back to Disney that animated projects are products of love and perseverance. "My friend and I came to LightBox because we saw it was online this year and a couple of our favorite artists are hosting panels. My friend is actually looking for work right now so I think she is also interested in trying to talk to some people," an artist I met through LightBox Expo told me. In this example, attendance is about love and networking. LightBox Expo is able to coexist as a space for both dimensions because frequently both "fan" and "aspiring artist" occupy the same person. Similarly, in a panel between four professional artists about how they acquired their current jobs, visual development artist James said "this career isn't always fun. It can be a lot of hard work and long nights which is why I prefer to do everything with love. Everything is better that way. The work is meaningful and I know I'm putting myself into it. Trying to make art without being creative is just like filling in someone else's shell." James does not specify what it means to do "everything with love," and critically, he does not have to. The audience accepts that there is a difference between making art "with love" versus exclusively for profit.

A historical precedent for love ideologically structures and enables much of LightBox Expo, yet there are also considerable technological and social changes that make spaces like

LightBox Expo popular today. From the earliest zoetropes to *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse* (2018), technological experimentation interweaves the genre of animation. Whether animators and directors see the incorporation of new technology as a humanistic exploration of art or a cynical attempt to cut production costs, there is an assumption that technology can and will change the medium. "I'm so nostalgic for the old stuff. They don't make things like that anymore, but at the same time, the reason we have so much good content now is because 3D and stuff make it faster. Those people are really very talented and I know if I want to be in the industry I need to learn it too. So, I'm teaching myself Blender," Jonathan, a LightBox Expo attendee told me. Jonathan's comments were not unusual. Several other students and even a few professionals expressed interest in learning Blender, a popular free 3D modeling software, to keep up with the industry's interests. Critically, these interests are not necessarily new. Rather, interest in computer animation closely follows the history of computers in general. Technology and animation have never been opposing forces. Nevertheless, there is a pressure for artists to adapt to new programs and techniques to work in the industry.

This raises the question: if the medium of animation production can change, can't the medium used to teach that production change as well? As we see with the success of online art education, the answer is yes. For students, the idea of learning digital technologies online is not radical. In addition, the field of animation is so diverse with new programs, quickly produced online courses can keep up with changing methods faster than a traditional art school can. In a 2015 Kickstarter campaign to raise money for Chiu's online art school, Schoolism, he states, "Pledgers will be able to access knowledge in minutes that has taken the most successful and famous artists in animation, film, and television their entire careers to learn…be a part of art

education history" ("Schools Subscriptions"). Chiu hinges the benefits of his campaign on the affordances of technology. He asserts that learning online is faster and more direct. Online instructors can condense material down to its most effective lessons so that students will not have struggle learning new programs the way their instructors did. Chiu's call to be "be a part of art education history" is both prescient and predictable. Schoolism has only grown its roster of courses, instructors, and students since 2015, and it is now one of many online art education platforms available to students. At the same time, online learning is not entirely new. Artists and fans have used early social media websites like DeviantArt to share tutorials since the early 2000s (Jones 2015; Salah 2010). LightBox Expo thusly builds on these existing connections between technology and education.

Finally, entering the animation industry means entering a highly collaborative environment. Artists work on teams overseen by lead artists and directors. Completing projects by key deadlines requires efficiency from all workers in all departments. When one project ends, artists are not necessarily guaranteed work on another project. This insecurity encourages artists to therefore maintain their hiring appeal. This pressure means displaying good teamwork, remaining in contact with key recruiters, and keeping their artistic skills and knowledge up-to-date with industry demands. Conventions provide critical locations to practice all of these situations. They also critically provide informal safe spaces to discuss studio politics, interpersonal relationships, and other rumors.

In conclusion, the foundations for convention like LightBox Expo have been slowly built throughout animation's history. The same interests and values that buttress the industry also map onto the structure and activities hosted at the expo. Folktales like Disney's encourage a deep

passion for the craft of animation and storytelling that supports the idea that artists should be fans as well as workers. A slow, but consistent integration of new technologies makes animators amenable to new forms of knowledge dissemination. Finally, animation is highly collaborative. Networking and maintaining close relationships with others in the field is important for securing future work. It is not a coincidence then that the main activities at LightBox center around meet-and-greets, tutorials, and panels. Participants are encouraged to interact in setting as fans, students, and colleagues.

Mystery 2: How Systems of Knowledge Leave Tradition

Contemporary online art education is enigmatic. As Chumley (2016) notes her in exploration of Chinese art schools, art education precariously balances the perception of innovation alongside a state-approved understanding of "high" art. While the political and social structures between China and the US have considerable differences, American art schools weigh a similar tension. On the one hand, there is a pervasive cultural perception that art should be innovative, imaginative, and boundary pushing. The California School for the Arts (CalArts) states that it "is renowned internationally as a game-changer in the education of professional artists. The transformative cultural impact of our alumni shows why: We bring out visionary creative talent unlike any other university, school or conservatory" (CalArts). Savanah College of Art and Design (SCAD) similarly lists "innovation" and the creation of "transformative life-changing experiences" among its key values. These two examples among many others demonstrate how art schools market themselves as pioneers of a creative revolution. But, as Irani (2019) argues, "innovation" and creativity live within preexisting systems of power.

Entrepreneurs and artists may benefit from claiming to innovate without having to interrogate the structures which allow or fund that innovation in the first place. This idea is why on the other hand, art schools continue to mold students to produce works the public would generally recognize as "art." The strain between cultural innovation vs cultural reproduction is not unknown to art students. Storyboard artist Michael explained it to me as, "Of course I just want to do my own thing, but I also know I'm making cartoons for American kids." Creation for self, creation for the "arts," and creation for commercial success paint a triptych of art education where flexing any one of these skills too aggressively runs the risk of sabotaging your success in the other two. But, if this is the nature of art education generally, what are some of the unique aspects of online education? And, how do systems of knowledge, such as instructors and techniques, leave tradition?

Online art education is an extension of the creative triptych battle. Many online art programs promise to use methods and technology which push innovation even further. In my survey of online art programs, marketing for online art schools anomalously pursue innovation through grounded "real-world" usefulness. On its About page, Schoolism claims that its founder, Bobby Chiu, "formulated a plan to learn from his heroes by harnessing the power of the internet. Almost immediately, it was apparent that this idea could benefit not just Bobby and his co-founder Kei Acedera, but artists everywhere if they could bring that education to the world and project it globally" ("About Schoolism"). Online art platform Brainstorm asserts, "Our program is dedicated to artistic development, bringing together students from around the globe to learn and grow in a supportive online community. Our courses, led by professionals in the field, teach the most recent techniques utilized in today's entertainment industry" ("Learn From Industry

Leading-Professionals"). And, online art school Project City boasts, "Watch top industry professionals make their projects and teach you how to make yours" (Project City). This sampling of online art programs' own descriptions captures an ironic dualism: innovation occurs through the educative medium, but the actual educative knowledge is based on practical and professional application. In other words, traditional art schools underscore their transformative cultural impacts; the ability to create expressive "high" art alongside commercial works. By contrast, online art schools cut the philosophizing of the sociocultural significance of "art," by directly promising to connect students with educators prepared to teach practical, ready-for-work skills. An online art program's claim to innovation thusly comes less from its relationship to art and more from its ability to provide students technologically advanced workplace knowledge.

The fact that online education platforms combine digital interactions with physical embodied activities makes them perfect for trendy "phygital" marketing tactics. Art students may listen to digital lectures, ask questions in online chatrooms, and produce art with digital programs, but to actually practice art students must sit in a physical space, hold physical equipment, and use physical techniques. The reality that digital interactions are mediated through physical lived experiences is not new to digital anthropology, but that has not stopped businesses from repackaging this idea as futuristic and experimental. Most recently the Covid-19 pandemic proliferated a boom in studies and treatises on "phygital" learning (Chaturvedi, Purohit, and Verma 2021; Del Vecchio, Secundo, and Garzoni 2023; Tolstikova et al. 2020). A portmanteau of physical and digital, phygital is largely a marketing technique that offers consumers physical rewards for online interactions. While online art schools do not explicitly market themselves as phygital they replicate its rhetoric when they promise improved skills (and possibly even a

career) as a result of enrollment. These claims are often likewise swathed in Silicon Valley language ensuring that the student's experience will be "innovative," "leading," and "cutting-edge." The ultimate irony is that for most online programs "cutting-edge," actually means stripping the creative processes down to only what is necessary for work. For example, one instructor I took a course with told his students, "don't waste your time drawing feet. In the animated projects I've been on, we can just move the model closer. We don't need to see feet to know that a character moved."

At the same time, most online art programs offer extensive course listings and students are able to completely design their own curriculum. The three programs listed above (Schoolism, Brainstorm, and Project City) demonstrate the most common examples of online art education and require students to pay by the course. Other programs offer annual fees in exchange for access to a library of pre-recorded videos. Courses may either be completed at your own pace or follow a synchronous weekly schedule. Since students have considerable control over their education and there is so much variance between courses, it is difficult to conclude whether the content of online art education innovates on its traditional art school counterpart. When I asked my participants if they observed any notable differences between students who attended art school versus students who studied online, their answers pointed to qualities other than technique, such as the ability to work on a team. As I explore further in Chapters 2 and 4, what classes one takes are often secondary to who someone takes classes with. A unique aspect of an online education is the ability to for students to select their favorite artist as their teacher. In art school, degree scheduling, course availability, and hired faculty limit who students may learn from. Online courses by contrast not only offer a bounty of storyboarding classes, for example,

but students often actively scour social media to find out where their favorite art influencer is teaching.

In short, several of the distinct aspects of online learning include vast course listings, high scheduling flexibility, and a stringent focus on ready-for-work skills. When I asked students what attracted them to an online art education, their responses blended practical appeals with an emotional and ideological interest in controlling their own education. “I just like that I get to do what I want to do,” one told me. “I can take the classes I want, when I want, with who I want, and it’s so, so much cheaper than art school. Why should anyone have to pay $80,000 a year just to learn how to draw when I can do it at home? Art school is kind of a scam.” Likewise, when I spoke to Alicia who had recently made the transition from art school graduate to teaching her own classes on an online schooling platform she told me, “I always tell my students they don’t need art school—and they appreciate that honesty—because it’s true. There’s so many amazing educators online that I want to learn from too. Art school can be really expensive, but you can take my sketching course or another animation course and learn these skills at your own pace for a fraction of the cost. I think that’s really amazing.” In tandem, Alicia and the student’s response demonstrate the producer-consumer marketing synergy of online education. This is chiefly expressed as the idea that online education should be affordable and commensurate in knowledge with art school while offering a wide range of course options that let students feel “in-charge.” Students cite these qualities when expressing their interest in online education, and teachers reference these qualities when selling their courses. But, how have these qualities come to exist in first place?

I argue that the current technical and ideological structure of online education can be attributed to three primary developments: 1) art schools produce graduates with teaching skills, but no guaranteed place in the institution, 2) art jobs are becoming increasingly insecure and online education has come a reliable source of secondary income, and 3) student's belief that art careers are not-profitable lead many to "hedge their bets" by pursuing alternative careers alongside art.

In speaking again with Alicia about her transition to teaching, she explained it like this: "After I graduated from CalArts, I had all these ideas about sketching from life and what makes a good character sketch. I took up some freelance work in the industry, but it was mostly for commercial projects and nothing like the feature animation I had trained for. But at the same time, I was posting my work online and people wanted to know my process and I wanted to teach them. So I filmed some lessons and started selling those online. Now that those lessons are made it's like a passive income for me." Alicia is not alone. In surveying the instructor list for several popular online art schools, nearly all of the instructors were art school graduates with experience working in the industry. From a student perspective, selecting instructors with an art school education and animation experience seems reasonable. Alicia's explanation exposes how artists reemerge in systems of education as instructors. Many traditional art schools produce a learning structure similar to what Wenger and Lave (1991) have described as a situated learning environment wherein students observe and reproduce the work of their educators often without explicit instruction. As time progresses, the students gradually assume more responsibilities including teaching those with less experience. Thus in art school, students acquire not only drawing skills, but teaching skills. These skills may benefit graduates when they enter the

workforce as animators now practicing and providing good mentorship to their team. However, it is far less common for students reenter art school as teachers as the prestige of an art school is often based on the legacy of its educators. For example, an animator with 20 years' experience is a more appealing hire than a recent graduate.

In contrast, the barrier for entry for online teaching is very low. Potential instructors may sell their classes through their own webpages or they may partner with online education platforms, like Schoolism, and host synchronous classes. Sometimes an instructor approaches the platform to propose a course, other times platforms will reach out to popular artists to collaborate. Depending on which service an instructor chooses there are varying degrees of regulation or quality checking. If the course consists of prerecorded content, then an instructor's responsibilities seldom extend beyond making and advertising the course. As Alicia noted above, these courses can become an easy source of passive income.

While the exact numbers remain elusive, most market research identifies the animation market as a multibillion-dollar industry climbing well over $300 billion, with a projected continual rise in the future (Katatikarn 2024). But even if these numbers are untrue, the popular assumption amongst my participants was that the animation industry is highly lucrative. "Frozen II made over a billion dollars and they keep making those Minions movies so you know those are profitable too. We're making these companies billions of dollars," one animator said to another on the Animation Workers Discord server I joined. "That's streaming," the other animator replied. "All the streaming services want big audiences so they're pumping out as many animated projects as they can." As this short exchange demonstrates, for some at least there is an understanding that the animation industry is profitable. But profit does not necessarily translate

to job security or comfortable wages. Since 2023 popular animation news website Cartoon Brew has been publishing its Layoff Tracker documenting “significant layoffs” across the animation industry (Lang 2023). The Layoff Tracker is one of many items, including op-ed pieces, YouTube video essays, and Reddit threads, that reveal a growing uneasiness sweeping the industry. Students, instructors, and animators asked “is the animation industry dying” as frequently as they discussed its high profits. The resounding consensus is that the industry was growing in value, but not in its labor force. Critically, the belief that animation as a career may not be sustaining turned many present workers into educators.

Despite growing concerns over job security within the animation industry, the success of LightBox Expo evidences people’s consistent (if not growing) interest in joining. Animation workers looking for secondary incomes, a large body of artists seeking to improve their skills, and an increase in online platforms which allow creators to monetize their content (such as Patreon) has resulted in an educator’s market. Instructors may sell their content across multiple platforms generating a reliable passive income. Advertising through venues like LightBox Expo pulls in new audiences of students seeking online education. Thus with a passive knowledge in teaching, a pressure to seek additional sources of income, a structure ready to encourage monetization, and a body of students willing to pay for it, animation artists have a lot of incentives to transition into teaching.

That is not to say that making an online course is easy or that instructors have no interest in maintaining their teaching content after it has been made. In speaking with instructors, many expressed a lot of passion for their courses. In the preamble advertising their class, instructors often said things like “these are techniques that helped me” and “I want to teach people how to

illustrate their stories." Jack, a character designer for Disney, said "I spent months making this course. I even paid for a professional editor to help put the videos together. I want this course to be really helpful for everyone. My biggest regret is that I can't sit down with all my students individually." But while Jack's earnestness is admirable, it does raise a critical question. Why would students choose this path? Are students ignorant of the growing uneasiness in the industry? Why choose to support inconsistent structures of online education where educators openly admit to regretting limits of their course design?

I answer several of these questions with more clarity in the subsequent section and further analyze the emotional fracturing that occurs as students pursue a dream job that is decidedly not dreamy in Chapter 5, but here I would like to highlight one reason why students seem interested in pivoting from tradition towards alternative online education. Simply put, many students are detached from the inner political turmoil happening within the industry, but they are not unaware of the larger zeitgeist and the impression that employment within the animation industry (and maybe within all industries) is on a downward trend. I met Eric online through one of the chatrooms at LightBox Expo. He was attending his local university studying engineering, but since the Covid-19 Lockdown he had developed an increased interest in pursuing an online art education as his on-campus activities slowed down. His tone was somber, but it captured an anxiety around drifting in a sea of options with little certainty about one's future employment. "Everything sucks now. Not just Covid, but like, the economy, housing, loans… I went to school to get a good job and now I'm studying art online to get another one. I want to be character designer, but if that doesn't happen, then I guess I'll do something else." As Standing first prophesied in 2011, workers like Eric find themselves amongst a growing class of uncertain

laborers he called the “precariat.” Standing attributes the rise of the precariat to global neoliberal polices that push people into low-paying unstable jobs. The precariat must be, above all else, flexible. Other scholars have addressed how precarity impacts creative industries particularly by championing an internal culture that celebrates “innovation” and “big ideas” to obscure the unethical production practices that may have allowed those big ideas to exist in the first place (Han 2018). Underneath all these discussions is a pervasive melancholia. Workers know these conditions are unfair, but nevertheless grind through it.

In this sense, online art education emerges as a practical example of Berlant’s (2012) cruel optimism. Eric is pursuing a reality that no longer feels feasible to him. The world has changed in such a way that “going to school to get a good job” seems more like a cruel lie rather than a guarantee. But at the same time, our systems, stories, and rhetorics like the American Dream are so pervasive that they interweave an optimism into daily life that continues to underscore the value of hard work and stick-to-itiveness. Online art education allows students to embrace that cultural optimism while acknowledging that the world has changed in ways that may feel unfair and cruel. Tradition may dictate that a student goes to art school, perfects their skill, and then enters the industry. But since this pathway is now uncertain, online education offers lower stakes, lower costs, and lower risks for potentially the same reward. In other words, many students are moving away from tradition because the promises of tradition no longer feel tenable.

Mystery 3: How Students Become Students

When does an art student become an art student? This question has ontological and logistical purpose for both students and my research. Understanding when and how students come to identify themselves as a "student" helps me situate them within the timeline of my study. Did my participants see themselves as art students prior to attending LightBox Expo? Was attending LightBox Expo a step in their artistic career or was it an impetus for their education? Answering questions like these helps to disentangle "artist" and "art student" allowing me to more properly analyze the strategic uses and significances behind these terms. But understanding when students become students is also meaningful to my participants themselves. As I show in the following section, artists are keenly aware of their own "student-hood" and use discussions about skills and courses to evaluate their approximation to the animation industry and the art world more broadly. That is, artists use the label "student" to suggest their closeness to their goal of being in animation. For them, "student" is a transitional identity that signals progress toward a career. By contrast, "artist" surprisingly carries less significance. Although it would be reasonable to assume that being an "artist" is constitutional to an art student's identity, participant interviews suggest that it is too vague. The term artist may indicate a passion, hobby, or profession. The term is also fundamentally stagnant. As my informants articulate, shifting one's hobby to a career does not necessarily make someone "more" of an artist in the same way that a student becomes a professional.

Furthermore, my research suggests that "student" is inextricably tied to structure; it is an identity formed with systems of education. However, for self-directed online students, there is no unifying university or school to rally behind, which complicates how artists adopt the identity "student." Being a student is consequently an active identity. They are not students because they

are associated with an institution; they are students because they study. In the particular class of online art students, “being a student” is an identity formed through platform politics and physical practice. As I explore later in Chapter 3, students may perform their student-hood on one platform such as Discord, but present the results of their study on another, such as Instagram. Consequently, an artist’s online presence may document their transition from amateur to professional as they move through various social media landscapes. Contiguous with this movement is physical practice of art. Students use their physical bodies to draw. Yet, as noted in the previous section, many online courses may be consumed passively by watching prerecorded videos. Therefore, to what degree are people who consume art courses but do not practice, considered “students?”

While students used several determining factors to evaluate their own student-hood, I noted that arriving at this identity was largely an individual discernment. My participants did compare their length of study and personal discipline. Phrases like “I finished a whole sketchbook this month,” or “I drew for 5 hours today,” displayed commitment to their goals. But unlike other categories that emerged in this research, artists rarely contested each other’s “student-ness.” A student may practice more or less, but while this may impact their personal understanding of how studious they are, others did not publicly repudiate anyone’s claims about being a student. In fact, an unwillingness to measure other’s claims to student-hood may scale to the fickle structure of online education itself.

For an online artist to say that another online artist is not a proper student because of the courses they take or their methods of study is to cast a critical lens back on their own online education. Doing so would open a Pandora’s box with complicated and unflattering questions

such as, “is online education really as valuable as art school” and “can I really make progress with only free resources?” A strongly appealing aspect of online education is its perceived opposition to tradition and the assumption that a quality education should be easily accessible and affordable. By contesting one another’s claims to student-hood, artists inadvertently give more power to certain art education platforms allowing sites like Schoolism to claim that they have better instructors or better courses which in turn may drive up prices. At first, it may seem like this fact is incongruent with my earlier argument that identifying oneself as an online art student is complicated. After all, claiming to be a student regardless of one’s method of study preserves the online art education ecosystem and may help prevent online platforms from acquiring the prestige, rank, and cost that turns many artists away from more traditional schooling. However, for online artists without any formal education structure, being a “student” is a deeply personal statement about one’s identity. “I never thought of myself as an art student in high school,” Jeff, an artist I met through LightBox said. “I had to be there. But now that I’m choosing my own programs and paying for my own classes, yea, I’m an art student. I’m studying animation because I want to be an animator.” Integrated into Jeff’s understanding of study is a personal agency. “Student” is an identity he shaped himself for the purpose of tracking his progress towards a larger goal. He further gained pride from crafting and paying for his own education. Online students frequently celebrated “choice;” both in choosing what courses to take and how much to pay for them.

Overall, in pursuing the questions “when did my participants come to identify as art students,” and “why did they decide to pursue online education,” I identified four key trends of influence, several practical appeals, and a long history of personal interest. Combined, these

three factors began to serve as predictors as to whether artists would find online education attractive.

The first of these points can demonstrated in a conversation I had with Nickie, a young woman hoping to start an online education journey using the resources she discovered at LightBox Expo. I met Nickie through a "Drawing Jam" on the official LightBox Expo Discord as I waited to attend a virtual panel on joining the animation industry in the afternoon. Drawing Jams are digital synchronous creative sessions where multiple artists sketch and paint on the same canvas. While populated mostly by student-attendees, LightBox Expo encouraged its professional guests to join the Drawing Jam boards. In interacting with other artists, students build community through play. However, participation is strategic and the inclusion of professionals shifts the environment from exclusively casual to more performative. To impress and network with industry artists, the Drawing Jam attendees balance displaying skill and cordiality. Since all artworks happen on the same canvas, participants are careful to maximize their space while demonstrating friendliness. This practice creates a series of implicit rules such as don't draw over another artist's work, do not erase another artist's drawing, draw in unoccupied spaces, and do not take up more space than necessary.

At the same time, collaboration is a key appeal of the Drawing Jam. Working alongside and on top of other artist's work distinguishes Drawing Jams as community play and is an express benefit of drawing together rather than working on separate canvases. Thus, knowing when to add to another artist's piece is an important part of the strategy. Complicating this process is that fact that there is no audio on the Drawing Jam. Instead, students must join Discord voice channels and speak there. Many artists select to join voice hoping this will provide the

opportunity to speak with professionals in the Jam, however, others choose to remain silent. As several students expressed to me through text, Discord voice channels are discordant and loud, participants may be too shy to speak, improper audio equipment makes voice communication challenging, and computer or internet problems can cause frustrating drops in quality across time zones. In sum, Drawing Jams are community play spaces, but the participants act with respect to real consequences chief among them being the belief that a proper display of skill will lead to industry connections.

When I first joined the jam, creativity had already rooted in the form of an elaborate painted tree that eclipsed most of the canvas. Names flashed onscreen showing where new artists continued to work on the tree adding finer and finer details. In the corners of the canvas small sketches popped up. Nickie drew in the bottom left sketching the portrait of a young woman. While I struggled to speak with Nickie during the Drawing Jam, I connected with her afterwards where she agreed to answer my questions about her interest in LightBox Expo. “I am a self-taught artist,” she told me. “Technically, I guess I took high school art classes? But those aren’t very good. The teachers will pass anything and I really want to get into animation so drawing hand turkeys didn’t exactly help me. I found out about LightBox Expo through a YouTuber I follow and then when I looked into the programming I saw all these great artists hosting tutorials and things. I actually love that it’s all online because I live across the country and I would never be able to attend otherwise. Being active here with other artists just feels really cool.”

Nickie’s response succinctly summarized four trends that would reappear throughout my interviews at LightBox. In fact, I argue that these four trends emerged so often that unpacking them is critical to understanding how becoming an online art student is appealing. First, most

artists identified as “self-taught,” but would struggle to articulate precisely what they meant. Second, despite claiming to be “self-taught,” most artists did have some prior education in the arts although it was common for them to not hold this education in high esteem. Third, most of artists I interviewed reported learning about LightBox through a social media influencer. Finally, artists frequently made comments expressing an interest in or appreciation for the larger art community. Nickie’s discussion with me epitomizes all of these points. She supplemented what she believed to be an inefficient and lackluster art education with art tutorials on social media. Her desire to study art outside of high school and to take her education into her own hands led her to turn her influencers into her instructors and join broader art communities.

Another artist I spoke to at LightBox Expo described his experience like this: “Being self-taught is… well, like, nobody is really self-taught. We’re always learning from someone, but it’s more like no one is sitting you down and making you draw, you know? I’ve never been to art school. I learn from YouTube videos and stuff online, but now I want to be really good and focus and so, like, I’m looking into taking a real class.” Here again the concept of being “self-taught” remains vague, but its usefulness to artists comes from its opposition to a formal education. For Nickie and this other artist, being self-taught means taking initiative in one’s education without formal instruction. Neither high school art classes nor YouTube tutorials look like commanding testaments to one’s skill on a resume. To be self-taught is to therefore demonstrate a more serious commitment to learning to draw.

Implicit in Nickie and this other student’s story is the role of the internet as a critical resource. Since both already use the internet to learn and follow art influencers, a more structured online art education feels natural rather than revolutionary. These online spaces also

sustain communities, something which Nickie alludes to the value of when she says "being active here with other artists just feels really cool." As my participants told me, another challenge to being self-taught is how isolating it feels. Several told me that they felt like "the art kid" growing up. While some saw this label as a point of pride celebrating their creativity, others felt socially rejected for their niche interest. "In senior year, I was the only one interested in art school. Everyone else was talking about SATs and things and I just, nope, not for me," one student told me. Many online art programs conveniently provide the community many artists feel they are lacking.

In addition to these social and environmental factors, my participants were very transparent about the practical appeals of an online education. Simply, online education was more affordable, it fit better into the schedules of those balancing careers and other responsibilities, and it allowed students to learn from instructors across great geographic distances. Included within these practical appeals was an incendiary rage over paying exorbitant fees for tradition. Further, while many aspiring artists recognized the prestige following famous art schools, like CalArts and SCAD, many of my participants minimized the usefulness of an art institution's pedigree by focusing on the idea that an individual can build artistic skill without a degree. By centering their frustrations on paying more for skill, students downplayed the other significant benefits art schools provide such as networking opportunities—something which I discuss more in Chapter 4. Overall, students felt that art education should not be expensive because many art careers notoriously pay poorly. The high cost of art school was a frequent discussion and it is one of the first things the art school graduates I spoke to lamented about.

Critically, this is a rage that online influencers tap into well. Bobby Chiu heavily

advertises Schoolism citing the belief that art education should be widely affordable. Social media influencers use the low costs of their classes to steer art students to their own programs. At LightBox Expo one influencer advertised their course by saying "Why spend thousands of dollars learning things you are never going to use? Join my course and I will teach you the skills industry pros are actually using today." It's through language like this that "necessary skills" get adopted into discourse about practical appeals. That is, marketing around online art courses naturalize learning "only what's important," and use this rhetoric to convince students that they are paying for a more grounded, more purposeful education. Online education consequently positions itself as not only more financially responsible, but also more ideologically sound. It's educators "really care" because they are willing to cut content to only the essentials.

Learning ready-for-work essentials asynchronously at home from one's favorite artist for $3,000 is so monumentally distinct from a $30,000 tuition at an art school that requires daily courses and relocation to the campus, that it may seem flippant or unsubstantial to put these two methods of education in competition with one another. And yet, conversations amongst my participants about art education heavily weighed these two options. Kris, an artist who eventually attended various online classes, shared with me early into research that they could not afford to attend an art school; that the price of tuition and cost of relocation were unreasonable even with assistance. Yet at LightBox Expo, Kris asked a panel of their favorite artists, "should I attend art school?" And again later in a course I took with them, Kris asked the instructor if he recommended art school. Comments like Kris' demonstrate a persistent anxiety around not attending an art school despite its significant differences from the more publicly championed self-driven online education. Even when artists believe they are making the right choice, or the

only choice, but pursuing online education, debates about art school continue to enter the conversation. Why? As noted earlier, online art education presents far more insecurities. Of note here is the way it challenges to students to see themselves as students out of a traditional a structure. But being a student is not just a point of individual pride. Do animation studios recognize lists of obscure online classes as adequate training?

The answer is unclear. Students certainly hope that their favorite animator who moonlights as an online instructor would hire someone with the skills taught exclusively through their course. But, the hiring process at animation studios involves so many more political decisions from what positions are open, to who knows whom, to the status of current projects, to what intern posts are available that there are few guarantees. There is also the portfolio. A strong portfolio displays 10-20 pieces that demonstrate an artist's skill at their chosen position. A portfolio functions as both a resume and cover letter combining prior works and pieces of the artist's signature style. It says "this is what I have done, but also this is what I bring as an individual." Focusing on helping students create a strong portfolio is another way online art education platforms show their commitment to "only the essentials."

In conclusion, there is still a critical component to the mystery of how students become students that is missing: why? Online education is tumultuous and unregulated, even if it is affordable and accessible. Choosing to become an online art student means paradoxically accepting any conditions of your education (such as asynchronous learning and sporadic feedback) while also insisting that being a student is meaningful, structured, and goal-oriented. The argument is that anyone is an art student so long as they study art. Studying art is the gateway to the animation industry. But since not everyone who studies art makes it to the

industry, there must be educational differences that account for this discrepancy. To question these differences, however, jeopardizes the belief that online art education is commensurate to art school. For artists for whom an online education is their only recourse, critically evaluating what it means to be a student is too big a risk. It is why terms like "self-taught" are useful even though they are vague. It confirms commitment to a goal. In general, the reason why so many artists become students is perhaps overwhelmingly simple: they want to.

"I know non-art people don't really 'get it,' but this is my life. I always wanted to work in animation and this is my step to doing that. I love movies. I love storytelling. I love drawing. This is what I want to do," Nickie explained.

Conclusion

The art and animation convention LightBox Expo generated some of the fundamental questions that inspired this research. Its existence suggested a history of oddities; that there is a considerable audience of aspiring artists whose interest and monetary support is enough justify an arts for the entertainment industry expo, sustain multiple online art schooling platforms, and allow numerous social media art influencers turn into educators. These are conditions that do not appear overnight, nor are they exclusively the result of the global lockdown forcing individuals to spend more time online. These conditions, like LightBox Expo itself, exist because people want it to, but why? Art education, particularly online art education, is nebulous and uncertain. Industry workers open profess a growing dissatisfaction with the animation industry. Layoffs, labor disputes, and low pay occupy many conversations between industry workers. Yet, students appear increasingly interested in joining the industry. They are so interested that they are

pursuing forms of education that are as insecure as the industry itself. Much of online art education is unregulated, inconsistent in quality and structure, and offers limited interactions with instructors. Nevertheless, during the course of this research I followed 40 students and observed hundreds of more who willingly chose this path instead of a traditional art school. For the vast majority of these individuals, online education was not seen as supplemental to a traditional education and nor was it an option they merely resigned to. Online art education was the preferred choice.

This oddity led to what I have called the first paradox about contemporary art education: why might such an established tradition have such an uncertain career pathway? Using LightBox Expo as vehicle to explore this question, I looked more specifically at three mysteries namely a) what are the structures and ideologies that allow for a convention like LightBox Expo to exist and flourish, b) how has the landscape of online art education formed, and finally, c) what is informing students decision to interact with various online learning platforms and become students.

In sum, the answer to the first question is intimately embedded within America's film history and its complex and often obfuscated relationship to the military. It is not coincidence that culturally uplifting animated features that underscored key American values like democracy, hard work, and patriotism flourished during the second World War. Men like Disney became government-approved visionaries. He was celebrated not only for his work, but for his life story which resulted in a tale about a man so passionate about art and innovation that he grew an empire and changed the world. This is a folktale that artists and scholars have been critical of, but the lesson that the production of art should be personally meaningful and passionate

continues to shape contemporary art networks. Art schools reinforce this narrative when they tell students to work on their passion projects. LightBox Expo reinforces this narrative when it assumes its attendees are fundamentally art and animation fans into addition to artists. And, students reinforce this narrative when they choose an insecure education because their desire to practice art is so strong that the insecurity is worth the risk. It is this final point which supports the other two mysteries: what is the nature of online art education and how do students see themselves within its nebulous structure?

Competing values complicate online art education. Online instructors must balance the teetering allure of being alternative to tradition. They must offer comparable knowledge and skill to a traditional education while being so affordable and accessible that any potential cons seem worth it. Instructors must also navigate their own web of unregulated options. They may publish prerecorded courses on one platform or host synchronous weekly lessons on another. They may devote considerable time in their schedule for course design and student involvement, or they may let older lessons slowly build a passive income. Many instructors arrive at these decisions based on their own feelings of insecurity within the industry. There is a popular belief that the animation industry is collapsing and that outsourced labor and cancelled projects will slowly leave American animation workers jobless. Under these circumstances, teaching emerges as an attractive secondary income. This is especially true because the barriers to entry are low, the risks of failure are minimal, and many animators have teaching skills they acquired through art school.

By contrast, students arrive at the decision to pursue an online education through many more factors. They are setting out on the beginning of their journey and are not at the close of it. Consequently, the stakes are higher and the risks are riskier. An animator moving from artist to

online instructor (or more accurately, artist and online instructor) does not require the same fundamental shift in identity that moving from aspiring artist to art student does. For the aspiring artists I interviewed, "being a student" required considerable ontological and practical changes. It demarcated the pursuit of career and allowed students to unify around communities of purpose wherein artists worked together towards their goals.

Online education is foremost appealing because it is affordable and students can find courses which fit their schedules. That is, students who want to learn art but lack the budget or time to pursue a traditional education find online courses useful from a practical standpoint. But, instructors and online education platforms also present online learning as ideologically distinct from tradition. They advertise online classes as more innovative, more grounded, and more serious than a conventional arts education. The idea is that these courses teach ready-for-work skills and thusly accelerate a student's chance at entering the industry. Ultimately, the aspiring artists I followed who became art students felt a deep and nearly spiritual calling to this work. There is both individual agency and a precedent to see animation (and the arts more broadly) as humanistic explorations of story even when the content of that animation is about fantasy dwarfs and mice.

LightBox Expo is supported by configurations of love and insecurity. It is composed of educators compassionate about their craft but seeking other sources of income amidst perceived turmoil. It is also composed of art industry hopefuls who aspire to complete great acts of storytelling, but struggle against a tradition that appears smarmy and unhelpful to them. Under these conditions, online education emerges as not just an alternative to tradition, but as the solution to its ills.

ACT 2
Chapter 2: The "big deal"

Introduction

When I began interviewing aspiring animators about their interest in online education, I asked how they discovered the courses they chose. Nearly all had an identical answer: "my favorite art content creator is hosting it." The online social media landscape has platformed a new voice in the world of art education. Young aspiring artists are increasingly turning to art influencers—individuals who pull in audiences with content about their artistic process. As Becker (1982) has argued, artistic visionaries are not new and the reputations of great artists serve to cement artistic traditions and uphold various art institutions from museums to schools. Khamis, And, and Welling (2017) has similarly noted that the concept of "relatable celebrity" is not new and that television has played a considerable role in packaging "reality" for mass audiences. Critically, they argue that this foundation provided fertile ground for today's self-branded micro-celebrities who sell their "ordinariness" to claim that anyone can achieve fame.

In the social media art influencer, these two concepts merge together: an ordinary person who achieved artistic greatness displays their successes online. While online content creation is profitable, crafting the perfect relatable image is not easy. Under global precarious working conditions wherein reliable work is seldom guaranteed, the pressure to constantly be working or think about working dominates daily lives (Ross 2009). Deuze (2007) suggests that media workers often find themselves at the center of these issues as the production of media or content quickens. The result is an environment where it is possible to always to be working. In this sense,

online content creation is a problem and a solution. It allows artists to balance insecurity in the animation industry by picking up a secondary income as social media content creators, but it also produces new anxieties around self-branding and "always working." Georgina, an artist who recently decided to pursue a career in storyboarding for animation, shared this about posting her work online, "I need it to be good. If it's not good, then people won't follow me and it hurts my online portfolio. I do feel this pressure to only make things I'm good at and that sucks because it hurts my learning. Like, people don't want to see my ugly studies, they want my finished pieces, so if I don't think something is going to be good, I quit or don't post it. There is a lot of pressure." Georgina's anxiety stems from the belief that if she fails to show off her best work she jeopardizes her audience and her future career. Duffy and Hund (2015) have described this as the pressure "to perform having it all." In careers the public typically sees as glamorous, workers feel expected to maintain the facade that work is joyful and easy. As a social media art instructor told his audience of aspiring artists, "I love my job. I really do, but I gotta tell you, people won't have a lot of sympathy for you if they think you're just getting paid to draw and talk to a camera all day."

Scholars like Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin, likewise warn that, "Because cultural work is prominently featured in popular discourse, especially in visual images, and associated with trendsetters, beautiful people, hipness and cool, this problematic normalization of risk serves as a model for how workers in other industries should also behave under flexible employment conditions" (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin, 2005, 308). In other words, when people perceive upsetting working conditions as a natural part of "fun" jobs, this line of thinking is extended to other industries. This is an issue aspiring artists know well. Many of the students I interviewed

were careful to dispel the illusion that working in animation is all "fun and games." "I already draw 14 hours a day and I don't have anyone over my shoulder telling me I need to do a better job," Dina, an online art student told me. "I know being in the industry is going to be hard. I think most people know that." Ironically, Dina's impression that industry work would be hard work came from a source whose hard work was far more obscured: a social media art influencer named Daniel Harris.

This chapter analyzes an ethnographic exploration of a social media art influencer's first online class. The instructor, Daniel Harris, is a prolific YouTuber who spontaneously announced his plans to host a 6-week Art and Animation Fundamentals course. For many of the participants in my study, this was the first online art course they would take. The following analysis captures the collapse of social order as various actors struggle to transition into new roles. Much like Geertz's (1957) Javanese example, predetermined cultural frameworks for meaning fail to produce their usual hierarchies because the setting (in this case an online course rather than a YouTube video) has introduced new symbols and gaps for authority. Harris transitions from influencer to instructor. Many fans transition into students. Others attempt to use the renegotiation of roles to transition into mentors to acquire social capital and secure networking opportunities.

Overall, this chapter is the first to begin to explore the second paradox: why would so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career?

Before Day One

“I don’t know what I’m doing, but I want it to be amazing” is spoken with the type of bravado best befitting an overzealous Hollywood stuntman about to perform a peek-through-your fingers act of bravery, and is perhaps not as inspiring or suitable for Daniel Harris, an equally overzealous professor of an experimental online class charging students up to $800. Yet, his audience of young aspiring artists quickly left comments expressing their excitement about this proudly proclaimed unplanned course. “This is a GREAT opportunity” one fan commented.

Daniel Harris, a long-term industry artist who worked on widely celebrated animated projects moonlights as “Harris” online, a highly cultivated online personality built from gags, goofs, and expletives. His explosive style of online buffoonery is most endeared by his largely teenage-to-young adult male audience to whom he provides a wealth of industry knowledge and art tips on YouTube. In an online landscape replete with educators ready to turn their skills into marketable classes, quality advice like Harris’s is seldom given freely. And this fact is not unknown as Harris’s pride in sharing information publicly that he was educated about privately is a proud statement on his channel. “This is what I wish I knew before entering the industry” he stated before leaping into comedic harangues about character proportioning and tutorials about drawing in perspective. And although it was hackneyed, Harris’s “what I wish I knew” marketing deeply appealed to his audience which remarked things like “I am so glad he tells us how it really is.”

Perhaps, this context—that Harris presented himself as someone so eager to give industry secrets away for free—is what was so bemusing about his announcement to his YouTube channel in February 2021 about starting an online class costing a minimum of $300. For a man who largely built his online presence by promising free and equal accesses to education, a costly

online class might feel suspicious at best and treasonous at worst. For his audience of fans, however, this news sparked mostly positive reception. This course promised an insider approach to even more elusive insider knowledge. If Harris already offered industry secrets on this channel for free, what greater treasures lurked behind an online paywall? The course, which was designed to teach skills essential to the animation industry, naturally drew in many prospective students for whom joining the animation industry was the ultimate aspirational goal. If Harris's mystical cult of paid educational content truly offered the key to the industry's door, then for many students this opportunity was irresistible.

Predictably, the biggest criticism came in the form of lamentations about the price. These concerns peppered the comments underneath Harris's announcement video and soon spread to Harris's private Discord server - a community space reserved for Harris fans to discuss his content and share art advice. Notably, these complaints more often concerned not being able to afford the course, rather than questioning if the educational knowledge would be worth the tuition.

"It's $400 just to take the class?!" Megan typed into the Discord server. Her punctuation indicated her exasperation; a "?!" demarcating the difference between wonder and anxiety.

"I think the price is reasonable" pinged Leslie 20 seconds later. Leslie is a frequent commenter and reliably supported Harris's latest ventures. "And $800, if you want him to review your work live."

"Do you think you'll do it?" Michael asked, a newer user lured in by the opportunity to explore "industry secrets."

Neither Megan, Leslie, nor Michael joined the course, but the YouTube comments and Discord server quickly became abuzz with the rapidly filling digital seats. Harris limited the capacity for the $800 review tier, creating a highly-coveted opportunity. Securing a review seat not only indexed one's personal wealth (or perhaps their willingness to accrue credit card debt), but their commitment to the craft. The implication was clear: an $800 review meant industry-level feedback, and industry-level feedback meant students would increase their chances of entering the field. Many students expressed the confidence Harris's approval would give them. As Jung put it, "if HE likes my work, I know I can make it."

Harris and these students represent a complex network of social media activity. Harris is an example of successful online self-branding and he models this work to his many YouTube fans. Like Scolere, Pruchiewska, and Duffy (2018, 2017) observed Harris strategically moves between platforms to take advantage of key features and engage with different members of his audience. He posts professional quality work and project updates to his Instagram, but shares high-energy art reviews to his active YouTube audience. His choice to announce his course on YouTube demonstrated a calculated approach to reaching his largest and most engaged audience. Harris's fans are aspiring artists and social media urban explorers who use various platforms to find entertainment and knowledge. In fact, it would not be wrong to describe many of them as the now aged kids from Ito et al.'s 2010 investigation into online youth culture which proposed that emergent media ecologies provided an environment particularly conducive to learning and play. In a prescient note about online video creation, Ito argued that creative spaces illustrate "the new possibilities that the Internet offers for kids to receive feedback not only from peers but also from media companies. The advent of this socially based, digital milieu means they can connect

with large numbers of dispersed others and test wider reaction to their work" (Ito et al. 2010: 24). Harris and his fans represent both sides of this idea. Harris receives monetary support from companies looking to advertise on his videos and his fans represent the "large numbers of dispersed others" who consume his work and support his growth. Critically, many of these fans developed their social skills and online presence in what Jenkins (2006) has called "participatory cultures" where play and contribution are necessary for acquiring social capital. Fans anticipate a level of interaction with their favorite creators and frequently aspire for more (Jenkins and Ito 2015). This can be particularly true for YouTubing and live-streaming where creators often rely on parasocial connections to maintain their viewership and income (Lang 2019, Taylor 2019). Unfortunately, this behavior often only provides more challenges as creators feel pressured by their fans and "the algorithm" to perform intimacy and be available for affective labor (Glatt 2022, Raun 2018).

In short, prior to his course Harris and his fans had a complicated, but understood relationship. Harris provided edutainment and his supporters thanked him with "follows" and "likes." These actions did abstractly translate into profit for Harris—more followers meant he could run more ads on his videos—but, he had never charged access to his content before. Yet, inklings that this connection could be more were already in effect and fans were eager to get closer to their "art hero." Yet several early confessions revealed that not everyone valued the "Harris" character:

"I'm interested in this class because I respect his insider knowledge. I don't actually like his attitude. I know it's fake, but it's too mean for me and it attracts a lot teenage boys who think

it's ok to talk to me that way," Sarah confided in a Discord call with me. "I'm an adult woman and a mom. I'm trying to learn art, not make memes."

"I think he's funny, but sometimes the jokes overtake the art" Jacob relayed in a separate call. "I've spent 10 years working as a software engineer. Animation is my greatest passion and I think this course will really help me, but I want it to be serious."

Sarah and Jacob represented the other half of Harris's audience. They were both returning students hoping to pivot their existing careers to animation. Throughout the duration of the course, louder younger students would drown out the perspectives of these older students by taking advantage of their familiarity with the platform to share memes and talk over one another.

A man named George Birn hosted Harris's course on his personal website. Birn's affable and passionate personality permeated his many projects. An acclaimed storyboard artist, producer, and show runner, Birn educated students in various Southern California art schools before turning his ambitions online. For the past year, Birn had been strategizing with various online educators and personal friends to develop an online art school with a curriculum that rivaled the best art institutions. Birn appeared in Harris's class announcement video echoing the claim that Harris's course would reveal industry art secrets. In fact, Birn's entire online school operated with a similar ethos. "We need to trim the fat, and focus on what animation students *really* need to know to get into the industry" Birn declared.

For Birn, Harris, and the other teachers he worked with, trimming the fat looked like skipping "how-to-draw" courses and focusing instead on various skill-based courses such as lessons in storyboarding, writing, and animating. Each teacher could determine the content and delivery of the course. If Birn had a strong oversight, his presence was not felt. The result was a

disparate spattering of courses of varying lengths and admission fees. No other course, however, charged the $800 review fee Harris's did. This fact suggests something Birn, Harris, and the other educators already knew, and something that plays a critical role in world of online art education today: Harris's influencer status justified the higher cost.

A critical aspect of Harris's success lay not only on his YouTube channel, but on the blossoming online community he ran outside of it on Discord. Discord is a contemporary void-filler for the space forums left as they faded away to more popular forms of online social media in the mid-2000s. It's simultaneously public, private, and largely community driven. Discord is a series of public and private "servers," customizable spaces that organize conversations around a broader topic (for instance, sports, literature, pinball machines, or any other popular or niche hobby). Within each server are various "channels" where users converse about sub-themes within the larger topic. Discords dedicated to art typically feature channels related to sketching, critique, and live drawing. Channels and servers create a vast interdisciplinary network and they are mostly operated and curated by moderators who work for free.

And while some online educators locked their Discord servers behind additional charges, Harris did not. He modeled his Discord with the same principles as his YouTube channel: industry knowledge should be accessible, art students should push themselves through new activities, and study is the key to improvement. Consequently, he frequently directed viewers to his Discord through his YouTube videos with the promise of additional content and opportunities to practice their work. Sometimes, this direction was obvious: "Join my Discord server to learn my streaming schedule and get behind-the-scenes content." But, Harris would also host portfolio reviews wherein he would review student's work submitted through Discord for his YouTube

channel. The latter served as a particularly attractive advertisement as high-level art critique given for free is a rare prize. In all, these Discord videos, the Discord itself, and the Harris's abrasive but otherwise amiable personality leant itself well to community development. During the time of my research, the Discord channel had about 64,000 members and was continuing to grow.

So in early February 2021, when Harris took to his Discord to advertise this new teaching opportunity, his fans were primed to receive it. In the aforementioned YouTube video announcing the class, Harris described it as a never-been-done experience. The course would peak into the animation industry to ascertain the skills one needs to be successful, and in true Harris fashion, it launched with a this "what I wish I knew before I began." With Birn's assistance, Harris's course promised to be better than any art school. For aspiring students, the premise itself is a dream—a professional with their dream job will tell them information to skip past the grueling work others need before entry. Potential students described it as "totally worth it" and "exactly what I need."

The Course Begins

The first session began 5:00 p.m., but Harris opened the digital room early to test his equipment. Students popped on from all around the globe to experience this first meeting and within minutes the viewer count sailed from 150 to over 300 people (each one paying a minimum of $300). Some users lamented the time difference, but the course overwhelmingly contained Americans who found orienting themselves to Harris's LA time zone manageable. The entire course was run through a massive video conference platform similar to Zoom. Users could

choose to have their cameras on and stare back into Harris's inattentive, elsewhere-focused eyes, but only about 30 did so. In the corner of the conference call, Harris fidgeted with his large digital drawing tablet and video equipment. As he stumbled through the video conference's clunky interface, his fingers twirled his stylus nervously.

Loud, ringing plosives hitting unprotected mics frequently diverted my focus. In addition to camera feeds, the call also featured a chat window for text-only conversations and an audio feature where users could talk to the class using their mics. Excited students chatted freely about movies and career goals. In an otherwise lonely Covid isolation, the sounds of energized students were a welcomed and nostalgic treat. However, the variance in audio quality, mic delay, feedback, and misunderstood speech cues produced a lively but raucous cacophony. And at 5:15 p.m., when Harris finally began speaking, it was clear that the swell of conversation would not slow.

In the live video feed, Harris prodded his keyboard with erratic fervency. "I don't know how to mute you," he murmured into the mic, his complaint drowned out by a louder, "Ok, but have you seen *Avatar: The Last Airbender*?" Meanwhile, the text-based conversations in the chat bar reached an equally impressive intensity. Lines of text scrolled offscreen within seconds as text-members attempted to respond to the more thunderous audio-chatters. The result was two similar but mostly separate conversations ranging from fandom fights to individual art struggles. At 5:20 p.m., Harris still struggled to exert control over the class despite more diligent students pleading with the others to simmer down.

It was at this point that a student named Trinity spoke over Harris and the rest of the class to take control of the course. She said into the cheap mic tangled in her headphone cords, "Let's

focus and begin class. I am going to circulate a Google Doc where you can input information about yourself and what your goals are. Later, we'll set up a class Discord." These were actions that she took completely on her own. The creation of the Google Doc and subsequent class Discord expressed an interest in community, networking, and organization that neither Harris's course structure nor the video call's interface offered. With Trinity's leadership pronouncing itself through her soft yet firm instructing, Harris took advantage of the conversational lull to ask the class to mute themselves. And while a few straggling voices continued to pop on the mic to ask a rogue question about the structure of the course or how Harris's day was going, Harris began to formally introduce himself. "I am a visual development artist who has been in the industry for many years," he said, fingers drumming on the edges of his tablet. "How many of you know who I am? Have you seen my YouTube videos?" These were odd questions. Harris had advertised this course only through his personal YouTube, Discord, and Instagram. It was highly unlikely that anyone who did not know who he was would be in this class.

Yet, this oddity remained unquestioned as students unmuted their mics to enthusiastically declare that they were big Harris fans. If between the statements like "of course" and "yeah, dude, I love your content" anyone did not know who he was, they did not say so. Harris stated "I am going to teach you differently than a lot of people. I'm going to teach you like you are my interns." The chat swelled with excitement about this declaration. For many, this class was their first experience with industry work. Within the industry, internships are a core component of learning and are perhaps, the most difficult part of an industry education to emulate online since they typically involve sitting next to a senior artist in a studio.

After the alacrity calmed, Harris began his first lesson. He argued that modern-day animation was borrowing more techniques from film theory and that his students needed to understand how the basic principles of film applied to animation if they wanted to be successful in the industry. In this context, "successful in the industry" referred to the quality of the animation, not the ability to successfully enter the industry. This language suggested that the course goals deviated slightly from the course advertisement which promised to teach students ways to proportion and display the body for the animation industry. Nevertheless, Harris asserted that this was "how I would teach interns working for me," again underscoring the idea that this class prioritized an alternative style of learning. However, with no explanation of how this class should compare to a traditional internship, this statement was exciting but vacuous. Yet, as this idea and the marketing of the course demonstrates, vagueness was a useful strategy for building an audience.

The promise of "insider knowledge" drove the operation. The deal emerged as thus: students paid with skill and practice to the master in exchange for industry insight. The deal was assumed to be so beneficial to the student that the master could appropriate their labor however they pleased. In this way, the privilege of the internship obscured the payment of real money. From the moment Harris pronounced this course as an internship, the several students felt that the $300-800 admission fee was justified. Harris's next actions only evidenced this point. He stated, "I need you to produce professional-looking work… because the industry is hiring. And, I want you to be able to work for me." What followed was a shaky scheduling announcement wherein Harris loosely detailed his plans for the coming few weeks. His voice was uncharacteristically clinical. However, it appeared that most students had difficulty recalling this

schedule as the power of Harris's previous statements lingered in the digital chat room like a persistent ghost. "I couldn't believe he said he wanted to work with us," one student proclaimed after the first class period. "Working with Harris would be my absolute dream," another remarked. The chat window soared with various cheers, but the mood was about to take another dramatic turn.

An Industry Secret

Fingers resuming their drumming on the tablet's edges, Harris asked the class if they had seen his YouTube videos. Like earlier, audio and text chatters enthusiastically agreed. Without further elaboration, Harris began to review a concept from one of his videos. He provided a voiceless demo and meekly urged the class to watch the video if they had not already. He argued that this lesson, and the following five lessons, would be about "structure" because "the industry cares a lot about structure." From the demos, "structure" appeared to refer to an artist's ability to depict characters in a 3D space; to understand how shapes compose forms and, in turn, how those forms act in different environments. But to the many chat questions asking for elaboration on "what is structure," Harris said nothing. Artistic structure aside, it was evident from the flurry of questions about how Harris's free YouTube videos would relate to the paid course material that the students' most pressing concern was the class structure and not drawing techniques.

Harris's hands moved nimbly from demo to demo with a practiced deftness that inspired a calm awe, even amid the storm of questions crashing into sputtering mics. Finally, at 5:50 p.m., Marcus broke through the tidal wave. An active chat user, Marcus asked Harris, "What is big in the industry right now?" Harris read the question aloud, and the chat-microphone symphony

quieted to hear his response. Understanding what the animation industry was looking for was the first step to crafting an appealing portfolio. This question led Harris to reveal our first industry secret: “culture is a big deal.” Harris turned his attention away from his work and instead looked into the camera. His voice rose, and his normally exuberant mannerisms steadied. “I’m inspired by on-the-job training. I like knowing what skills artists use and don’t use. And right now, the industry cares about different cultures and originality. Culture is a big deal,” he said.

For me, the word “culture” pulled at an ancestral, anthropological heartstring, but to Harris’s active audience, “culture” was an objective. To be in the industry meant capturing the “big deal.” One’s portfolio had to evolve to meet the industry’s practical and stylistic demands. A call for a storyboarding portfolio or a character design portfolio included implicit interests in style. That is to say, many animation companies were interested in hiring artists who exhibited art styles that a) fit the aesthetics of the company and b) fit the social and artistic interests of broader audiences. For example, Nickelodeon and Walt Disney Animation exhibit different artistic styles, but both feature the rounded shapes and diverse character designs that most current audiences found appealing. Thus, saying that “culture” was a big deal implied that “culture” was a capturable aesthetic style that could be presented to studios as proof of one’s proficiency. It was social commentary realized through particular design choices.

In this sense, “culture” had practical implications as well as artistic ones. In the limited samples Harris provided of animation with “good culture,” there were several common threads: a diverse cast, clothing representative of different nationalities, displays of income disparity, and representations of non-Western and non-Asian architecture. Left unsaid was: if this represented “good culture,” then where did that leave animation made prior to or irrespective of the “big

deal?" The answer to this lay embedded in Harris's other suggestion. While "culture" took the focus of the conversation, his full statement asserted, "the industry cares about different cultures and originality." With "original" as the operative word, the implication of Harris's "good culture" examples suggested that earlier animation aesthetics were not "bad," but certainly overdone. Or perhaps more simply put, just "not a big deal."

Moreover, these "good culture" trends were not limited exclusively to the animation industry, as the film and video game industries expressed equal interest in diverse cultural representation. But for a course designed to bring students into the animation industry, the central question became: Is it practicable? Could students learn to draw diversity? Harris did not offer a response, but he did provide an image. With brows furrowed and fingers tightly gripping the tablet pen, Harris flashed a composite on the screen. In the same practiced hand of his earlier examples, Harris displayed thousands of his personal practice sketches compiled into a massive singular image. The screen flickered as Photoshop struggled to load each line; the scroll bar on the right shrank to a pinprick. "This is mileage," Harris said. This was what practice looked like for an industry artist—time, dedication, and patience summarized in a flickering file size. The chat exploded with praise, but Harris's focus was only on the file, his eyes tracing over each study. He smiled. "Make mistakes and be excited. Pretty drawings come later."

Harris struggled to answer the avalanche of questions pouring into the overcrowded audio channel. In the corner, the text chat gathered digital dust. "How do I become a character designer?" "How can I learn visual development?" "How did you get hired?" Curiosities and anxieties pounded like rain against a window. Harris ignored most of these, but when asked,

“Does taste matter?” his eyes half-closed, and he crooned a response that sounded halfway between a revelation and a sigh. “No, not necessarily. The industry is just looking for people who are good to work with… people who try new things and people who do not take criticism personally.” The barrage of questions ended abruptly at 7:00 p.m. when Harris announced that he was leaving.

Overall, this first session embodied some of the best qualities of online community learning, but it would also set an unconfident tone that only increased as later lessons became more chaotic. It glittered with fresh friendships, industry promises, and hero worship. For the students, it signified the start of a new career and provided a clean network of social and professional colleagues from which they might refine their craft or secure employment. In the private class Discord, students dedicated paragraphs to outlining their career goals. These speeches mixed job-ladder aspirations with artistic improvement. “Hi, my name’s Cathy, and I want to be a character designer, so I’m really hoping Harris’s class will help improve my figures lol,” one user shared. Other students clamored to reveal their goals, and the Discord channel quickly filled with Twitter links and Instagram portfolios showcasing their work. While the structure of Harris’s course never included this offsite supplemental community, the rapidity of its growth showcased the artists’ interest in it.

This Discord would be fundamental to understanding Harris’s class’s place in the larger online education ecosystem. The course itself represented an optional branch on the path to industry work, but its secondary community space on Discord was not. The public announcement of goals was critical for defining the American animation dreamscape. This

dreamscape was a shared, public objective that reified particular career choices as "good," "challenging," and "obtainable." As discussed earlier, positions within the animation industry were nebulous and unfixed. Working in one position often meant filling the roles of others, particularly as deadlines neared. These responsibilities transcended what one was typically "hired" or "trained" to do, and as a consequence, artists had to work multiple jobs to complete projects. The dreamscape functioned in two ways here. First, it defined work that official job titles might not. Thousands of students expressing their interest in being a "character designer" effectively created that position, despite the industry's ability to use any of its artists for that work regardless of their title. Second, within animated projects, the dreamscape created projects worth "believing in." The dreamscape composed the fabric from which phrases like "it should come naturally" and "trust the process" were sewn. The idea that artistic work could be natural, iterative, and procedural came from the public discourse about the inherent "meaningfulness" of this labor. Artists working to meet deadlines reinforced the same dreamscape that justified their position. In other words, it said, "I want to be a character designer because I believe that it is meaningful work. Completing this current project, even if it is not character designing, is important because its completion ensures that the work I want to do will continue to be needed and valued in the future." Furthermore, if character work was meaningful, and the project needed character work to succeed, then the entire project must be meaningful.

Thus, Harris and his students reaffirmed the value of laborious but personally rewarding work through layered public conversations. This value was expressed most often through firm, declarative testaments about what one intended to do and the work that would be required to get

there. Harris's instruction thus emerged as an important step in this process. It offered a specific kind of tutelage that only he, as an insider, could provide, and it was this secrecy that partially made the work valuable in the first place. Harris played dual roles as a teacher but also as an influencer. Charging more for his course solidified his importance and set a precedent for what qualities would demarcate "his" students in the future. Among these qualities were his artistic style, the $300-800 fee, and his specific dreamscape language. Critically, this course fostered a parasocial friendship between Harris and his students. As discussed more in Chapter 4, within the industry legacy connections and art instructors provided powerful tools for employment. Harris's course built on this idea. His students, who already felt a connection to him prior to this course, strengthened that connection by entering this more intimate, exclusive setting. Moreover, the high price of admission left some students feeling as if Harris's friendship was owed to them. The higher price for more exclusive one-on-one reviews and Harris's proclamation that he desired students who could "work for him" similarly suggested that Harris's intimacy was just as valuable, if not more valuable, than his instruction.

The students' interest in this course was clear, but what about Harris? For him, this course provided a critical transition from informal online mentor to serious teacher. In his YouTube videos, Harris frequently lamented his art education, citing on-the-job training as more useful than formal schooling. Through teaching this course, "this is what I wish I knew before entering the industry" became more than a wish. Harris actualized the change in education he had always imagined. This course celebrated his transition from informal to formal instructor, regardless of whether it resulted in any students actually finding employment. In this sense,

Harris occupied the same dreamscape as his students. When he stated his intentions about the course's goals, he modeled the performance of dream sharing. Thus, Harris and his students contributed to the dreamscape that defined animated work both categorically through job titles and philosophically through the vocal celebration of "hard work."

Moreover, the "big deal" spoke to more than just aesthetic material culture. For Harris and the students, it embodied new attitudes—shifts in the shared dreamscape—that had to be adhered to if one wanted to enter the industry. For many, this shift required artistic and social alterations. To accept being in the industry now meant accepting the philosophy of the "big deal." In the Discord, many students offered small snapshots of their lives as teachers, nurses, college students, and engineers. These brief blurbs looked like "before" photos; quick glimpses of people on the precipice of a pivotal career shift from "before" to professional artist. Harris's own transition from influencer to instructor was a proverbial motivational poster. For others, this course reflected excitement around new and accessible technology. The field of animation had never felt so attainable. But new did not always mean good, and novelty soon wore away into nervousness in the coming weeks. However, perhaps nothing was more shocking than Harris's big reveal in the second class.

Collapse

The next session unofficially began on the class Discord as students waited for Harris to upload the meeting link. The energy from the week prior had settled and student comments suggested some early dissatisfaction.

“He was very unprepared. I respect him a lot, but it seemed kind of unprofessional,” one student wrote.

“No, that’s just because no one would shut up,” another student responded.

Trinity, the creator of the Discord and one who now an exerted informal leadership, offered this advice, “we all need to stay calm and stop talking over each other. We can come here for off topic conversations. Harris is giving a lot of his time for us.”

“ok, but I didn’t pay $800 for him to get distracted and yell at me,” a final student replied.

Together this conversation revealed an emerging tension that formed as Harris transitioned from fun YouTuber to formal instructor. The audience expectations for each role were considerably different. Fans wanted to use this new setting to push the boundaries of their parasocial relationship. By jumping spontaneously into conversations and using his own memes back at him, these fans tried to exude an equal status and authority to Harris. But those expecting a regimented course found these intrusions disrespectful and time-wasting. Since the affordances of the platform (such as text chat, video streams, and the ability to unmute one’s mic) were accessible to everyone, neither Harris, the fans, nor the students could successfully manage an entire course.

Furthermore, fans and students were not wholly separate categories. When Harris asked during the first session “have you seen my YouTube videos” only to receive (as far as I observed) no negative responses, it was clear that his students enjoyed his content. Critically, Harris was more than just the knowledge he provided. Most of his viewers also liked the way he presented that information. Harris’s signature playful aggression complete with insults and swearing appealed to his audience. In the course, students riffed on these themes by punctuating their

questions with cusses and spamming memes into the chat. Where swearing loudly in a university classroom would be inappropriate, it was not unexpected for Harris's fans. It was thusly unsurprising to see many of his students behave the same way. The fact that so many of Harris's students were foremost his fans noticeably affected the culture of the class. Discussions between students frequently softened their criticisms of Harris and the course. For example, in the above exchange, one student is careful to note that they "respect him a lot," and Trinity compliments him for "giving us a lot of his time." These comments suggested what would soon become a recurring theme. Students frequently hedged their criticisms as they felt pressured to maintain a positive relationship with Harris in the hope that they might one day be working in the industry alongside him. This hope, however, would prove to be difficult to maintain.

Harris began the second class session at 5:00 p.m.. Several students unmuted their mics to voice their concerns about last week, but Harris mostly ignored these. Instead, he began another lesson eerily reminiscent of a free YouTube video released earlier that month. He provided drawing demonstrations and answered some questions the students had about technique. At one point he laughed and stated, "I can't believe you're paying me to watch this." People with unmuted mics laughed too, but at least one comment in the chat voiced a clear concern stating, "is this all just your YouTube videos?" There was no response.

By 6:00 p.m., Harris ended the drawing demonstrations and opened the discussion for a question and answer session about working in the industry. The same three questions reappeared in the chat over and over again. Even when answered, identical questions came back. "How can I make it in the industry? What skills are necessary? What positions are currently hiring?" It was clear that the students found Harris's responses, "work hard, draw well, and entry-level jobs,"

unsatisfactory. But if Harris could have provided more information, he did not. Instead, he abruptly ended the Q and A to give a puzzling announcement.

To his course of 300 students, Harris declared that he would be quitting his full-time job as a visual development artist in the animation industry. He explained that he wished to pursue his interest in writing and storytelling while continuing to primarily support himself through his YouTube content. He asserted that learning to balance studies with portfolio work and personal interests was a critical component of living as an artist. He skipped the remaining questions, reviewed the homework, and ended the class.

That night, the Discord buzzed with discussions about Harris's announcement. Their hero, the one who had inspired their interest in the industry because of his place in it, had just announced that he would be leaving to pursue his "dream." Conversations flickered between excitement and worry. "It's good that he's doing what he wants," one user stated. "It worries me, though. Everywhere I look, someone else is running away from the industry."

Over the next two weeks, anxieties and tensions only intensified. In the following session, the chat continued to discuss Harris's abrupt exit from the industry. The language was positive. "I'm excited to see his new work." "I'm proud of him." "Good for you!" But the subtext was different. The chat was less lively, cameras were off, and the cacophonous roar of the Day 1 excitement had sobered into muted mics and a slow text crawl. That day, discussions in the chat focused less on Harris's instructive material and more on private conversations between students. Notably, most of these conversations sought advice outside of the class. Several students asked each other how they could afford digital art materials and whether it might be possible to

replicate these lessons with traditional mediums and low budgets. Others discussed how they could balance art study with family care and their current jobs. In response, students began recommending other art content creators they enjoyed learning from. Even Harris struggled to capture his usual gregarious character. His gaze lingered longer on the tablet screen, and his use of filler words tripled. Trinity mused that the fourth class was the first session where he hadn't asked the class to view one of his YouTube videos first.

The final session came with two more upsetting revelations. First, Harris admitted to never watching the shows he worked on. Second, in answering questions about his own training, it was apparent that Harris had significant formal art education. This new information disrupted the worldview of fans and students. As discussed in Chapter 1, folktales about creativity and ideologies about the "love of art" inform cultural attitudes towards the practice of animation. Consequently, many artists have the expectation that art is better or more meaningful when it is developed from an intrinsic passion. While it might seem more reasonable to assume that this passion precedes artistic production, many of my participants described a process wherein passion was naturalized by consumption. In other words, rather than stating "I love art so I draw a lot," artists were more likely to say "I saw this show and I loved it so much and it inspired me to make art that I love." In the second phrasing, students directly link the media they consume with their passion for making art. Students presented this behavior on the first day of Harris's class when they excitedly shared their favorite animated TV show and their goals in the industry. Thus, when Harris admitted to never watching the shows he worked on, it challenged the inherent presumption students had about artists being fans.

Harris's second confession was equally rattling because it confirmed, or at least supported, the idea that artists in the industry do require formal offline training. Harris's online content featuring his comically aggressively, but otherwise friendly presentation attracted students interested in his realistic "ordinariness." Many of Harris's fans and students identified with his down-to-earth personality and felt validated in their decision to pursue an online-only education when he would post diatribes about "not needing art school" and "not wasting your money." Therefore, to discover that Harris did have significant art training broke the illusion that he and his students were equals. As one of the students told me after class, "all the people I watch online say you don't need art school, and sometimes I think that's true because it's really about knowing how to draw, but then it kinda feels discouraging when everyone you look up to has gone to school and you know you can't afford it."

Overall, this class provided an interesting case study into the social collapse of an online class. In the beginning, the students eagerly awaited Harris's presence, looking up to him as a role model, a parasocial friend, and a purveyor of knowledge and secrets about an industry they desperately wanted to enter. Students frequently remarked how they wished they had more money or availability so they could devote more of their time to participating. Some students admitted they were not accepted into traditional art schools and took this route instead; others shared that they were precluded by poverty or care responsibilities. This created a community of extremely passionate learners, brought together partially by their respect for a man they had never met. By contrast, most people who attend traditional art schools do not necessarily do so to be taught by one specific teacher—they might not even know who is teaching at the school before they attend. Everyone who joined this class did so because they wanted to be taught

specifically by Harris. In this regard, they were already a community before the class even began.

At the same time, Harris's surprise announcement that he was leaving the industry left many students feeling adrift and alone. How could they aspire to enter a world that Harris, their hero, was now choosing to leave? What did it mean for their confidence in the animation industry? As the class experience came to a close, one final question lingered: what's next? I interviewed Brea and Nathan about their thoughts on the class and what they intended to do next. Nathan was a 22-year-old biology student who admitted to struggling with the pressure to finish his degree while pursuing his passion in art. "I really hoped this class would give me the skills or direction I needed to join the industry, but a lot of it just came down to 'practice more.' I already try my best to do that, but I'm busy with other things too and it's disappointing because I feel like that was the promise of the class? To give us industry shortcuts so we don't have to spend so much time drawing. Next, I think I'll just study on Discord and maybe take a summer class," he said.

Brea was 26 years old and balancing a waitressing job with art classes on the side. "Honestly, I was so excited when I started, but on reflection, I was really put off on how unprepared he was," she said. "I'm black and I don't think anyone who looks like me could get away with that. He's privileged in that way. At the same time, I know he's had it hard because he talks about in his videos. Hearing him describe his hardships makes me feel like I can accomplish my goals too." Nathan and Brea's testimonies trigger one final unease. While online courses are more affordable, students must sacrifice regulation and accountability. There are no

other institutional authorities they can go to seek help or voice their concerns. Because their idol is their mentor, many strived to maintain their adoration even when presented with facts that warped their impression of him.

Conclusion

Throughout the weeks, the organization of Harris's course slowly collapsed. Harris struggled to maintain authority in a new environment where students were able to use the allowances of a new online platform to derail discussions. Harris was used to the online structure of YouTube. The commanding presence he cultivated on one platform did not transfer to the synchronous online video call. While his status as an industry professional with "insider knowledge" did carry some authority, his fans were more eager to treat him as a friend rather than an educator. It did not help that Harris openly admitted to being unprepared. Students with more media literacy and more confidence manipulated the platform to silence and direct other students, and to try to earn Harris's attention in other ways. The continual pivoting of social roles and hierarchies created repeated disruptions, pauses, and outbursts. By the end of the course many students felt dissatisfied. Others, like Michael, notably separated the knowledge from the course stating "I'm really happy with what I learned, but the class was so disorganized."

A major source of the conflict was an incongruity between Harris' presentation as YouTuber and as an educator. His social media branding forwarded an energetic, friendly everyman. But when he tried to invoke a more serious focused tone as an educator, his audience responded to his branded identity and not his instructive one. His fans thusly entered the class

anticipating a friend and found themselves flummoxed by being lectured to. The course did not provide the participatory play Harris's branding suggested.

But the course had other concerns too. Students used the Discord and in-class discussions to plan their dreamscapes. The dreamscapes reflect shared ideas about the industry from what jobs are available to what the labor for those jobs should look like. Dreamscapes are collaborative experiences that reinforce the idea that certain projects are "meaningful" and "worth it." Yet the students' biggest dreamscape deteriorated when Harris announced that he would be leaving his job in the animation industry. For many students, the idea of working alongside Harris, their hero, was an aspirational goal. Harris's abrupt and unceremonious announcement of his departure created a considerable rift. Students now had to grapple with the idea someone they deeply admired was leaving their dream career.

Responses to this announcement were varied. Some stopped participating in the course while others continued planning their year with what they intended to study next. Students with opposing feelings engaged in debate over Harris leaving the industry throughout the remaining weeks. The disagreements circulated the question "is this foreboding proof that the animation industry is dying or is this healthy evidence that an animation education is applicable to many fields?" Absent from these debates were Harris's inputs and agency. Interestingly, staying away from his own community allowed him to maintain some of the power he lost when he shifted to a platform and status he was not used to. The distance maintained a notable interpersonal boundary.

Amusingly, these interactions exemplify Harris's industry secret: culture is a big deal. Pre-scripted interactions do not only have implications for animated storytelling, but they may

also explain why certain encounters may struggle or fail. In this case, the scripted relationship between fans and an influencer collapsed when the setting, communication affordances, and expected relationships abruptly changed.

Chapter 3: Discord Community Learning Center

Introduction

My project began in earnest on Discord. While Lightbox sparked initial investigative questions, the answers emerged through the deepening networks of Discord servers I occupied. Participants moved from and between servers. Large communities splintered into smaller study groups. Classrooms formed, collapsed, and reemerged with new members. My own entry into Discord began with Harris's public sever—he was the social media art influencer and instructor I enrolled with in Chapter 2—then his private class server, and then through the looking glass as I followed my participants dutifully marching their way through new communities and classrooms to share their art. While the landscape of Discord is amorphous (an appearance resulting from its shifting, conversational structure and around-the-clock activity), my participants soldiered on strategically. They carefully reasoned their decisions to leave servers or join others. Paradoxically, their detailed justifications appeared incongruous with Discord's structure which allows for easy access to multiple servers. After all, joining a server is only a click away.

What it truly meant to be part of a server proved to be the real source of conflict. That is, joining a server is easy; entering a community is not. Aspiring artists discovered new servers through their favorite art influencers, like Harris, or through events like LightBox Expo. As they integrated into these servers, their friends invited them to join others and subsequently, the network of Discord servers deepened. Throughout the duration of this project, I observed participants analyze, debate, and question their place in Discord's networked communities. These deliberations produced happy, tense, and introspective moments as young artists constantly

reimagined their identity in the professional art world. To this end, Discord servers privilege an anonymity that allows its users to constantly shift identities. Artists reported feeling more "free" to experiment with their style and presentation. Artists would alter their communication patterns and move between servers to demarcate their shifting identities. The result is a liminal environment: an in-between space that bridges the structured classroom and the formal "real world" animation job.

This chapter is an exploration of Discord's structural nebulosity and how students navigated its features to create unique online community spaces that fostered artistic growth while remaining purposefully disconnected from employers. It follows the same platform studies principles established by Lange's (2019) research on YouTube, Gillespie's (2018) research on Facebook and Twitter, and Taylor's (2019) research on Twitch. Namely, it contends that platforms, like Discord, are unique, but they are unique in the way that the stores in a mall are unique. One's behavior in the toy store is different than the perfumery, but there is nevertheless an overarching structure that guides social interaction. The store has culture, but the mall has culture too. The choices one makes in one store may influence your relationship to other stores and the many people who travel between them. Discord is one store in the social media mall. It has unique affordances and modalities that develop culture, but its users are also deeply aware of the way their presence on Discord is networked within other social media platforms.

In the first section, I analyze Discord as a situated learning environment and compare student activities to a more traditional art education. Second, I review how students use Discord's various communication modalities to structure a learning environment that builds a hierarchical

communities based on art progress. Finally, I discuss how student artists navigate Discord's privacy features to shape their identities in preparation for a formal art career.

Discord as a Situated Learning Environment

Within classically structured ateliers, art education resembles Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning environment. Art ateliers provide opportunity for "legitimate peripheral participation" in that apprentice students observe professionally trained "art masters" who indirectly guide instruction physically and symbolically while working on their own craft (Lave and Wenger 1991). At the same time, ateliers do offer structured schooling where masters provide instructive physical demonstrations of their work, drawing alongside and even on top of, student work to show proper technique. In turn, the student-apprentices not only learn to refine their skills from the masters, but they also learn how to be masters themselves. The master-apprentice environment recreates itself as students learn to apply critique to newer pupils. Consequently, the students practice master level-technique and tutelage that prepares them to reenter their environment as masters. Recreating this environment is practical as well as ritualistic. There is a practical need to sustain the field by continually introducing new students that is driven by the ideological assertion that this field and these educative techniques are worth preserving. Inhabiting a space to observe and copy master-level artists while also receiving direct instruction characterizes a lot of conventional art education. However, Discord students are entering a vastly divergent environment. While users do provide feedback, there is seldom an officially recognized "master" to which the students must defer.

Therefore, Discord classrooms represent a uniquely community-based learning environment that minimizes physical situatedness and instead embraces an "always on" atmosphere. When I asked users how they spent their time on Discord studying, some responses revealed that students conceived of Discord less as a "place" and more as a "network." College students who studied art in their free time frequently reported "keeping Discord open in the background" or "periodically checking it throughout the day to respond to pings or read threads." In this sense, Discord operated more like Facebook, LinkedIn, or even email. Students would use it to submit queries, answer questions, or check their messages unlike more "place" oriented social media such as YouTube or TikTok where users spend extended lengths of time consuming content. The students who described Discord as a network were also far more frequently to report using Discord through their phones rather than a desktop. However, students who routinely dedicated 4-6 hours daily to studying art, were more likely to describe Discord as a place. These students joined nightly multi-hour voice calls and participated in group drawing activities. This group was also far more likely to report using Discord from their desktop, laptop, or tablet.

I therefore contend that Discord offers two forms of situated learning: place-based learning and network-based learning. If we are to define success as "the ability to communicate one's interests easily, gain acceptance within a community, and acquire knowledge," then one's success on Discord is dependent upon their ability to shift between these two systems of learning. For my research participants, this success does not necessarily mean artistic success. Students may become better at navigating these learning structures without de facto becoming more skilled artists. This point is critical for understanding the disparity between learning on Discord versus

pursuing a conventional art education. Moreover, Discord is an insecure educational path because artistic growth is not guaranteed.

That is, learning on Discord improves student's skills in learning on Discord. This improvement overlaps with artistic growth when students can apply their learning skills to recruit mentors, receive feedback, follow tutorials, and evaluate their work. But Discord art communities infrequently apply external pressures which encourage students to apply their skills in this way. Further, artistic growth is not a prerequisite for community or learning involvement. An art school or art atelier may levy scholarship funding, course grades, mentorship opportunities, or class availability based on artistic progress. Students may be asked to take courses or complete assignments that push them to develop their skills. By contrast, learning on Discord is highly self-directed.

Discord art students must select their own courses and communities. They must create their own work, manage time for practice, and seek feedback independently. Upon receiving feedback, they must critically evaluate the advice they receive because not everyone who responds will offer applicable or professional insights. As I discuss in the final section on privacy, Discord's culture forwards anonymity, meaning that professionals, advanced students, and beginner students are often indistinguishable. In this environment, learning who to take advice from is as crucial as the ability to implement that advice.

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that these experiences are wholly alien to traditionally-educated art students. Traditional art students are often likewise expected to develop their own self-directed regime that may better help them achieve their artistic goals. In fact, a few of my participants who intentionally chose an informal online education over an art school

reasoned that they would save time and money by using the free community resources they would likely be using anyway even if they did attend an art school. If an art education is always partially self-directed, perhaps it is valuable to practice that self-direction early and vastly more affordably? But while this reasoning does begin to address the second paradox (why would so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career?), it does not explain why students choose Discord in particular.

In the introduction to this chapter, I remarked that students exhibit keen selectiveness when choosing to enter new Discord communities. I intend to expand on that here by contending that community selection is a key component to learning on Discord as the communities they enter impact both place-based and network-based learning. Different servers favor either style. Therefore, entering a new server might mean adapting to a new learning style.

On Discord, place-based learning and network-based learning are both platform-specific digital adaptations to replicate a situated learning environment: students observe master-level work, work with mentors to produce similar works, and accrue social status and knowledge capital through the mentorship of others. It is an observation, production, and reproduction cycle that traditional art atelier's use when art teachers provide guided demonstrates and encourage advanced students to mentor newer students. The key difference lies in whether Discord is someplace you go, or a tool you use. How one conceives of Discord (e.g. as place or as a tool) is largely an individual discernment, but it is not uninformed or arbitrary choice. Each server's unique community, social hierarchies, educative structures, and ethos influence the perception of Discord as a place or a tool.

In short, each form of learning may be summarized and compared as follows:

Place-Based Learning	Network-Based Learning
Requires students to sign-on a particular times to share work or receive feedback;	Students may submit work when they choose; feedback is often random;
The server is moderated, guided, and/or largely attributed to one key figure or "Master" whom students aim to align their	The server is organized around a central, but often abstract theme such as "art," "comics," or "animation;" art styles may vary wildly
Social status and recognition is accrued through voice channels	Social status and recognition is accrued through formal and informal moderation
Entry to the community and/or access to key resources require payment	Joining the server and/or accessing resources is free

Table 1. Place-Based and Network-Based Online Learning

Broadly, place-based learning more accurately mimics a conventional class. Its moderators frequently double as verified instructors. Lessons happen at scheduled times and require students to participate through video or voice. By contrast, network-based learning embraces Discord's "always on" atmosphere. Moderators earn their positions through their passion and availability rather than their artistic credentials. Students may submit work whenever they desire. This frequently results in more feedback, although in turn, students may need to exercise greater scrutiny when evaluating this feedback.

I contend that place-based learning and networkl-based learning are not antagonistic forces, but rather both modalities may be present within the same server. For instance, Harris's public server frequently hosts scheduled classes organized by a certified art instructor alongside a 24/7 student-led critique forum. In this context, students may take advantage of both modalities. Critically, students place distinct, but not necessarily greater value on either modality. When I spoke to Davina about her preferences learning on Discord, I watched her deftly wrangle her toddler who skittered across the Zoom video like blurry moth caught on a night camera. She was

young mother overtired from her career as a nurse hoping to transition to art and animation—a passion she possessed since early childhood. “Discord is the reason I’ve been able to pursue art,” she explained. “You can learn however you want. I can login after work. I can speak with professionals or just people better than me. I don’t need to pay extra or sign up for classes.” Davina’s assessment of Discord’s accessibility matched the sentiments from other students balancing childcare and career transitions. Students who prioritized flexibility and affordability, vastly preferred network-based learning. Conversely, students who preferred place-based learning valued legitimacy. These students argued that the more regimented structure, vetted professionals, and entrance fees created a more conducive learning environment. Further, these barriers produced a feeling of exclusivity.

In her 1946 study of Hollywood, Powdermaker observed how filmmakers obscured production to dissuade audiences and lower-status workers from challenging elite production authorities in a social system she called “totalitarian.” She wrote, “Hollywood represents totalitarianism. Its basis is economic rather than political but its philosophy is similar to that of the totalitarian state. In Hollywood, the concept of man as a passive creature to be manipulated extends to those who work for the studios, to personal and social relationships to the audiences in the theaters and the characters in the movies” (Powdermaker 1950, 343). Since the 1940s, the technical production of films, including animation, have changed dramatically, but the assumption that filmic knowledge gains its power and value from secrecy remains a significant belief amongst the students I interviewed. In this sense, the barriers created in place-based learning proffer a legitimacy. In this context, phrases such as “I paid for access to this Discord,”

or “I log on every night” intimate that this online education is meaningful, valuable, and equal in status to traditional offline learning.

By contrast, network-based learning, with its greater accessibility, might suggest less specialized knowledge or inferior tutelage. However, network-based learning is particularly critical for enacting situated-learning online. Network-based learning features, such as 24/7 channels open to artwork submissions, may lack the experienced “master” leading the course, but they are crucial for final “reproduction” in the observation, production, and reproduction knowledge cycle. The accessibility of these spaces allows for students of all knowledge levels to practice criticism and accrue authority. According to my interviewees, Discord’s sundry communication allowances make practicing these skills easy and fun. Moreover, many students asserted that these allowances and features make Discord the premier place for art study and community.

Features, Communication, and Authority

In an online landscape replete with platforms vying for user attention, what features bring artists to Discord? Many platforms, most notably Instagram and ArtStation, let artists share their work and build their online portfolios, but it is Discord’s robust communication features that allow users to reimagine the situated learning environment online. Artists switch communication modalities and styles within those modalities to accrue and display knowledge capital. The resulting environment is one that encourages social hierarchies based on one’s ability to sufficiently deliver criticism through multiple communication modalities. This section charts

these features and how artists switch between and within them to signal their status in the community.

Currently, Discord allows users to communicate through text, audio, video, and images. These four communication modes are split between several features including text posting, private messaging, live-streaming, phone calls, image uploading, and "reactions."[1] Younger users expressed gravitating towards text posting because of its ease and anonymity. They felt posting a quick reply on a Discord text channel required less time and social commitment than joining a Discord voice channel. When compared to other social media sites, these younger users preferred the rapidity of conversation on Discord compared to Reddit which they believed required longer, more structured conversation. Moreover, students felt that Reddit's upvote system which highlights and rewards certain responses while hiding others, harmed one's ability to receive fair criticism. These feelings appear to be supported by qualitative research on Reddit, which argues that redditors openly participate in "reddiquette" by crafting comments they believe will earn them more recognition rather extending or challenging an existing conversation (Massanari, 2015). However, Fiesler et al. (2018) notes that while there is an "ecosystem of rules" which extend across Reddit as a platform, individual subreddits develop unique rules which appear to be community enforced and context dependent. My research on Discord shows that Discord follows a similar pattern wherein platform-wide allowances shape general behavior, but individual servers require new entrants to adapt to the tone.

When compared to Instagram, younger Discord users liked Discord's conversational atmosphere and felt that their replies were noticed and appreciated unlike Instagram comments.

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[1] This feature is akin to "liking" on Instagram or Facebook.

Overall, Instagram's image hosting features center visual media and obscures conversation, which can often result in advertising and political propaganda appearing indistinguishable from user content (Serafinelli, 2018). Consequently, art students relied on Instagram to distribute their finished works, but decidedly chose Discord as an avenue for learning.

When I asked older Discord users how Discord compared to other social media sites, they were quick to mention two early internet references: "It reminds me of chatrooms," and "It reminds me of forums." These comparisons are apt both in structure and behavior. Like forum threads, Discord channels are organized around distinct topics, conversations stack from oldest to newest, and users quote earlier text to show who they are responding to directly. The resulting conversations demonstrate patterns of group communication: conversational norms, references to earlier speakers, and the formation of smaller subgroups within the larger conversation (Gritsenko 2016). Like chat rooms, conversational styles preference brevity and informality; users manipulate their status to mask their availability; users alter their language to play with race and gender, users change their text style to shift their tone; and finally, without moderation, chaotic actors can hijack conversations (Baron 2008; Lamb 1998; Del Teso-Craviotto 2008; Weber Jr. and Aakhus 2003).

Ultimately, Discord is like other social media platforms in that it its users develop strategies for communication. It is distinguished from current social media, such as Instagram, and early social media, such as chat rooms, in that it provides a variety of engagement opportunities that center communal discussion rather than an individual's feed.

Across all of these platforms, users develop and maintain social hierarchies. This maintenance can be explicit through content moderation, which Gillespie (2018) describes as the

"hidden decisions" which propagate some ideas while obfuscating or censoring others. On Discord this may look like banning users, censoring adult language, restricting user access to channels, and deleting posts. Hierarchy maintenance can also be performed implicitly through users conversation. Similar to Reddit's "reddiquette," Discord users will "correct" each other to enforce social cohesion. These examples display webs of knowledge and power. Who has the knowledge to correct what others say? And, who has the power to enforce those corrections? For the Discord art students, displaying knowledge is a critical component of the observation, production, and reproduction cycle seen in most art conventional education. Volunteering advice, correcting one's speech, and offering fair criticism demonstrate an artist's ascension to mastery. The implicit assumption is that better artists should assist novice artists. Notably, the quality of criticism and the method of delivery exhibit greater knowledge capital. My participants frequently expressed high anxiety around the quality of their work; fearing that they "did not know enough" or "were not good enough" to apply for industry work. In this sense, proving that one can teach concepts serves to illustrate one's mastery of those concepts. This process is a core underpinning of a stage I call **"**debut**"** wherein students take actions to present themselves as professional artists.

On Discord, art students evaluate the importance of features based on the ability to engage with art and feedback. Displaying knowledge capital and asserting authority changes depending on the mode of learning. In place-based learning, students use the tone of their voice to direct group conversations. Students will pause and listen when one student offers a critic. Younger artists notably speak less giving more space for advanced students to levy criticism or demonstrate a skill. Formal educators can even instruct students to leave Discord rerouting the

conversation to another platform such as YouTube or Twitch. In network-based learning, these moments happen through text placing a greater emphasis on length between responses and stylization choices.

Overall, if art school is a true situated learning environment, then Discord can feel more like a perpetual lunch break. It is a moment to catch up with friends between classes. Students use this space to share opinions, witticisms, and concerns. When Shari questioned the efficacy of Danny's course, she aired her hesitations on Discord first. "It feels like a safe space. We're all a part of the same community, and people just generally want to work things out… I trust them." When pressed further about what it meant to "work things out," my informants explained that while Discord conversations were serious at times, most interactions were casual, brisk interludes, and while conversational regulars did accrue social status from their chat frequency, most conversations happened between completely new individuals each time. Discord feels communal, but noncommittal. This combination of short, breezy conversations with anonymous chatters produced a community reminiscent of early 2000s chatrooms. Like these chatrooms, user's impressions about the ease of conversation are not coincidental.

Discord's structure services breezy chatter over long form discussion (such as blog posts). First, Discord has a 2,000 character limit that keeps text posts shorter than a paragraph. Second, Discord offers limited text formatting options, and the options that are available to users (bolding and italicizing) require users to know Markdown, a text formatting system. As a result, large unformatted text posts are difficult to read, especially on mobile devices. Third, unlike forums or blogs, blocks of text from separate users are not sectioned into discrete boxes making it more difficult to keep track of different speakers in long conversations. Fourth, Discord allows users to

select “reactions” which appear as small emojis underneath text/image posts. Therefore, users are more likely to “react” with positive emojis rather than offer verbal approval. In art Discords, this pattern looks like a user submitted illustration with numerous “reactions,” but no additional comments.

Critically, Discord’s users enforce social rules around text length. Users openly profess their preference for brevity and will frequently harass other users for disobeying. In my first conversation on Discord, I asked other users how they felt educational YouTube content compared to more formal art schooling. The entire post consisted of three sentences: introducing myself, asking the question, and offering a brief thought on my experience. Seconds later, user Ben replied “thanks for the fucking novel.” Another user, Amanda responded about 10 minutes later. Over the course of the conversation, Amanda and Ben progressively shrink the length of their responses and the time between replies:

Ben (9:55 p.m.)

thanks for the fucking novel

Amanda (9:57 p.m.)

never taken an art class before

and barely listen to the videos (I listen to the jokes and blank on the rest)

woo woo loser status!

Ben (9:58 p.m.)

same

but i listen

Amanda (9:58 p.m.)

But that said, no I don't feel like I miss anything by not taking art classes

The teachers always seem stuffy to me

Ben (9:58 p.m.)

wdym[2] stuffy

Amanda (9:59 p.m.)

stuck up

In this exchange, Amanda and Ben shift from responding within minutes of one another to seconds. Text posts correspondingly become shorter with more reliance on shorthand (i.e. "wdym"). Not only did this pattern repeat on multiple Discord servers, but users would also transition into more serious responses by increasing text length and adding punctuation. In a discussion about abstract art, users Tyler and Marcus use longer, more punctuated sentences when offering advice.

Me (12:04 p.m.)

Why is abstract art so difficult?

I'm really struggling

Victor (12:06 p.m.)

treat it like practice

Emily (12:07 p.m.)

it requires a different way of thinking

painting a portrait is different than painting a landscape

Marcus (12:07 p.m.)

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[2] What do you mean

you should take the abstract art class

[after a short conversational interlude] Tyler (12:14 p.m.)

Here's some advice:

Shapes fit into the "Golden Ratio," wherein they can be divided by 1.26 to create pleasing sizes. You should also be aware of rhythm—There's a video on that. It shows how multiplying/dividing by 1.26 applies to art.

For color, consider looking into graphic design tutorials. They use color and shapes for abstract things like fonts.

Hope that helps!

Me (12:17 p.m.)

Thank you for the advice friends

I do want to take the abstract art class; it looks fun

Marcus (12:18 p.m.)

It's really great.

High engagement, great community, affordable

In the beginning of the conversation, Victor, Emily, and Marcus offer short, unpunctuated, rapid responses. New ideas appear as new lines of dialogue instead sentences in the same paragraph. By contrast, Tyler's response (which appears 10 minutes after the original query) consists of multiple edited sentences entered at the same time. Later, when Marcus voices his support for the abstract art class, he similarly adds capitalization and commas (i.e. "High engagement, great community, affordable.") Thus, students enter more authoritative and educative roles by typing longer, more grammatically correct sentences. Critically, the

infrequency of these switches to "teacher text" indicate that typical Discord conversations are to remain casual. Therefore student's enforcement of casual speech (i.e. "thanks for the fucking novel") serves to maintain a social hierarchy wherein a majority of students occupy the same social level.

In conclusion, student artists work within Discord's features to display their knowledge, demonstrate their status, and demarcate a transition into a teaching or "mastery" role. In video and voice calls, more experienced students exert their authority by talking more, raising their voice, and critiquing art. In the text channels, students shift into "teacher text" by using increased punctuation, text formatting, and grammatical correctness. At the same time, students may talk over each other, defer to qualified instructors, or chide other users for being too formal. These moments reinforce existing hierarchies and may subtly remind novice students that they are not professionals yet. As students progress in their artistic knowledge and become closer to debuting as professional artists, their interest in expressing their authority increases, and they often begin to make other changes to signal their advancement.

Privacy and Professionalization

With a global user base, the art Discords I observed were active at all hours, resulting in a continuous flow of conversation. Because Discord stores these conversations, each server may contain years of dialogic history. Unless it is intentionally removed by the creator or a moderator, everything from images to political diatribes to gossip are kept in the server's chat logs. boyd (2014) argues in *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* that while various technological affordances— and users responses to them—are not new, they are "persistent" and

users consider things like their online self-expression and searchability within a network of platforms. This means that issues regarding things like privacy and branding include, but extend beyond Discord. Artists consider privacy within a network of platforms. Questions like "will what I post on Discord be shared somewhere else" frequently influence artist's behavior. The rapidity and brevity of Discord conversations may give the appearance of an overwhelmingly casual environment, however, my research participants demonstrated complex feelings about Discord's privacy and implemented strategies to bolster or obscure their online presence.

Unlike chatrooms, Discord keeps a permanent record of all its channels and users may search for phrases or content posted by specific users. When I asked my participants if they used this feature, the most frequent response was "sometimes." The general consensus was that Discord's search feature was "clunky" and unreliable. Moreover, many users expressed social misgivings about the search feature. That is, while some users found searching helpful, others thought that it indirectly enforced social etiquette by permanently linking users to things they wrote casually. This section explores how privacy and professionalization conflict to form an environment wherein students debate whether to relinquish anonymity in favor developing their career.

Discord layers privacy. For instance, many Discord servers are invite-only "Community Servers" that require users to click special links to gain access. Furthermore, most users obscure their identity with screen names. Discord also does not publicly reveal which servers any one user belongs to meaning that a single user may be active on a vast network of servers without others knowing. Private servers, private messaging, unrecorded phone and video calls, options for users to hide their status, and screen names contribute to a culture of anonymity. Indeed,

many of my participants cited being able to obscure one's identity as a key feature which made Discord appealing:

Katie, an 18-year-old college student, shared "I like that I can be myself here. Have hobbies and join fandoms that people in personal life don't know about. If people give me trouble or don't like my art, I can block them or they can block me. I don't have to see them later."

Omar noted, "I'm at an art school in New York. I need a place where I can talk about my film or other weird ideas I have that I don't want my family or school to know about yet. I can be a bad artist here."[3]

Thalia, a teacher in her early 30s, confided her interests in anonymity, "It's hard to talk about. But I can say it here, I'm Muslim. My family and community have expectations for me, but there's things I about me I need to express. I make a lot of queer art. I'm in a lot of queer fandoms, and without Discord, I wouldn't have anywhere to share that. I don't know what would happen to me if I was caught so this space is important."

Across the internet, people desire anonymity for a myriad of reasons and consequently, platforms design structures to appease this desire (Kang, Brown, and Kiesler 2013). These three students embody three reasons why art students, in particular, gravitate to anonymity. Katie wants separation between her online and offline social life. Omar wants a space to share unfinished works without judgment. Thalia wants a safe haven to explore art her family would

[3] Many formal animation programs require animation students to produce a final short film before graduating. These films demonstrate technical skill, storytelling, and direction. Newer students frequently help senior students complete their films.

not approve of. As Garfinkel notes more broadly, "privacy isn't just about hiding things. It's about self-possession, autonomy, and integrity" (Garfinkel 2000, 4).

Unfortunately, anonymity and privacy can come at the cost of online harassment. As of 2024, Discord provided the following statement about its privacy: "We care a lot about privacy. We are committed to creating spaces where people can come together and find a place to belong. Respecting user privacy is a key part of that mission" (discord.com). Researchers and journalists note, however, that there are concerning challenges with content moderation when users are anonymous including bullying, raiding voice channels, and bombing text channels (Jiang et al. 2019).[4] I personally witnessed two different art servers suffer from these attacks. In one instance, an anonymous user filled an art critique channel with images of gore. In another, a user spammed images of pornography in a channel for artists looking for work. Both of these instances took approximately 15 minutes to resolve and required the assistance of a moderator to ban the offender. In short, opening oneself up to this space can also mean subjecting oneself to harassment. When the harasser and the harassed are both anonymous, it is easier to block the offender and move on, as Katie suggested.

However, on art Discords, navigating social privacy directly conflicted with the desire to build one's brand. Many of my participants practiced a cultivated anonymity. They would exclusively use their screen names and actively avoided sharing any identifying information. Unless such information was freely shared, many participants felt it was rude to ask questions about one's race or gender. A few participants even admitted to changing their screen name if

[4] Raiding is practice where users sign on to voice or video calls and play loud disruptive noises with the intent to disturb or end the call. Bombing includes spamming text channels with obscene text or images to disrupt other users from posting.

their previous one became too identifiable.[5] By contrast, other participants saw becoming identifiable as the goal. These users practiced a cultivated branding, where they consistently used the same name across multiple platforms.

Artists who practiced cultivated branding had three primary motivations: (1) to seek friendships and networking opportunities, (2) to accrue social status in the community, and (3) to build a clientele. Several participants believed that using a consistent screen name helped them secure friendships across platforms. In large Discord servers, such as Danny's, users more frequently preferred anonymity. Users who cultivated anonymity did not like the concept of being permanently tied to things they said. Since so much of Discord's structure and ethos champion its privacy, having a structural search feature that lets users review all the content posted by one user on that server felt antithetical to that spirit. Some participants felt pressured to keep their conversations light and "politically correct" to avoid having any unsavory comments appear in the search bar.

In addition, cultivated anonymity users liked to "distance" themselves from their art. Many wanted their works that they considered to be "in progress," "bad," or "sketchy" critically reviewed, but they did not want these unfinished works to be linked to them in any formal capacity. In other words, it was "safe" to share unfinished worked on Discord, but only technically sound, finished pieces would be shared to their Instagram which would be under a different name. By contrast, users in small paid classroom Discord servers (those more likely to

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[5] It is possible to change your screen name, but not the unique code number associated with your account. If you know this code, which is available publicly to all members on the same server, then you are still able to search a users entire chat log regardless if they change their screen name.

practice place-based learning), openly sought friendships and networking opportunities. These cultivated branding artists would often share their first name and location. They would share their contact information for other websites and expressed interest in finding study partners and collaborators.

Users who practiced cultivated branding would also express interest in accruing social status in the community. Critically, these users were far more likely to transition into "teacher text." These shifts distinguished these users as helpful. Since advice and criticism are precious (because of the time and labor it takes to produce meaningful feedback), users who offered free supplementary teaching often became notable members of the community. Other community members would cite prolific advisors as "leaders" and "teachers." In situated learning environments the gradual shift from apprenticeship to teaching signals the student's progress towards mastery. These Discord users mimic this shift by slowly increasing the amount of free art advice they provide as they prepare to enter the job market more formally.

At the same time, users also expressed their interest in accruing social status in order to organize their own communities or receive recognition from their idols. Several participants told me they manage their own Discord servers or desired to make one. Student Amanda openly recruited members from larger servers to her own which she described as having "better feedback, constructive comments, and better organization." Amanda identified potential recruits via their shifts to "teacher text" and posting consistency. In this case, formal writing and a branded identity indexed the seriousness Amanda was seeking for her community. Users who kept a consistent name across platforms were also far more likely to catch the attention of the

server's owner. Since industry connections are vital to obtaining work in the animation industry, many of my participants desired to befriend industry artists, such as Danny.

Finally, users who practiced cultivated branding most eagerly sought employment opportunities. Not only did these users frequently link off Discord to their other social media pages (such as Instagram or Twitch), they would also share their commission pricing, express the desire to obtain more followers, and inquire about job opportunities. Underneath images of their art, they included phrasing like "you can find me at [@username] everywhere." For these users, having a consistent name meant having a consistent brand identity—a practice Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere term "self-branding within a social media ecology" (2017, 2). At the same time, they note "Although social media users may have initially been called upon to project just 'one identity,' there is a growing awareness that users showcase discrete elements of their personalities on particular platforms" (Duffy Pruchniewska, and Scolere 2017, 2). The pressure to use the affordances of one platform to create a specific identity often results in a "platform-specific self brand" (Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018, 1). Thus, while cultivated branding students did link offsite to their other social media, these students primarily focused their Discord presence on teaching, critique, and job searching.

Overall, the interest in building an [@username] everywhere identity conflicts with interests in privacy. As a platform, Discord allows both forms of user to coexist but it can be difficult to have flexibility. Being an [@username] everywhere user ties artists to an identity they may later wish to change from. Changing the username thus creates a change in the entire identity ecosystem. Therefore, artists who consider themselves to be advanced and ready to seek

employment opportunities are the ones most likely to pursue this kind of online brand managing work.

The decision to transition from cultivate anonymity to cultivated branding (or back again, if an artist changes their art style or medium) is critical. Artists may mark this shift by changing their username to something catchier (e.g., 2bigg0ldfsh to Erika's Art), linking to offsite platforms, or asking for portfolio and resume reviews rather than art critique for a single piece. As the students move through various types of performative branding activities, they index their transition from novice to professional. However, several participants who made these shifts lamented losing their anonymity and felt pressured to only share their best work.

I met Candace through the official LightBox Discord server where she distributed links to her YouTube page. Other students recognized Candace from study groups she organized on several different servers. Candace told me in an interview, "I completed a mentorship last year with a famous artist from Blizzard. It was really expensive and I had to save all my money to do it, but by the end, I felt I had enough skills to go for it." In this case, "going for it" meant changing her username, starting an official art portfolio, and uploading speed paintings of her work onto YouTube.[6] Candace's increased skills had thus far resulted in her increased confidence in her self-branding. However, it's unclear whether these skills drove her increased viewership, or whether increased marketing corresponded to increased viewership regardless of her artistic progress. Despite the uncertainty of the answer to this question, Candace squarely asserted that viewers would not watch her content if her art was unskilled or unfinished. This

[6] A speed painting is a popular form of online art content where artists show sped-up footage of an illustration they have made from start to finish. These videos usually contain accompanying voice-overs where artists explain their process or reflect on news in the art community.

belief put a lot of pressure on Candace to consistently produce high-quality content that had yet to turn a profit for her. “I like uploading to YouTube, but it’s hard to be consistent each week, you know? I need to make good work so people will watch it, but I don’t always feel proud of what I’m making. You can’t just upload a sketch; not at my stage.”

In short, increasing one’s Discord publicity may increase one’s offsite traction, however it also negates one of reasons so many artists found Discord appealing in the first place—that they might have a non-professional place to share in-progress works. Users must strategize their shift from cultivated anonymity to cultivated branding as this transition requires laborious and often emotionally draining changes throughout a broader social media ecosystem. As I will explore in the subsequent chapter, the myths around performing greatness are not unfounded.

Conclusion

With more people seeking online entertainment and education during the pandemic, Discord art communities saw increased activity. Since the 1990s, animation, has itself, become a very digital medium and animation tutelage has consequently incorporated more digital media software (Furniss 2016). In many ways, this research captures the shifting cultural ideas around online instruction. Namely, do students believe that learning exclusively online is as good as attending a physical classroom? When I initially began preliminary research in 2018, most of my informants strongly desired to attend a physical art school and would have chosen to do so if they had the money and time available to them. By contrast in late 2021, many students expressed the desire to receive an online-only education. Intriguingly, Discord’s history reveals that it was never intended to become the next digital classroom. Discord is not unique in this

regard; it is not the first social media platform to evolve behind its creator's intended purpose. However, Discord is a meaningful locus for digital research on community and education. The situated-learning environments I observed on Discord proved that a classroom is more than "a place where learning happens." Discord art students entangled themselves in practice, mentorship, and professionalization wherein they not only learned how to be better artists, but also how to integrate newer artists into the same networked community involvement.

I opened this chapter by explaining how Discord acted as the locus through which I explored the second paradox: Why would so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career? I can answer the first part of that question here.

Why would students choose a self-directed art education through Discord? Simply, Discord is affordable. CalArts, one of the most historic and recognizable art schools globally, estimates tuition at $55,000 for 2023–24 with plans to increase costs in the coming years (CalArts). As one interviewee put it, "I'm not becoming a lawyer. I'd never be able to pay that back." But even still, there are a lot more affordable options between $55,000 and free Discord art tutorials. The Watts Atelier I mentioned earlier presently offers pay-as-you-go online courses for $99 a month. By contrast, Discord art servers have infrequent and informal instruction with limited teaching from industry professionals—a title that anyone may give themselves. Moreover, this knowledge is not secret. The students I interviewed were well aware of Discord's shortcomings. They acknowledged that may not receive quality critique, that being on a platform which caters to "edgy, politically incorrect anonymous gamers" may increase their likelihood of being harassed, and critically, that Discord learning does not guarantee artistic improvement or a career.

So, why would so many students pursue such an insecure education? For many, Discord promises two things art schools and online courses do not: community and social advancement. Art schools frequently require students to compete for the same scholarships, internships, and jobs. Art school attendees I spoke to described the experience as “grueling,” “toxic,” and “lonely.” Attendees outcompeted thousands of other applicants for the privilege to enroll. Students described the resulting campus culture as fiercely competitive. Conversely, online art courses can be deeply isolating. There are no common halls for students to mingle and classes are often taken completely alone.

Discord’s design services community and conversation first. The barrier to entry is low. Students may cultivate anonymous personas that allow them to be socially invested in the community without it reflecting in their personal offline life. They may share unfinished “low quality” pieces without worrying how these pieces might appear to employers. Furthermore, students do not receive social status from their grade level or number of courses they’ve taken. Rather, students accrue social status from the quality of their critique.

Ultimately, Discord is appealing to art students despite its insecurity because systems of invested knowledge keeps students at all levels involved in maintaining the community. Artistic growth becomes more than a personal responsibility. It is also the metric which demonstrates the success of the community’s moderators, leaders, and influencers. Since the entire community is student-supported, students are more likely to view each other as equal collaborators rather than competitors. The community is dependent upon all artists, from novice to professional, feeling supported and invested in maintaining this network.

Chapter 4: Professionalizing Perfect

Introduction

The transition from student to industry artist is branched like mycelia. Students, education, mentorship, and career are interwoven in a complicated thread-like structure. It is in this network students form their relationship to art, tutelage, and work. These relationships are flexible and their perspectives often change in response to their education, but for the participants of my research, the goal never wavered: join the animation industry. With outsourced labor and the number of art school graduates increasing yearly, this competitive goal already appears ambitious. But for my participants, many of whom describe themselves as nontraditional students, such as those switching careers, returning to art after a long hiatus, or electing for a completely self-organized informal online education, the goal and the progress towards it are equal in their vagueness and loftiness.

This chapter explores the way in which "skill" becomes the most valued vehicle to accomplish the goal of joining the animation industry when in reality, job recruiters frequently rank artistic ability vastly below other workplace qualities such as effective communication. I argue that positioning artistic competency as the most crucial determinant for employment does two main things. First, it provides students a measurable growth scale wherein acquiring new skills demarcates clean advancement towards their goal. This growth is simultaneously personal and objective. Students see learning anatomy, for instance, as a measurable skill, but they also incorporate the struggle to learn anatomy into their personal narrative about their "art journey." Measuring art progress through skill is consequently appealing because students see observable

changes in their work and because they associate the time they dedicated to make these changes with their commitment to their goal. Second, I argue that by valuing artistic skill over other job qualifications, students routinely re-articulate the value of art allowing them to rationalize their interest in pursuing profit alongside passion.

To explore these arguments I examine two moments in my participant's education that pose a fundamental oddity. The first is an extensive art competition hosted by art instructor and theorist Julian Tudor. The second is an experimental online anatomy class taught by legendary art educator Stanley Woolard who is highly revered for his in-person lectures. These instructors are well-vetted, well-educated, and well-liked; both are equally impressive in artistic virtuosity and teaching ability. Yet, for students self-selecting their education online, these courses at first appeared to me to be a surprising choice. If the goal is to enter the animation industry, then pursuing education related to animation feels like a natural extension of that goal. But neither of these experiences or these educators seem to meet that end. Tudor and Woolard have never worked in animation nor do they advertise lessons pertaining to it.

Tudor's competition focuses on digital painting—a skill unneeded for most of my participants, who were pursuing work in storyboarding or character design. Woolard's course balanced technical knowledge in anatomy with an extensive art history education centered on replicating the techniques of one famous figure artist. The fine art skills cultivated in this course are not only unnecessary for work in the animation industry but may even stall new industry entrants' progress, as they will have to be retrained to fit the construction techniques used in modern animation. Thus while dissimilar in their content, these two experiences capture a parallel oddity: why might students pursue coursework unrelated and unnecessary to their larger

goals? Answering this question is an integral component to answering the larger question I explore throughout ACT 2: since art and animation schools acquire prestige through their ability to secure students a place in the larger workforce, why would so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career?

As I suggested earlier, the answer to this puzzle emerges from the physical process of skill building and the narrative associations attached to it. Throughout these experiences with Tudor and Woolard, students reassert their interest in animation and their progress towards that interest. Ultimately, narrative creates value in the process while skill creates value in the product. Students routinely balance the language the of both to legitimize their education, explore their practice, defend their artistic choices, and demarcate progress towards their goal of joining the industry. The following subsections of this chapter explore each of these motivations.

Digital Lineages

Lineages, real and imagined, have a profound impact on artistic production. "What class did you take" is frequently used as shorthand for "what class did you take and with whom?" The reputation of prestigious art schools hinges on the ability of their students to find industry work, a process which in itself relies on situating students within particular artistic lineages. To say, "I attended CalArts" is to say "I place myself within Walt Disney's artistic lineage." Curiously, this placement does not come from artistic ability: rather, it is the lineage itself which asserts value. That is, an artist who trains at CalArts, but does not reproduce the signature Disney art style, is still recognized for being within a lineage of Disney artists. They may benefit from their real and historic connection with these artists to apply for work. Their teachers and mentors may advocate

for their ability even if the student produces work dissimilar to their own. Moreover, a teacher can attest to more than a student's artistic ability as students also demonstrate their timeliness, agreeability, and diligence through coursework. By contrast, an artist who can flawlessly reproduce the Disney-style, but lacks the industry connections borne from art school lineages, is eschewed these advantages. The ability to place oneself within an artistic lineage and take advantage of the connections that lineage offers is one of the primary benefits art schools command. Yet, curiously, when I asked my participants what they felt the advantages of attending an art school were, this reason was not a common response. But while not vocalized clearly, I argue that students reify the importance of artistic lineages through their actions. While most of my participants asserted that the primary value of art school was to improve artistic skill, the "when," "where," and "with whom" continually structured artist's personal narratives about their work. One of the more critical experiences that evidences the value of artistic lineage is the recreation of those lineages online. Moreover, I argue that this lineage reconstruction is not strictly for practical networking purposes, but students also use lineage to legitimize their education and their status as artists. The motivating belief that "good artists have lineage" fosters lineage construction even in non-traditional learning environments.

My participants would explicitly juxtapose art school against their informal online education. Online students used conditions such as cost, time, and the ability to freely choose their courses to openly celebrate their decision to pursue alternative education. In this sense, online art education was lauded not necessarily for its own benefits, but instead for "not being art school." In other words, many online students enjoyed their alternative education precisely because it was "non-traditional." When speaking about the affordances of an online class, one

participant told me, “Art school is stuffy. I remember doing art in high school and a bit in college and if I wasn’t tracing DaVinci or painting fruit, I was ‘doing it wrong.’ But now online, I can use all these classes to study exactly what I want, when I want, and with people I really respect.” In this response, the student frames traditional art exercises negatively. Traditional practice, such as still-life painting, counters what the student wants to do, and more importantly, what they believe they need to do in order to achieve their goals. Critically, this framing not only positions these art exercises as obsolete or unnecessary, but also the instructors requiring it. That is, to study what they want, when they want, and with people they “really respect,” implies that instructors also gain value by opposing traditional education. This sentiment was not uncommon as many of my participants asserted that creating a “targeted curriculum” was one of the primary benefits of a self-directed online education. As put participant put it, “I can learn animation from someone actually doing animation.”

The perception that art school is “stuffy” while contemporary online education is fresh and innovative was also a commonly held belief. This perception appears to stem from the broader history of art which has historically prioritized Western painting and sculpture. Ironically, the inclusion of non-Western, non-colonial art into art history education has largely strengthened the impression that Western aesthetic traditions are incomparable. Anthropologists have been dutifully critical of this distinction and have rightfully scrutinized the study and segregation of “primitive” or “ethnic” art for being ahistorical and essentializing (Coote and Shelton 1992; Gell 1998; Schneider and Wright 2021). But even these criticisms tend to focus on objects most commonly recognized as “art” in a western canon such as painting, performance, or costume. These objects appear to derive their primary value from aesthetic appreciation rather

than casual consumption. That is, objects become "art" not only through production, but also through the viewer's participation. Viewers interact with the Mona Lisa differently than Marvel's *Avengers*.

In his analysis of "taste," Bourdieu (1984) specifically points out the way education reinforces a "hierarchy" of arts, which members of a culture may use to make statements about their class. Furthermore, people may legitimize their place in the arts hierarchy and their ability to make statements about it by acquiring what he calls "titles of nobility;" explicit recognition from art institutions:

> To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'. The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it: the importance attached to manners can be understood once it is seen that it is these imponderables of practice which distinguish the different—and ranked—modes of culture acquisition, early or late, domestic or scholastic, and the classes of individuals which they characterize (such as 'pedants' and mondains). Culture also has its titles of nobility—awarded by the educational system—and its pedigrees, measured by seniority in admission to the nobility. (Bourdieu 1984, 1).

Bourdieu reasons that "tastes" that run counter this hierarchy still participate in this broader system of nobility. That is, saying "I prefer the *Avengers* over the Mona Lisa" plays within the hierarchy to make statements about one's class or anti-elitism. This effect does not mean that all "bad tastes" are intentional counter-culture proclamations. But rather, Bourdieu asserts that all "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (1984, 7). For animation school students, this "legitimized social difference" plays out in interesting ways. Animation graduates do possess great skill and knowledge which may "refine" their tastes, but they also openly chose not to.

Does an animation education pedigree really assert value in the "hierarchy of arts" when its champions choose to produce children's cartoons and not renaissance paintings?

Many modern art schools are consequently held in abeyance between this unique tension. On the one hand, art schools gain their prestige precisely by being traditional. They teach classical Western approaches to art and reinforce beliefs about the reverence these works deserve. These beliefs then influence and are influenced by larger society. On the other hand, most art school graduates are explicitly aware of and are in fact, keenly interested in producing large capitalistic pop culture projects.

Joyce, a woman in her 30s pursuing an online education, reflected on her experiences learning art in college. "Back when I was trying to get my BFA, before I switched to psychology, I really enjoyed my art classes. I liked learning about gothic architecture and doing oil paintings. But it always felt kind of… distracting? What I really wanted to do was digital art and environments for animation. But instead, every week I'd stand up and present my latest portrait or surrealist painting and wax poetic about what it 'really' meant. I think feeling like I wasn't heading in the right direction eventually led me switching degrees" she told me. Similarly, Mathew who graduated from Savannah College of Art and Design with a BFA in Animation in 2018 said, "You do spend a lot of time of doing classical, foundational stuff like figure drawing. And you do take a lot of history and story classes and GEs. I think a lot of students find those boring so they don't try very hard. We all want to practice or work on our film project because we know that's what is going to get you a job or internship." Joyce and Mathew both express frustration being held back from their passions. While history and drawing foundation courses do

build important skills, I argue Joyce and Mathew's experience demonstrate how these classes serve a secondary function to "perform education."

Art students aspire to present as art students. This presentation includes displaying personal items (e.g., animation shirts, keychains, sketchbooks) and participating in key activities (e.g., sketching, taking art classes). Art schools correspondingly operate both as practical learning environments for skill-based trades and academic institutions. Art history classes, general education classes, and traditional painting classes all service this latter function. As noted earlier, however, informal online students are theoretically unburdened by the pressure to present as formal art students and perform a more traditional academic art education. While many of my participants celebrated this freedom, equal numbers chose to reproduce these experiences online, even if they may vocally say otherwise. A clear example of this reproduction is seen in the importance online students place on tracing their artistic lineage.

In the following conversation on Discord, two students debate and reify the importance of lineage. In this excerpt, students Sophia and Marcus discuss their plans for the summer. What they are hoping to learn entangles with who they are hoping to learn from. Critically, Sofia appears to propose a lineage that Marcus challenges for being "unreal."

"So what are you doing next?" I asked Sofia.

"Well, do you know Julian Tudor? He's an art teacher on YouTube, but he also runs this online summer art camp on Discord. He gives you a theme, you submit a painting, and he reviews them. The worst entries that day get eliminated, but you can still compete for fun. And sometimes he reviews the 'just for fun' entries too" she told me.

"Does he teach painting?"

"No. Well, on his YouTube, yes. But the camp is just for fun and practice. And for the challenge of saying you've done it for all 30 days."

"What are you hoping to learn?"

"I really want to get better at digital painting! It's my weakest area, I think. A lot of my paintings are, like, really bad. But really, I just want him to notice me. He's my favorite online teacher. I think I would actually die if he gave me some feedback on my work."

"He has a real class, you know? It's on another platform," Marcus interjects. "He'll actually teach you stuff and grade your homework. He'll actually talk to his students, and get to know them, and then you can say you actually learned from him."

Sofia is a young woman attending her local community college to study nursing. She had previously shared with me the tension she felt between both paths: a profitable and clearly defined nursing career, and her passion for character design which is a popular job in the animation industry. Now, as I posed her my questions, however, the tension felt less pressing as Sofia was a week into her summer break and she professed to taking this time to "really go hard on making art." In this way, her story is not unlike many other younger artists in the Discord learning communities. Many students delicately balanced formal schooling with artistic practice on the side. Summers thusly emerged as critical temporal moments. It was not uncommon for artists to share their "before and after" summer progress with side-by-side displays of their work. Instructors know the value of summers too. Discord servers, YouTube videos, and livestreams become replete with "limited time summer sales," offering exclusive online art courses that run throughout the summer months.

Sofia and I met through the art convention LightBox Expo, and later reconnected when we took the same online course on animation with Daniel Harris. It was not a summer course, and Sofia admitted to struggling with the homework and class live-stream schedule amidst her community college midterms and lectures. “I’m still glad I did it,” she had told me. “When I saw he was offering a course, I knew I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to learn with him—even if I never got the personalized art review.” Since the course ended, I had followed her through various art Discord servers where she would share examples of her work and scour for new courses. The animation course we took together ended a couple months ago, spring was eclipsing into summer, and she had expressed wanting to find something new.

Marcus is a regular on this Discord server. He frequently shared his art studies and would jump from free programs to others. In a separate discussion he told me, “I don’t make much money at my day job, so I’m really only interested in classes that are valuable to me. I’m looking for teachers I really trust and want to learn from. I want to save my money for the best.” Like Sofia, Marcus cautiously balanced his daily responsibilities with his artistic interests. Although he was not in school, he too took advantage of the fecundity of summer course offerings and would frequently compare programs in the Discord chat rooms. These comparisons debated the value of the content, instructors, price, and critically, the “authenticity” of these courses. Marcus and the others he chatted with scrutinized programs to evaluate whether they were a commensurate experience to art school.

In the above conversation, the authenticity of Julian Tudor’s art camp hinges on his role as an instructor. Sofia expresses her excitement by proclaiming that he’s her “favorite teacher” and that she deeply desires to receive art criticism from him. Her interest in the camp extends

beyond her interest in improving her skills in digital painting; something she could practice without a formal camp or course. The camp is appealing precisely because Tudor is the one hosting it. Marcus's interjection challenges her excitement on basis that the camp is not "a real class." In this instance, Marcus asserts that Sofia's imagined lineage between her and Tudor is not authentic. This conversation thus reveals several implicit assumptions about the relationship between students, courses, and instructors.

First, Tudor is a teacher, but he is only seen as "her" teacher when their relationship has been formalized through coursework. Otherwise, her relationship to him is more akin to watching YouTube tutorials rather than attending a class. Second, the authenticity of a lineage thereby hinges on the quality and structure of its mentorship. In his classes Tudor provides consistent and personalized criticism. By contrast, the reviews offered through the camp are inconsistent, simplistic, and do not consider an artist's entire body of work. A quality mentorship, and consequently a quality lineage implies teacher-student relationship over a considerable quantity of time. Third and finally, a "real" lineage must be reciprocally acknowledged. Just as Sofia might say "Tudor taught me," Tudor must also agree, "I taught her." Nevertheless, lineages may be continually debated, contested, and restructured as the relationship between the teacher and student changes.

With these elements in mind, I propose the following matrix to explore the relationship between various forms of formal and informal education and their effects on how authentic or approximate an artistic lineage is.

Formal	Informal

Authentic	A formal course or mentorship with practical drawing advice and 1-on-1 critique Personal relationship to the instructor Usually paid “Glen Keane taught me to storyboard when I started at Disney”	Following books or online tutorials from someone supplying instruction No personal relationship to the instructor “I learned how to draw hair from Harris’s YouTube tutorials.”
Approximate	Informal mentorships or large classes without personalized advice “I took an online class with Tudor to improve my painting”	Copying or studying artwork from other artists No instructor and no personal relationship to the artist “I trace images by Chuck Jones to study cartooning”

Table 2. Formal-Informal Authentic-Approximate Learning Matrix

In short, formal and authentic lineages are the ones students and hiring committees are most likely to recognize as “real.” The lineage is grounded in formal, often paid, coursework. The instructor and student recognize each other within the same lineage. A formal but approximate lineage is similarly grounded in coursework, but lacks the personalized guidance that helps students acquire job opportunities through networking. Informal and authentic, and informal but approximate lineages are “imagined” through the perspectives of students. Students imagine these lineages through practice and learning, but not explicit mentorship. Neither lineage forms a personal relationship to the instructor. The difference between informal and authentic, and

informal and approximate, lies in whether there is instruction at all. A book or YouTube tutorial offer instruction while reproducing a master study does not.[7]

But why do students create lineages? And, critically, why do other students challenge them? What does Marcus stand to gain by chiding Sofia's excitement and proposing instead that she take "a real class" instead? Becker argues that "Art worlds routinely create and use reputations, because they have an interest in individuals and what they have done and can do" (1982, 351). Students therefore accrue not only tutelage from lineages, but reputation as well. The transference of reputation from a senior artist to a student may allow a lineage to index reliability, creativity, and skill. In Lancy's review of apprenticeship, he argues that apprenticeship is "a formal, contractual relationship between a master and a novice of a specific duration which is designed to serve two ends: to provide cheap labor and/or fees to support the master's enterprise; and to afford the apprentice an opportunity to learn and receive certification for mastery" (2012, 113-114). While not all art education results in apprenticeships of this nature, the dual-support structure is common within the animation industry. Industry apprenticeships frequently require interns to perform less-desirable tasks while receiving professional guidance and more complex training on the side. Online, however, this understanding on apprenticeship is more murky.

Online instructors, such as Tudor, are not working on or hiring for animated projects, and the primary benefit from teaching their courses comes the money they earn by selling them. Training students in particular animation skillsets in exchange for cheap labor is unnecessary.

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[7] A master study is a form of artistic practice where a student copies an artwork as closely as they can. This process helps students improve their composition, value, color, and/or technique with the goal of incorporating what they learn into their own work.

Nevertheless, online students continue to uphold the historical significance of art lineages by revering their educators as masters. Overall, the objective of this authority figure is to distill creative knowledge, to create a style guide, and reaffirm key principles of instruction.

In the working environment, adhering to a style guide and company workflow is critical to securing and maintaining work at a studio. Companies seek to shortcut training by hiring artists already familiar with these practices. This interest makes "lineage-based" hires appealing. But for informal online students, replicating these knowledges and systems is difficult, and I argue that it often leads student to mistake other appealing hiring qualities for artistic greatness. In other words, when a student trains with a prominent artist, their changes in skill are easily observable, but other qualities such as their ability to take criticism, work efficiently in a group environment, and produce consistent work for 8 hours are less apparent. Online students consequently place greater emphasis on learning from certain individuals since from a distanced perspective it appears that learning from this individual is the main strategy for finding work. When Marcus chides Sofia for not taking a "real class," he is protecting his own vested interest in Tudor's lineage. After all, if Tudor is a great instructor and his lineage enables industry work, then it is economically and symbolically worthwhile for Marcus and other students to enroll in his course.

In conclusion, online students use lineage to approximate formal education while learning new skills. While he is not in the industry, instructors like Tudor are valuable because of they offer affordable high-quality education. Without personalized feedback, however, online students struggle to obtain the networking advantages apparent in formal authentic lineages. And, while online students largely prefer the informal, self-guided curriculum that online courses offer, the

pressure to present as an "art student" leads many students to reproduce offline art traditions digitally. Since traditions reproduced online lack systematized authorities, it is other students which validate and contest authenticity. This practice is how lineage claims become controversial discussion topics and why students like Marcus challenge other's proposed lineages. In the following section, I further discuss online students perform the role "art student" while keeping their objectives abstract and malleable.

Enacting Knowledge and Art Journeys

What do the first fifteen minutes of artistic creation look like? For the students I observed, creation almost always began in an identical way: with a circle. Throughout the duration of this project, I watched hundreds of students and instructors start this way. Whether they were traditionally educated, online educated, working in the industry, practicing, sketching, or producing a final work, the circle reappeared thousands of times as the genesis of creation. However, it is false to assume that the circle is the only way or the best way to begin drawing. It was also not uncommon to hear instructors advise against beginning with a circle. Nevertheless, the discourse around the circle (e.g. to begin or not to begin with one) indicated that the circle is a prominent feature in the creation of artistic works. In this sense, I argue that the circle is emblematic of practice. It indexes a form of knowledge. It is a visualization of knowing "how to do art" that is so integrated into the practice of art that students rarely think to begin in other ways. To go from not beginning with a circle to beginning with a circle demarcates a progression in knowledge. It is minor shifts in technique such as this that students identify as "improvement." This section examines how students practice and build narratives of success around

"improvement." Critically, I explore how narratives of improvement enmesh with myths about skill.

"I just want to improve," Abby told me when I asked her why she decided to enroll in Stanley Woolard's figure drawing class in Fall 2021. Unlike other courses, Woolard's class more readily embodied a traditional art class. It had a required text, weekly homework, and synchronous zoom lectures which fused art history with practice. The purpose of the course, according to the blurb Woolard delivered during Lightbox Expo 2021, was to teach students the history of famed anatomist George Bridgman while having them replicate his studies. "It's a great class with a great opportunity to talk about a skilled artist whose conceptions of bodily form played a pivotal role in shaping my own work," Woolard announced. But for students, it was Woolard's lineage, not Bridgman's that they found most appealing.

For over 40 years, Stanley Woolard has been working as a professional illustrator. What began as a successful career in advertising morphed into an equally successful career in teaching in the early 1980s. In the late 2000s, Woolard began experimenting with online teaching after appearing in a successful podcast. Students described him as "intelligent," "critical," "deeply personable," and a "skilled instructor." On the Discord chats I frequented, it was common for Woolard to be described as a "master of art and philosophy." The general consensus was that Woolard had a unique way of blending critical art education with therapeutic discussions about the meaning of practicing art. Compared to a more boisterous art influencer, like Harris who I discussed in Chapter 2, Woolard projected a calmness more akin to painters-turned-educators like Bob Ross. He embodied that idea that good art comes from patience, joy, and a personal (perhaps even spiritual) connection with the medium. In this sense, Woolard's teachings are more

aligned with the way the public assesses "art worlds" in that he affirms a comfortable, meaningful relationship with art that puts a passion for the craft above pure profit (Becker 2023). At the same, Woolard was never shy about art being a source of income for him; making art and teaching art was his job and he was grateful for the opportunity. With this complex personal history, prominent art career, and extensive knowledge, it was curious when I asked Abby what she hoped to learn in his course that her answer be simply "to improve."

While there were many other reasons Abby could have listed for joining Woolard's course, her answer was not an entirely strange one. When I interview Sofia after we finished Harris's Animation Fundamentals course in Spring 2021, I asked her if she felt that she had accomplished her goals. "My goal was to learn and improve. The class wasn't what I expected, but I think I did that." Similarly, when I asked her about her decision to participate in Julian Tudor's Art Camp she stated, "I want to get better at digital painting." Conversely, when I asked Jason to reflect on his experiences in Harris's class he told me, "It didn't suck. I think I learned a lot about doing animation as a job, but I wanted to learn skills. I wanted to see my work after and be impressed by my improvement. I feel like that's what was promised to us." These responses and others circled a central curiosity: what is improvement, and furthermore, how and why does improvement become a goal?

"To me it's like… well say you're in college and you have to take a biology class, would you say you're improving in biology? No, but art is like that. I can draw a face, take a portrait class, and then get better at drawing a face. I think maybe it has to do with seeing where I want to be," Abby shared later, reflecting on her thoughts about improvement as she worked her way through Woolard's course. I shared her response with Jason, another of Woolard's students, who

expanded on her ideas. “Yea, it’s just about getting better. You see all of these amazing artists and you want to do what they do. For me, I feel like I’ve improved when I can draw faster and without reference. Great artists can just draw, but I have to sit there forever and it feels like ‘why can’t I do that? I need to improve.’” Here, Abby and Jason reveal the first truth about improvement: improvement is comparative. Both aspire to see visual changes in their work as well as technical changes in their workflow. For Jason, improving is also about how the art is done; improving feels faster and more coordinated.

Further conversations between Woolard and the students revealed a second truth and third truth: improvement is often intentionally vague and improvement holds more value than “improving.” “You come to me and you ask: Is my work better than last week? And what am I supposed to tell you? Does it feel better? Are your lines smoother? I can tell you that your studies look more like Bridgman’s; that the tilt of pelvis matches his study perfectly, but did you internalize that? I can’t tell you,” Woolard said as he reviewed the submissions for the Week 3 homework over Zoom. In the chat, several students responded, “I think I’ve improved,” and “I’m still learning.” The following week I asked Gogi how he felt about his progress in the course. “I think I’m improving,” he replied. When I asked what he thought he was improving on, he paused, and said, “my lines.” The paradox of improvement is that while it is comparable, it is also often vague. Students identify improvement when their work looks different from their earlier work, but the objective “to improve” eclipses discussions about what specifically students are hoping to change. It is this vagueness Woolard appears to push against when he tells his student that the homework “looks more like Bridgman’s,” but that he can’t evaluate if the student

has internalized this method or not. Woolard seems to suggest that in this context "to improve" means to adopt Bridgman's methods, but the student responses appear more uncertain.

Throughout the duration of this project, I interviewed many students about their goals in education. For most, the goal was simply "to improve." It is this vagueness that makes "improvement" as a narrative device particularly compelling. Improvement is adaptable to any class and any student. It does not require specificity. That is, a student may claim a course or program is "worth it" based on their improvement without having to delineate specifically what that improvement was or how they achieved it. Where other goals may have direct consequences for failure, improvement does not. Not completing work may result in a failed course. A bad painting may not sell. A mishandled interview may cost someone the job. But the stakes for failing at improvement are contrastively low.

Nevertheless, improvement, while vague, is not unobservable. The student's strong interest in improving, sharing that improvement, and encouraging others on ways to improve all suggest that improvement does contain concrete qualities. More directly, I argue that students use minor shifts in technique to demarcate improvement. Thus, the vagueness emerges not necessarily from how students improve, but rather, the abstractness appears in whether that "improvement" is necessarily a good thing that moves them towards their larger goal of entering the animation industry. For example, students may say "I've improved my ability to draw faces." The change between their earlier work and their present work is observable. In this context, students intend "improve" to mean "better" (i.e. "the faces I draw now are better than what I used to draw before"). But, better is vague. It is both subjective and contextual. Students can and

do contest claims of improvement. The following text conversation on Discord demonstrates this practice:

Don (5:42 a.m.)

here's my side-by-side of two digital paintings i've done. The first is 2019 and the second is 2021. i really feel like I improved! lol

Sylvie (6:02 a.m)

I like the first one better

James (6: 11 a.m.)

I agree. It's more lively imo

Sylvie (6:13 a.m.)

Yea, it has better flow

And the colors are better

The new one is muddy

Don's eagerness to share his improvement is tempered by Sylvie and James' rebuttal. This conversation is interesting not only for what is said, but what is absent. Don does not clarify what he feels he has improved on, nor does he request feedback. It is unclear whether he means to say this particular 2021 piece is better than his 2019 piece, or if he is making a statement about his improvement in general to say that he is a better artist now. Critically, Don never specifies what his goals are. Why does he aspire to be better at digital painting? There may be elements to his improvement that are not perceivable in a side-by-side example like speed, concentration, or his confidence with the software. Don's comments also appear to subtly acknowledge the subjective construction of improvement. He suggests "I really feel like I improved," rather than

declaring “I have improved.” This subtlety illustrates the way students often call on other students and instructors to validate narratives of improvement. But, if improvement is vague, contextual, and subject public scrutiny, why do so many students rely on improvement as the metric to reach their goals?

I argue that narratives of improvement are the most critical component to constructing a satisfying and dispersible art journey. The “art journey” is a critical oral tradition that artists use to a) share stories about their education, b) reify practices that signal their status as artists, and c) explain their success. To be clear, the term “art journey,” is not strictly analytical. Students use this term casually in conversations with other students and instructors, interviewees would explain their “art journeys” to me unprovoked, and marketing material for courses would frequently use phrases such as “an important step in your art journey,” and “open to students at any point in their journey” to advertise their usefulness. These layers demonstrate how the structure and dissemination of art journeys continue to popularize their use. For instance, students sharing their art journeys with other students creates the expectation that they should have one, students sharing their art journeys with me creates the expectation that I should understand them, and marketing art journeys creates the expectation that an art journey requires (often paid) education. The result is a narrative of success that meaningfully tracks progress and reifies certain artistic traditions.

Art journeys are pre-structured personal narratives constructed before their delivery. It quickly became evident in interviews that asking my participants to recount their experiences with art year-by-year, and to “tell me their art journey,” yielded dramatically different results. Not unlike animated works themselves, an art journey is structured like a story complete with

rising and falling action. Art journeys place weight on emotional tension, perseverance, and discipline rather than the accumulation of skill. Artists will not share all educative experiences in an art journey and in fact, moments of low artistic production are just as critical as high ones.

Cassidy, a 27-year-old storyboard artist working in the industry shared her art journey, noted "I always loved drawing as a kid. I'd watch cartoons and draw my favorite characters in front of the screen. When I was middle school, we started learning about careers. I knew I wanted to do art, but I just said 'animator' because it was the only job I knew. At the time, I was still drawing a lot of cartoons and anime, but my high school really changed that. I went to an arts high school and I learned how serious I needed to be about my anatomy if I wanted to go to art school. I spent about 2 years on my portfolio, just improving my work. It kinda ended up not mattering because I went to my local university rather than an art school. But the art program there was really great. I fell in love with storyboarding and my professor got me my first internship at a local studio. From there, someone on my team got hired at another studio. They recommended me and that's how I got my current job." In this recounting, Cassidy displays three notable trends with art journeys: the identification of a goal, a disciplined perseverance towards that goal, and the accomplishment of the goal. Cassidy aspires to be in the animation industry, trains diligently to craft a portfolio, and ultimately finds work in a studio.

Gogi's art journey parallels Cassidy's narrative beats despite pursuing online education rather than art school. "When I was 11 I wanted to do concept art for video games. I loved seeing all the art in game guides. I still think I'd like to do that, but my interests began to shift to animation when I was in high school watching anime. I realized I wanted to tell my own stories like that. But, I never actually drew anything. Just some monsters and bad-looking dudes with

guns. I was 19 getting ready to drop out of community college when I thought about giving art a real try. I had summer so why not use it to get good? I sucked really bad when I started, but I just couldn't stop. I joined forums and got critiques and just kept going. The first time I got paid for something I was 25. It was a commission of an anime girl and I really felt like I made it. I was always humbled quickly though. When Instagram really took off I could see how good all these other artists were and it was inspiring so I buckled down again and started doing more classes. That's where I'm at now. Trying to be the best and hoping to apply to industry soon." Like Cassidy, Gogi's art journey dances on a singular moment: the realization that one needs to "get serious." In an action film, this is the moment before a training montage. In an art journey, this realization defines the second act. An artist recognizes that entering the industry requires a skill level they currently do not possess.

What makes this moment critical is the way student artists become entangled with tradition and learn to enact (and describe that enactment) in particular ways which reify what many come to think of as "a traditional art education." To call back to an earlier example: this is the circle. Students recognize their art goals require proficiency, they begin training in more structured environments, and through this training they learn techniques (like starting with a circle) which improve their work towards an industry standard. It is also through this process that they begin to acquire the status "artist." For the students I interviewed, the title "artist" is about more than the production of art. In an interview with Sandra about her time in art school prior to joining the industry she told me, "Yea, everyone makes art. Gatekeeping is gross. Beginner and bad artists make art, but it is different for me, because that's my job. When I tell people I'm an artist I'm talking about my job and not just a thing I like to do. So maybe I would say everyone

makes art, but not everyone is an artist?" Sandra's comment demonstrates how the title "artist" intertwines with practice and career. It is a position Sandra has trained for and she makes it clear "artist" is more than an affective relationship to art. Artist as a job implies a training, structure, and system of practice and payment distinct from making art casually. Within the art journey, a hobbyist moves towards professional carefully demarcating the acquisition of knowledge, skill, and career.

In short, enacting knowledge, including the process through which "improvement" becomes a satisfying narrative objective, is as much about identifying as an artist as it is about displaying skill. This point is made abundantly clear in an announcement Woolard gave at the start of his Zoom class in 2022. "Training is theater," Woolard proclaimed. "In the military they march you back and forth for invisible audiences. Think about it. Every day you make your bed and clean your gun, but for who? Does a clean bed keep the enemies from bombing you? No, but you do it anyway because it's all a part of being a good soldier. So every day they train you to perform like a good soldier would. Training is inherently theatrical, and I don't see why art school would be any other way." In his analogy Woolard suggests that training is not exclusively about the outcome, rather training instills patterns of behavior that help the trainee identify with their new position. For art students, enacting knowledge is about performing the role of artist. When animation students apply for work, they are applying for job labeled "artist" thus they must begin associating with this role prior to application. In other words, being in the animation industry does not make someone an artist. Rather, that title comes a priori before looking for work.

Further, I argue that this fact reinforces Sandra's point instead of detracting from it. Sandra's asserts that for her art is a job and "not just a thing she likes to do." She continues to suggest that while all people make art, not everyone is an artist. Her statements appear to support the opposite of the above conclusion; that the title "artist" comes from the job and not before it. However, this is untrue. To even acquire the job Sandra must first be familiar with the necessary training. As Woolard succinctly put it, "training is theater." In this case, Sandra's art education works to secure her status as "artist" and she may claim this identity in the dissemination of her art journey.

To conclude, while many students describe a spiritual connection to art, they do not assert that artistic creation is organic or natural. In fact, in retelling their own artist journeys, they frequently highlight moments in which training became formalized and goal-oriented. Artists share these narratives to bond and to reflect on their own personal experiences. These narratives are structured much like animated films themselves and display the slow accumulation of knowledge and perseverance. Curiously, while most of my participant's ultimate goal was to work in the animation industry, the most repeated reason for attending new courses was to "improve." Improvement as a goal is not only abstract, but it is also subject to public scrutiny as other students openly evaluate each other's progress. Nevertheless, I argue that this vagueness makes improvement valuable. There are limited consequences for failure and the act of improving builds narrative satisfaction. When art students use minor shifts in their technique to demarcate improvement, they enact knowledge. This process legitimizes their status as artists. As I explore in the following section, however, students beliefs about the industry often become their greatest roadblocks in becoming an industry artist.

Myth Making

For some, the transition from student to professional industry artist is lolling and bucolic. For others, it is directed and clear. The overarching irony is that in some ways, shifting from an amateur to a professional artist is as simple as declaring yourself to be one. Instructors and mentors may even encourage this re-categorization. In observing several student artworks submitted to the Art Camp competition, instructor Tudor remarked, "Practicing? You should be working already. Go apply for something." Likewise, instructor Woolard preached to his students, "Refinement is good. We never stop learning, but some of you need to stop being afraid of the 'final piece.' You can say 'I'm an artist.' You've earned that." With less compassion, but mirrored sentiments, instructor Harris told students, "You are babies. I don't want to tell you if you're 'good enough.' If you want to be an industry artist, go make art for the industry." These three messages share the same lesson: industry artists make industry art. Yet, students routinely challenge this simple aphorism. In this section, I explore these challenges on two grounds. First, I analyze how students destabilize categories of art by playing with terms like "professional," "practice," "industry," and "culture." I argue that students use categorization to place themselves in relation to their practice and their goal of entering the industry. I further examine under what contexts words like "professional," or "student" carry the most weight and advance students towards their goals. The second challenge to "industry artists make industry art" that I explore emotionally buttresses the first. I examine student's anxieties and insecurities about joining the industry. I argue that the pitfall of the "perpetual student" is particularly harrowing for self-directed online students. Despite repeatedly hearing that exceptional artistic ability is not the

defining characteristic of an industry career, students continue to uphold the "myth of perfect"—the faulty assumption that they may not even apply for industry work unless their skills match the level of veteran artists.

Can one declare themselves to be "in the industry," without a career? The terms "industry" and "professional" are related, but incongruent. Particularly, in online contexts, the term "professional" is defined less by standardized connections to stable institutions, but instead encircles networks of visibility. How many likes, followers, and sponsors one has may denote a professional status, and more aspiring or amateur creators seek increased visibility to further their professional image. Duffy et al. (2021) have noted that creators and promoters use promises of "being seen" to further "professional advancement." These promises suggest that greater likes, follows, and views equal professional status and opportunities, but the reality is more inconclusive. Greater attention does not necessarily mean that one is more likely to be perceived as a professional and opportunity for success does not guarantee steady employment.

Nevertheless, the supposition that greater visibility equals greater professionalism highly influences online creator's actions. Duffy et al.'s 2021 findings suggest that while creators certainly enjoy the ego boost many likes provide, conversations between creators about their content reveal that personal satisfaction is always discussed in relation to professional opportunities such as brand deals and offline affiliations with other businesses. For the students artists I worked with, "being seen" is likewise a desirable goal. However, these students were less interested in building their own unique "brand" and more interested displaying professional quality, hirable work. Students routinely used follower counts and likes to explain why certain artists were good. Additionally, students circulated "discovery myths," believing that increased

visibility would lead to studios “discovering” and recruiting them rather than having to directly seek employment.

As Lange (2017) notes, the rhetoric of “hitting it big” has migrated from Hollywood show-business to online landscapes where “being discovered” has inextricably entangled with virality producing a new form of the “accidental celebrity.” She argues that the result is a paradoxical approach to online production. That is, creators know that high quality productions and hard work are crucial for building audiences and increasing visibility, however, belief in the myth that celebritydom is something that “just happens” leads many creators to obscure the difficult reality of their work in favor of projecting an easy, personable appearance. Within in my own research, I find that this paradox more deeply impacts informal online art students than their art school counterparts.

Informal student artists are married to social media in a way that traditionally educated students are not. As I explained in the first section of this chapter, art school students rely on the legacy and lineage of their educators to slowly build industry connections. It is these connections which most often help them find employment rather than artistic ability alone. By contrast, online students are deeply entangled with the internet from the outset. For many, their community, educators, courses, and resources exist exclusively online. Sharing their work online is not a recommendation. It is necessary for participation. Consequently, platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram serves as sites for progress tracking and “discoverability.” Perpetuating a discovery myth, online art student Diego told me, “I follow this artist named Cara. She makes YouTube videos and now even teaches her own class, but she got started on Instagram. She shared a lot of Disney fan art and examples of her environmental design and they hired her!

Someone at Disney found her insta and offered her work through direct message and she's been working there for eight years now. So you should always share your work and tag the studio because you never know."

Hidden in Diego's retelling of Cara's discovery myth are several revealing insights. First, while Cara is active on many online platforms, Diego claims that she "got started" on Instagram. In this context, "getting started" means establishing the conditions for her future discovery and employment. It is unclear whether Cara shared her art elsewhere or whether she had art school training (she did, as I would later learn). In this discovery myth, the critical point of the story is not Cara's training, but rather the setting of her work—Instagram—is the key component to her discoverability. Second, Diego frames the narrative such that Disney takes an active and productive role in finding and hiring Cara. Yet in his own recount of the myth, Cara is not "hidden," nor is she passive in her attempts to be recognized. She intentionally caters her online work and presence to Disney's interests. Diego even recommends tagging particular studios to draw their attention. As demonstrated with this example, discovery myths often paint creator's fame or success as "accidental," and studios as active explorers of new content. The interplay between passive-artist and active-employer has real consequences for the social organization of online art landscapes.

After completing Tudor's Art Camp in 2021, Marika began working at a popular children's media animation studio. "They found me," she explained. "I applied for their internship, but didn't make it. It was pretty discouraging, but I kept uploading my designs to Instagram and speaking with other artists who worked there, and eventually they noticed me and offered me a job. I am incredibly grateful because I know not everyone gets a job like this."

Marika's discovery story mirrors Cara's. Both minimize their own active participation in their employment while crediting the industry with "finding them." Discovery myths consequently establish social attitudes about professionalism, industry meritocracy, and indebtedness. Prior to working in the industry, Cara and Marika must advertise themselves as professionals by displaying consistent and quality work on par with industry artists. The discovery myth purports that it is the quality of this work which directly leads to industry recognition. The implicit assumption is that the animation industry naturally functions like a meritocracy awarding talented artists with their dream career. Critically, this system foists feelings of guilt or indebtedness unto its "discovered" artists. That is, in retelling discovery myths artists underscore the importance of "gratefulness" thereby positioning the industry with greater power. When artists act as if they should be grateful for the chance to work in the industry, it indirectly seeds exploitation. The industry artists I spoke to routinely mentioned the pressure they felt to "prove their worth" by overworking and accepting lower pay.

Critically, for informal online students discovery myths mystify the hiring process leading more students to misconstrue the practices and qualities that led to new hires. This misunderstanding is how abstract properties like "improvement" and "skill" come to dominate informal student discourses about success. In other contexts, the term "professional" typically denotes paid laborer, while "student," or "amateur" means unpaid or unexperienced. But for the animation students I worked with, "industry" carried far more social currency and structure leaving the term "professional" malleable. In conversation, students divorced "professional" from "paid," and instead used the term to denote a quality of work. Teachers who never worked in the animation industry would describe their courses and the outcomes for students as

"professional." Instructor Woolard told students his course was about developing "professional" art skills. Students trained in industry practices, but not actively working in the industry yet, circulated their "professional" Instagram pages. When their art skills were challenged in Discord critiques, it was common for students to defend themselves by proclaiming they were not "professionals."

In short, students and educators employed the word "professional" to make statements about the quality of their work. By contrast, the word "industry" denoted a specific type of labor. This linguistic divide appears to demonstrate an understanding that working in the animation industry does not necessarily demand artwork of a particular quality. In fact, several instructors and industry artists I spoke to explicitly made this point. Storyboard artist Katie told me, "I was awful when I started working, but that doesn't matter. You learn. Of course you do need basic skills to get started, but in many ways, it's your team's job to teach you. Every project is different and you have to learn new skills and techniques each time." In addition, background painter Mike said, "Unless you're already a famous animator, no studio is really hiring you for 'you.' The goal is just for you to be good enough that you fit in with everyone else." Katie and Mike's comments make it clear that while work in the animation industry does require a specific skillset, it does not require perfection. Moreover, this fact is not necessarily hidden.

In the final weeks of his online course, Instructor Woolard addressed a recurring question his students frequently posted in the Zoom chat and course Discord. "I think I need to develop an art therapy course. Because I read this question from you and your stories are so personal and so emotional, and I can't possibly answer it. 'How do I know when I am ready?' I don't know how to answer that. So many of you are technically skilled. Your artwork is great, but I don't think

that's what you are asking me" he announced as he closed his anatomy lecture. In the chat, students responded "yes, I need therapy," "I just worry I'm not good enough," and "I want someone to tell me when I'm ready for a job." The student's responses voiced an anxiety that had been brewing since the inception of the course and prod at a fundamental curiosity. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Woolard is not an animator and his class was not an animation course, yet its student attendees vehemently defended its inclusion in their self-directed education.

In his statement, Woolard mirrors a comment I had been recording from instructors and animation veterans since attending the animator networking convention LightBox Expo in 2021: technical skill is not enough be hired in the animation industry. Teachers, advisors, and present animation workers made it openly and abundantly clear that job recruiters in the animation industry sought employment qualities in addition to skill. Ability to meet deadlines, team-oriented work ideologies, clear communication, and receptiveness to criticism all ranked as, if not more, important than technical skill. Taken with the student anxieties noted above, the openness of this fact creates a fundamentally contrastive paradigm. If animation studios prioritize qualities other than talent, why do so many online students choose to not only extend their education in pursuit of skill, but moreover choose to refine unnecessary skills? Woolard's class is not designed to teach lessons relevant to the animation industry, but when asked why they enrolled, many students told me "I want to get better so I can apply for work." This contrastive paradigm shapes what I call "the myth of perfect."

In the same way that discovery myths inform online social media behavior, the myth of perfect informs student practice. The myth of perfect posits that great skill guarantees great

employment. It is pervasive because it is practically, culturally, and ideologically attractive. It is actionable without definition and provides the satisfaction of feeling revelatory without revelation. Practically, the myth suggests that employment is an inevitability. Students reason that if they become "good enough," studios will hire them regardless of prior work history or insider connections. Phrases like, "Pixar only hires the best, so I am taking these courses to improve my drawing" invoke the practical appeal of the myth of perfection. Culturally, the myth of perfect satisfies the narrative arc of the artist's journey. In the previous section, I outlined how art students, particularly animation students, are intimately invested in narrative. Animated films are narrative. Consequently, the desire to see, enact, and retell narratives is formally and informally encouraged in student education. The "artist's journey" is a comprehensive narrative that artists disseminate to practice storytelling. Critically, the narrative reaches completion in the artist's "success." For animation hopefuls, the ultimate narrative success encircles great artistic skill. That is, once a student has achieved perfection, the journey naturally ends. Statements like, "I just want to be able to draw exactly what I see in my mind" display the cultural dimensions in the myth of perfect. Finally, the myth of perfect is ideologically satisfying in that perfection shields artists from unfair criticism. The belief reasons that if an artist can master all technical skills, then their educators and peers will necessarily respect their work. Comments such as "I worry everyday about what I post online; I just want people to like my work," illustrate how the myth of perfect eases ideological anxieties.

To be clear, the myth of perfect is not an absolute and many students are aware that "perfection" is vague and not necessary for employment. Nevertheless, the practical, cultural, and ideological benefits make supporting the myth more appealing than acknowledging reality.

As Woolard and other instructors have noted, art careers are volatile. Workers in the animation industry often struggle with steady employment, consistent pay, and overwork. Like much of the entertainment industry more broadly, finding work is more about who you know rather than what you know. The reality for most students is that networking and building lineages is seldom affordable. The online students I interviewed repeatedly built their self-directed syllabi from courses they budget. Public discussions about whether courses were "worth it" focused almost exclusively on cost rather than lesson quality, time requirements, or resources. Many students saw taking free or affordable courses with skilled instructors as a universal benefit regardless of whether these courses taught skills directly valuable to the animation industry. This belief further illustrates how the myth of perfect shapes online practice.

But online students are disadvantaged in other ways too. Formal art schools provide consistent criticism and reassurance. In Chapter 3, I analyzed how online students build and maintain social hierarchies through the practice of giving critique on Discord. Accruing social standing through thoughtful criticism is also found in formal art education, but the key difference is that it is regulated and systematized. Beyond social expectation, there are few pressures, for instance grades, that encourage online students to critique and reassure each other. By working on their student films, practicing outside of class, and sharing techniques, formal art students build community. Joining the animation industry is still competitive, but in a physical setting that privileges lineages, students may more easily see how their friend finding employment increases their own chance of finding work. Contrastively, online students are far more disparate in location, demographics, and education. My interviewees shared that online education was appealing because they could choose courses appropriate for their time zones and personal

responsibilities which often included separate careers and childcare. In other words, compared to formal art students, online students are vastly more heterogeneous which makes it more difficult to build and maintain support networks.

In conclusion, many informal online students are held in abeyance between freedom and anxiety. It is this uncertainty which leads to the creation and perpetuation of discovery myths and the myth of perfect. On the one hand, an online education landscape is teeming with advantages. Online students have great control over their education. For many students struggling with outside responsibilities and personal finances, the ability to mold one's education to fit budgetary and time constraints makes art education possible in the first place. On the other hand, this flexibility comes at the cost of a reliable support network. Social groups would form and collapse around new classes, but rarely did students maintain regular contact after courses ended. The low barrier to entry meant that students easily entered and left Discord communities without forming lasting bonds. As a result, students felt close to, but abstracted from the animation industry. They could take courses with animation veterans, practice critical skills, and learn the realities of employment, but they often lacked the intimate mentorship and peer-support necessary to build confidence.

Like the status of self-directed online education itself, the solution also became detached and individualized. Discovery myths posit that if one works hard and stays consistent, job opportunities will find them. The myth of perfect similarly suggests that perfection is achievable, universal, uncritical, and likely to be rewarded. Both of these myths work in tandem obscure the reality of the hiring process and instead offer actionable goals such as post more to social media, take new courses, and refine artistic skills. Compared to challenge of networking which comes

with the possibility of failure or rejection, these goals are simple, affirming, and anxiety reducing. As I noted previously, however, the reality of joining the animation industry is not completely unknown to students and this distinction appears in the strategic use of words like "professional," "amateur," and "industry." When students claim that they want to be a professional artist, they are making a statement about the quality of their work and not their place in the industry. Again, this distinction may provide the feeling of accomplishment and a personal satisfaction with one's work without having to confront the more tenebrous aspects of industry work.

Conclusion

Traditional art education and online art education present a unique tension for contemporary students. In many ways, traditional art education has become "traditional" because of increasing online courses. These two modalities are reshaping what students see as "formal," "professional," and "valuable." With these alterations comes new ideas about practice, and knowledge. In the introduction, I asked: Since, art and animation schools acquire prestige through their ability to secure students a place in the larger workforce, why would do many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career?

The first answer is practical: online education is vastly more affordable and flexible. The second answer is more complex. Formal art schools do acquire prestige through their ability to secure students a career. Online students recognize this fact, but often willing choose to supplant their own myths about the relationship between employment and education. This means that for many students the premise of the question is wrong and online education offers just as many

opportunities for prestige and employment as a traditional education would. As I explored in the section on digital lineages, however, this assumption is a half-truth. The greatest path to an industry career is networking. While this networking can be accomplished online, it is still easier in a formal setting. Online students nevertheless aim to reproduce these connections online by constructing digital lineages.

A successful lineage allows students to quickly index their skill and reliability. But since online lineages are less direct and formal, they are often scrutinized by other students. Defending claims about one's education legitimizes their knowledge. For online students in particular, "knowledge" usurps networking since most online courses promise knowledge, but few offer intimate mentorship. This process is how and why students view instructors like Tudor and Woolard, who have no connection to the animation industry, as valuable and desirable as lineage connections.

Furthermore, students own narratives about their art progress frequently involve insecurity. Even in formal settings, art education is vague. Students routinely question what they want to do, how they are progressing, and if what they are learning is helpful to them. With these elements common between traditional and online students, online students may not necessarily see their educative path as inherently more insecure than a student in art school. In fact, since online students may pick their own curriculum, many believe that an online education is more direct than a physical one. At the same time, art journeys display the pervasiveness of traditional art knowledge. Students use art journeys to build community and track their progress. They often fixate on moments in an artists life in which they needed to focus more clearly on their progress.

These moments are followed by incremental changes in technique which students come to call "improvement."

For online students, setting improvement as goal allows them to make progress towards their dream career without the formal guidance offered by a more traditional education. Yet because improvement is vague and flexible it works its way into myths about the animation industry. The first myth called the "discovery myth" suggests that students who work hard, and share their art consistently will be ultimately rewarded with employment. The second myth, the "myth of perfect" posits that students are unready for industry work until they have accumulated virtuosity. Both of these myths require improvement to achieve.

Students willingly perpetuate these myths because they provide meaningful action while easing anxiety. Online students often lack consistent communities of reassurance and consequently struggle with feeling unready for work. The supposition that work will one day find them is thusly relaxing. It also gives students actions to complete in the meantime. Students may always continue improving their skills in anatomy, perspective, and design. These thoughts can be entrapping, however, when students assume that they can only seek industry work once they have achieved mastery in all subjects. Not only is this untrue, but hyper-focusing on skill may lead students to neglect other important qualities for industry work like team coordination. For many of the students I interviewed, it was ultimately a strong fear of failure which kept them from pursuing an industry career.

ACT 3
Chapter 5: Battle Lines

Introduction

In this chapter, I offer two ethnographic encounters that explore the complicated feelings professional artists have laboring in a field that many students believe to be rewarding and fun. While most of my participants acknowledged that working in the animation industry is not easy, many are so distanced from the field that the realities of this work are often unseen. This separation is especially apparent for students whose primary education is self-directed on Discord as they have limited access to conversations with professionals. These two experiences correspondingly present moments where the students' worldview is inextricably altered when their idols make the difficult parts of industry work plainly visible. Previously, I have outlined three paradoxes about labor and education in the animation industry. First, if the US animation industry is such an established tradition, why is the pathway to entry so uncertain? Second, why do so many students forgo art school in favor of an insecure education towards an equally insecure career? This chapter thus begins to address the third paradox: The animation industry is a tumultuous, precarious environment that demands high volumes of work for unpredictable pay. Yet this is the same environment many animators staunchly defend as they explain their place in the industry.

In this chapter, I therefore demonstrate how the animation industry fosters a culture of insecurity that pushes some workers to believe that overworking is the only path to career advancement. I further explore how artists manipulate their seniority and engage in oral histories

about labor conflict to integrate new animators into activism. Finally, I argue that artists intentionally keep their demands amorphous and liquid, allowing workers to protest multiple issues concurrently. Contrary to my initial assumptions, I further assert that these indefinite demands bolster these activist movements rather than divide and fracture them.

Ultimately, many students operate in a cutting-room mindset where all work is subject to change, but employment is consistent. Projects are edited, goals will shift, and work hours will become longer or shorter. These elements compose the tumultuous, undulating feeling that fosters a workplace seasickness. All projects are one sharp wave from veering dangerously off course. Artists are socially and contractually obligated to ride these flows. The students I worked with were attentive to this rocky seasickness as an annoying, but livable pain in an otherwise smooth sailing career. However, in transitioning from amateur to professional work, artists come to accept project death. Networks cancel series; freelance contracts end; studios move people off projects. The animation industry is not an ocean, but a river moving projects downstream from production to distribution. But not every project or person who begins on the journey will make it to the end.

"What you really don't know is…"

"See? I have more time for you now," Harris muses as he fiddles with his camera's focus on his live stream. "You all thought I'd abandoned you, but I did this for you." The ambiguous "this" Harris proudly celebrates was the abrupt announcement that he quit his job in the animation industry approximately one month ago. Harris was the instructor for an online art course I enrolled in and discussed in Chapter 2. In short, he was a 29-year-old visual

development artist who had relocated to Southern California to pursue animation and had acquired an online celebrity status amongst animator-hopefuls for his series of tutorials and critiques. He now professed to wanting to commit his newfound free time to teaching art and furthering his personal projects. Yet many of his most faithful fans found this revelation disquieting. What did it mean that their hero had left his once-proclaimed dream career? And what might be the consequences of the hours they devoted to learning skills Harris no longer appeared interested in furthering?

Some of these worries were assuaged when Harris announced an impromptu portfolio review on his Discord. Students could submit their portfolios and Harris would critique them on a live stream he hosted with his friends from the animation industry. This opportunity was a considerable kindness. A portfolio review is a laborious and lengthy process that requires the examiner to carefully peruse an artist's body of work. These sessions include detailed feedback about the artist's quality and presentation of their work and reviewers frequently include altered redrawn explanations of their advice. The portfolio is the single most critical feature in the final part of the artist's growth chart I outlined in Chapter 1: application. The artist growth chart includes training, review, debut, and application. Application occurs after a student has "debuted" as working artist and is now beginning the process of applying to the animation industry. That is, it is possible to identify as a storyboard artist or animator without presently working in the industry. Even the existence of a portfolio may evidence a separation between an amateur and professional artist. Artists may spend years agonizing over constructing the perfect portfolio. Students routinely told me the most valuable feedback came from working professionals. This belief is not necessarily untrue as industry artists can provide constructive

feedback that helps students better cater their work to the styles studios are looking for. However, as I noted in Chapter 4, receiving industry feedback typically denotes industry connections and animation studios privilege clear networking over artistic skill. Nonetheless, as students gathered to watch the live stream, chat messages such as 'I can't wait! I need this," and "this is so exciting" demonstrated an eager desire to receive feedback.

Thus, Harris's offer to host free online portfolio reviews (a service I observed many other online artists charge $50-150 for) was a remarkable, but ultimately, dubious gesture as early into the livestream the pitch changed. It was common for Harris to invite his friends from the animation industry to join him and this stream proved to be no exception. This habit foremost served a practical purpose, but it also critically buttressed educative knowledge. Practically, Harris's guests would talk and provide entertainment while he focused silently on his drawing demonstrations. They also frequently engaged with members of the chat by moderating or bringing attention to questions Harris had missed. However, it often seemed as though these guests had another, unspoken latent purpose: to agree with Harris. When Harris provided portfolio feedback he would ask his co-hosts if they agreed, and while they often did, it was not uncommon for Harris to urge sympathy with statements like "but wouldn't you agree that he really could use more gesture," or "my time in the industry says this layout is better." Consequently, Harris's co-hosts strengthened his points and supported the idea that Harris's worldview represented the industry writ large.

So now, when other artists and writers in the animation industry joined Harris to host this live stream, and the former portfolio review became a "the TRUTH about the animation industry" exposé, the students were positioned to accept these lessons. Harris lamented to his

hosts that his followers “don’t know what they’re getting into” and that working in the industry is “much harder than you think.”

“I was alone, really alone,” he explained. “I was lucky I was too stupid to know that you’re expected to keep your head down. So I asked a lot of questions, and a lot of these old guys listened to me; brought me into the writers room and let me learn from them. Nobody had to do that for me, but that’s how you learn storytelling.”

“I just read a book,” joked Jim, a prominent writer for TV animation whose video screen abutted Harris’s screen. But this small quip about a different education spiraled into a heated harangue Harris delivered while tapping his frustrations out against his desk with his pen stylus. “You don’t learn from books! You learn from people! That’s where real stories are. When I started working in the industry, I needed to forget everything I ever learned just to get the creativity back.” As Jim heaved a reluctant sigh, Harris consulted another professional artist in his stream, Reed. “Tell them what they need to know,” Harris directed Reed. “What do the students really need to know about the animation industry.”

Reed, an older man with white streaks in his dark beard, rolled his eyes to the top on his head in thought. “It’s hard to say, because everything can change so fast. But the most important lessons are always about money. I got a lot of freelance contracts, and let me tell you, $6,000 sounds great when you start, but then you don’t budget properly, and that project ends in a few months, and then you have no job and rent is due, and now you’ve maxed out all your credit cards. But you want to do the work, because that’s why you’re here, right? Because you like the work? Well, then the project is over and guess what? They never air it and the NDA means you’ll never get to show any of the work you did for it.”

Harris replied “I usually worked in-studio, so I got regular paychecks, but the workload could be really insane. You’d be plucking away at a project and then all of a sudden, you’d get all this work coming back from Korea and now you have to do revisions until 4AM. And people just do it, you know? You don’t get to quit. When it rains, it pours and companies are just like that.”

Various comments from students in the chat began to appear that suggested a worried hesitation.

“I don’t think that sounds good”

“even my job pays overtime”

“it’s not fair that every job i want does this shit”

“this makes me less excited about my portfolio review”

Alyssa, a storyboard artist in her early twenties also co-hosting on the live stream, unmuted her mic. “They tried to do that at my last job. They brought in the animation from Korea and expected us do all this last minute work. But the studio actually got in trouble with the union. Speaking of… there’s going to be a Rally for Animation this Sunday to protest the lack of a union minimum and how streaming has been impacting our contracts. Please come out and support us.” she said as she posted the link for the Rally for Animation flyer into the chat. I saved it and cleared my schedule for Sunday.

The conversation slowly meandered off topic, but as the recounts of the animation industry’s struggles came to a close, Harris proffered one final, and bleak lingering remark: “At the end of the day, it’s not about loving your project. It’s about selling it. Kids put their signature all over ugly art no one is going to steal anyway. Post things online, make your name, and sell your project.” The sentiment is harsh, but vacant. Make your name for whom? And to what end?

If the objective is to join the animation industry, then having a recognizable and proficient portfolio is sufficient. But "making your name" and "selling your project" propose a loftier goal. Duffy and Pooley (2017, 2019) have suggested that self-branding is an emerging form performative idolatry that celebrates being "self-made" in face of precarious neoliberal exploitation. They write, "The stories of self-made success—the celebrations of promotional pluck—are parables for making it in an uncertain labor market. The Idols of Promotion are a response, in other words, to the rapid growth of independent and piecemeal employment" (Duffy and Pooley 2017, 5). As students begin to confront the reality of labor in the animation industry, the story of self-success emerges as an appealing justification for insecurity.

Idealization and Insecurity

In a post-stream reflection, I spoke with Christina about her thoughts on Harris's revelation. "It feels bad. It's hard to hear that something you've been working towards isn't as great as you think it is. That sucks… but I've wanted to do this since I was a kid. And all work sucks, right?" she told me. Her response neatly summarized the sentiments I garnered from other students. Work in the animation industry is hard and its workers fall victim to many of the same problems replete in other creative work. That is, it can be difficult to enumerate and advocate for the fiscal value of creative work when the primary value to said to be "love." As McRobbie explains in her exploration of the UK's "creative economy," there exists a complicated relationship in the arts "where the sheer 'pleasure of work' is assumed to compensate for workplace security and protection" (2016, 37).

The assumption that laboring for love moralistically supersedes working for money feeds into what Duffy and Wissinger (2017) call the "mythologies of creative work" and what DePalma (2021) calls the "passion paradigm." In her 2017 book about social media creators, Duffy writes, "Aspirational labor is a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love. As both a practice, and a worker ideology, aspirational labor shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist" (4). The young artists I interviewed perform aspirational labor when they toil away at their portfolios, curate their online branding, and tirelessly study art alongside their other responsibilities (many of which include other careers and childcare). Many expressed yearning for the moment when drawing "felt easy," and their ideas formed effortlessly on the page. Students identified "drawing proficiency" and "name recognizability" as the two most critical features to gaining a job.

The objective, to be an animator, is certainly aspirational, but unlike becoming a social media creator, these artists aspire to enter a more clearly defined industry. On the one hand, being an animator for large US studio offers more structure and formality. The path to enter is more clearly demarcated. Work ID badges, insider recommendations, and ending credit sequences all evidence that you have "made it." By contrast, determining whether one truly is a social media influencer is more nebulous. On the other hand, being an animator demands more rigidity. Workplace demands must be met at certain times and although many more animators are now working from home, they are not their own boss and must still attend to studio hierarchies. Moreover, the drive to become an animator can feel more than aspirational. My informants described it as feeling deeply personal and purposeful:

Maria, a 26 year old student shared, “This is all I ever wanted to do with my life. I knew from the first moment my parents plopped me down in front of *The Little Mermaid* this is all I ever wanted to do.”

Christina, a 30 year old nurse and aspiring animator said, “I knew I wanted to work in animation since I was a little kid and they would sometimes do those behind-the-scenes clips with the animators before movies? I remember thinking ‘whoa that’s a job?! I want to do that.’”

Cayley, a 29 working storyboard artist commented, “I always knew I wanted to do art. I can’t say when I wanted to do it, really. I just always wanted to do it. I didn’t exactly know I that wanted to be a storyboard artist—that came after I finished college, but I can’t tell you when I wanted to do this, I just always have.”

For each of these women, creating art for the animation industry reflected a sustained and nearly indescribable passion held since childhood. As DePalma (2021) explains, passion frequently operates as a primer to exploitation. Being passionate can offer an irreplaceable security in an otherwise uncertain career. In this case, the negative qualities of the industry (such as failed contract renewals, harsh criticism from superiors, and unpredictable hours) do not necessarily remove an individual’s love for making art. The passion for the practice provides meaning even when the conditions of that work to do not appear supportive. DePalma further asserts that “the passion paradigm also works in the new economy because it serves and protects the institution of work. It does this by deeply individualizing and thereby depoliticizing the experience of work for adherents while committing them to work hard and work well” (2021, 155). In other words, working for “passion” obscures and deprioritizes other reasons for labor.

The question “are you passionate about your work” removes questions about the purpose or conditions of this work.

As the animation industry progressively moves away from large in-house studios to remote home offices, DePalma’s position that companies foster narratives of passion while “individualizing” the work experience appears eerily prophetic. The amateur and professional artists I spoke to described both feeling more networked and more knowledgeable than ever, while also combatting an intense isolation that felt new to the art industry. A known challenge for flexible at-home workers is that an always-on, always-accessible job weakens home-life separation and emotionally burdens its workers with excess stress and responsibility (Gregg 2011).

Regardless of setting, animators are keenly aware of having their passions manipulated by corporate greed. In his 2006 account of animation unions, animator turned historian Sito wrote, “They consider us a tribe of overgrown children and treat us that way; they think we are all people who want to spend our lives in dark rooms drawing ducks and bunnies” (4). However, the “dark room” in the studio has notable advantages over the “dark room” home office. Harris’s opening reflection about his time in the animation industry concerned the loneliness he felt prior to physically moving to other rooms. In his statement, “these old guys listened to me; brought me into the writers’ room and let me learn from them.” Harris celebrates the physical availability of others. Comfort, knowledge, and sociality came from spaces away from his personal desk. He enforces this belief when he tells his audience, “You don’t learn from books! You learn from people! That’s where real stories are.”

There are multiple tangles of irony here. Harris's proclamation about the importance of learning from real people in physical settings is delivered to an audience primarily listening at home alone. Additionally, students I spoke to highly preferred at-home jobs and lamented the prospect of moving to LA to find physical work. As an instructor and influencer, Harris positioned himself not as an artist, but as one of "the old guys in the writers' room." His messages oscillate between support and admonishment. His audience correspondingly waivers in their convictions. Happiness about a positive portfolio review collapses into doubt ("does the industry really treat artists that badly?") and then into a nervous acceptance ("it's not fair").

Reed's comments more explicitly name some frustrations. Freelance work is unreliable creating unpredictable moments of financial security. It is not uncommon to work on projects that never come to fruition. The intensity of work is demanding, but inconsistent. Harris, Reed, and Alyssa's comments make this final point especially clear: studios will encourage you to work harder and longer than the initial job descriptions might suggest. But the three share this point more like a fact rather than a flaw. When Reed says "But you want to do the work, because that's why you're here, right?," he foregrounds the privilege of wanting. It's the same "want" that subtextually supports Harris's assertion that "people just do it, you know? You don't get to quit. When it rains, it pours and companies are just like that." Truthfully, artists can quit. The assumption is that an artist would not want, and more importantly, should not want to quit. While Reed and Harris's remarks are not wholly approving of these unfair practices, they are not necessarily critical of the passion that drives them.

So, why not quit? Why might professionals continue to perpetuate narratives about want and passion? In practice, insecurity benefits both the industry and its artists, although only in the

short term. For example, at its simplest, TV animation studios sell their projects to distributors, such as streaming services. If this service observes high viewership, they may continue to host the show and request more content. Essentially, animated projects are gambling their future on the success of the initial show, but to do this, there must be that initial show. As Harris somberly said when concluding his livestream, "it's not about loving your project, it's about selling it." Since artists are hired to work on particular projects, their future at that studio is also dependent upon the success of the show. Thus, completing extra work furthers one's chance of future employment.

Moreover, animation projects are large, team-oriented endeavors. Steps of production are highly dependent upon earlier steps of production. For example, character design precedes storyboarding, storyboarding precedes background painting, and rigging precedes animating. Changes that happen at these stages necessitate changes in other stages even if production in those areas has already begun. To keep projects moving forward, artists rely on support and feedback from others. A storyboard artist offering to help a character designer ensures they meet the deadline for their part of the process. This element produces a social environment that pressures artists to continue working for the sake of the team. This is how the animation industry fosters a culture of insecurity that pushes workers to believe that overworking is the only path to career advancement. After the livestream concluded, I questioned student Christina about her thoughts on Harris's conclusion:

"I think it's true. I love my ideas, but I know not everyone else will…and when you're working on a show or something, unless you're the director, it's not really your idea anyway" she said.

"Why do you think so many artists talk about 'doing what they love' if in some cases it's not really about love?"

"I guess… I guess it's love for the art? Love for the job. Love for the team. Maybe I don't LOVE this show or whatever, but I love the people working on it and I love animation, so yea."

When I later compared Christina's comments to Cayley's thoughts on teamwork as a working storyboard artist, she shared similar ideas:

"It's a team. It's a team effort. A lot of people carry their weight and put in their own pieces as well. When I was working on [animated show], I was so happy because all the board artists I knew were having such a fun time saying 'I did that scene!' When you finally watch it you can say, 'I did that!' Or 'I know that designer!' It's really fun and really cool. But at the same time, I really wouldn't recommend [animated show], it's really stupid and awful."

Both Christina and Cayley's comments foreground the importance of teamwork. This collaboration is partially fostered by job insecurity, but paradoxically also conditions the impetus for change. In working closely together, artists circulate conversations about working conditions and labor movements. During Harris's livestream, storyboard artist Alyssa began to integrate the students into this legacy when she proposed that they attend a Rally for Animation gathering in Burbank. As I will argue in the following section, joining labor movements becomes as integral to the professional artist identity as "doing what you love."

Integration, Indefinite Demands, and World-making

What does it mean to rally for worker's rights when you are already working your dream job? In 2022, Animation Guild members, local politicians, production workers and aspiring

animators gathered in Burbank to support the #Newdeal4animation rally. This rally was the latest movement in a long history of animation labor disputes. It captured a fear around outsourced productions, streaming contracts, and unprotected workers that had been steadily growing since the 1980s when American animation companies looked to hire oversea studios to save costs. I argue that this rally accomplished three objectives: 1) to voice immediate grievances relevant to the ongoing contract negotiations between IATSE and the AMPTP, 2) to educate and integrate new artists and unprotected workers into the union, and 3) to "liquify" demands into a more nebulous and workable form.[8] Moreover, I argue that each of these objectives are not independent by rather form a complex feedback loop where each objective becomes an incentive for or a consequence of the others.

In short, when demands become abstract, new artists join to support these beneficial, but ultimately vague causes. Union speakers can translate issues, such as pay increases, to apply them towards specific movements. Voicing these concerns integrates new artists into union activities. The inclusion of these new artists introduces new concerns which deviate from The Animation Guild's specified demands into again more abstract and liquid criticisms. The result is a feedback loop where new workers introduce new concerns, new concerns solidify into new demands, and these demands integrate new people into the workforce.

Yet for working and aspiring artists, admitting to the more nightmarish conditions of one's "dream job" often comes at the cost as appearing that you simply can't "hack it" in a

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[8] The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees is a union founded in 1893 and represents a broad variety of workers in the entertainment industry. Animators more specifically, are represented by the Animation Guild (IASTE Local 839), a union founded 1952, and included within IASTE. The Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers is a trade association founded in 1924 and represents American television and film companies in collective bargaining.

demanding, self-driven career. The result is that workers, and particularly students, deny or diminish the unsavory parts of working in animation. An instructor I interviewed told me, "once you start working, it's tough and you don't get help, but you adapt, and that makes you a better artist and that helps you get more work. Tough people survive." In an economy full of uncertainty, emerging "tough" supplies a moralistic reason why some artists make it and others don't. As Duffy and Wissinger (2017) argue "This coping mechanism, however, involves self-presentation as exemplary worker-subjects, untroubled by these precarious conditions, while in fact embracing them. Taking this stance is crucial to creating an image of fun, free, and authentic work that conceals its inauspicious realities" (4664). In other words, denying precarity only furthers exploitation and furthermore, continues to perpetuate the illusion of unburdened "dream" labor.

In his review of the video game industry, Bulut (2020) similarly documents a process he calls the "degradation of fun," wherein video game testers increasingly lose enjoyment for their work as they face the realities of precarious work conditions. Likewise, many of the artists I spoke to felt pressured to maintain the illusion of joy while experiencing their own "degradation of fun." While there is an expectation for animated projects to end, these endings may be abrupt, and unplanned leaving artists jobless. Further, the pressure to "be tough," and support the team frequently results in artists performing additional unpaid labor outside of their job description. These moments of intense overwork can be similarly unpredictable, but the culture of the work contends that all artists should expect this "crunch" as projects near their air date. The result is an insecure, unpredictable environment that leverages this precarity as simply "a part of the job" hoisting the emotional and physical stress of finding and maintaining work on the individual. As

Manny, a storyboard artist, explained, "Looking for work is the hardest part. When one job ends, you need another and the easiest way to get hired is by word of mouth. People like you so they recommend you. That means you need to be just like… a cool, nice guy at every job. My last job, I experienced someone acting kinda creepy with me, you know, I got some help with it, but I felt like I had to keep it all really casual. 'Like hey, it would be nice if you didn't leave me alone with so-and-so.' I didn't want to get a bad reputation because I was hoping to get hired again." The pressure to maintain an appealing, good-natured persona for future employers directly influenced Manny's choice to mask workplace problems. Choosing when to speak up is a careful and strategic measure often buttressed by those in similar positions. For instance, Manny first sought reassurance and support from his coworkers before speaking with his director.

However, confessing to upsetting work conditions privately between coworkers and in an anonymized interview is notably different from a large public rally where loudness and visibility are two of the main points. As the date for the rally approached, I asked Samantha, a storyboard artist who had been working in the industry for a year, how she felt about the concept of the "dream job," and whether she felt advocating for worker's rights jeopardized that image. She shared, "It doesn't have to be complicated. I wanted this job because I thought it would be fun, and it turns out it's not as great as I thought, so I'm helping myself and people like me make it better. At least… that's what I mean when I say it doesn't have to be complicated, but it kinda is. I spent so much time arguing with my family about why I should do art and not med school. Now I have to say 'no really, art really is good! But there are some things that need to change.' You can't explain it to everybody." Samantha's response reveals two additional pressures for young artists. Not only do artists feel stressed to maintain a hirable appearance, but artists like

Samantha face external (e.g. convincing your family you have made reasonable choices) and internal (e.g. convincing yourself that you love your work) struggles.

How, then, do artists, like Samantha and Manny, come to gather in 2022 for the first animation workers rally since the 1980s?

The rall-goers gathered in the crowded IASTE parking lot. The pressure to maintain social distancing collided with the determination to demonstrate union solidarity. Car horns and barking dogs punctuated excited chatter as the protestors awaited the union speakers on the central stage. Next to me a woman lowered her #STORYCRAFTERSUNITE sign to dance from foot to foot. The loud colorful posters neatly juxtaposed their carriers: people wearing lowered caps, sunglasses, and face masks. Bodies turned outwards to hail the passing the cars for support conveniently obscured their appearance from the news reporters and photographers who lined their cameras at eye level facing the crowd. The desire to be highly visible dangled precipitously over the fear of being recognizable.

But the posters had another consequence too. The large glittering signs defended arriving protestors, literally walling arriving artists into the center of the arena. As the small parking lot slowly filled with rally-goers, protestors without posters gathered before the stage. Social distancing fell away to the necessity to accommodate as many participants as possible.

Despite hesitations about workplace backlash, the pressure to maintain a positive outlook about creative work, and nearly 40 years without a labor movement, the rally in Burbank was not an anomaly, but rather an integral and regular component of the legacy of labor in the animation industry. That is, I contend that these labor movements are not disruptive blips on an otherwise peaceful timeline, but that these movements openly propel the history of animation. Workers in



Figure 1. Personal field sketch of rally participants observing the speaker

the industry, from interns to producers, are attuned to these movements, and are intimately aware of the way technology, education, and culture impact their work. Even the students I spoke with could name prominent labor strikes and speak with authority on key issues in the movement.

When I asked animation workers why labor disputes are a prominent topic in the history of animation, two key insights emerged. First, many felt that animation is a profession only borne form changes in technology and consequently, industry workers are deeply invested the in ways new technology impact creativity and production. Technology will open, alter, and replace jobs in the industry. As a result animators must routinely assert their value, and adapt to new processes. Second, animation production is necessarily cultural production. It is symbolic

cultural production both in Geertz's sense that it "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols" to communicate larger messages about a shared society (Geertz 1973, 89), and in the McLuhan's sense that "the medium is the message" (Fiore and McLuhan 1964, 9) that animation as a medium speaks to contemporary feelings about technology, art, and way information should be sequenced for consumption. But animation is also literal cultural production. It is a form of "metacultural production" (Urban 2001) where the goal is explicitly to produce cultural, and in the case for most studios, profitable stories. That is, many animated works intentionally use cultural experiences to comment on larger society.

The idea that animated stories should be "real" and "relatable" pervades nearly all levels of discussion about its production. Students disseminated this belief when they shared their reasons for learning art. Shanna a recent art school graduate told me, "When I started school, I had to decide between animation and studio art. But animation just seemed more fun. You work with so many people to tell these big stories and all these people get to see it. If I did studio art… maybe my work would get in a museum, but I wouldn't get that sense that I'm really sharing these stories with the world." And, as an instructor, Harris chides his audience, when he tells them, "You don't learn from books! You learn from people! That's where real stories are." In both of these anecdotes, animated story craft becomes synonymous with telling real, relatable, and subsequently, meaningful stories.

Whether these stories come through cartoon bunnies or impossibly chiseled superheroes is irrelevant. Artists asserted that the emotional message of the story (e.g. "perseverance in the face adversity" or "true love conquers all") inform animation's true value. A veteran art director I spoke to remarked, "It's almost always the same story—and I'm not saying don't innovate—but

there's a reason why themes like love, death, and heroism always come back. Audiences are drawn to those. Humans are in, fact." But for many artists struggling with the consequences of precarious labor, celebrating grand themes of love and valor feels incongruent with the nature of



Figure 2. Personal field sketch of rally participants displaying signs

their work.

For workers in the animation industry, labor conflict is a critical and poignant part of industry culture (Lent 2015). As one storyboard artist I spoke to put it, "It's a bit ironic to spend my days working on stories where good conquers evil only to look around me and see all the messed up things happening to the people who work with me." Perhaps it is unsurprising then

that the seminal text on labor disputes in the animation industry was written by long-term industry veteran Tom Sito. In his historiography on animation unions, Sito (2006), writes," As a young artist, I never thought about why I have weekends off or why my company offered a fat health insurance package. I thought it was an act of nature like leaves turning colors in the fall. I came to understand that everything I ever enjoyed as an artist in the studio had to be won through demand, and sometimes conflict" (4). Sito's text and conversations with my participants revealed that "coming to understand" happens through explicit and tacit socialization into industry culture.

The participants at the 2022 New Deal for Animation Rally had been routinely ideologically primed for labor activism prior to their entry into the industry.

"What?" A lean blond man asks as a car horn interrupts his conversation partner. A young tanned woman adjusts her poster, and waits for another car horn.

"I was saying, for now just focus on making your portfolio better. If there's a strike, then there's a strike. If you want to work in the industry you're going to need to send your art out anyway," she says.

"I'm trying to take some fine art classes to improve my chances of getting in CalArts, but the strike has me worried."

"Sure, if you want, but I'd say to skip that and just start sending your portfolio out now. There's always going to be something going on. Continue to be aware of stuff, you know?"

This exchange I overheard at the rally is analogous to sentiments I heard throughout my research and demonstrates tacit integration into "coming to understand" labor politics within the industry. In this situation, the female rally-goer advises her conversation partner, a man not in the

industry yet, to be aware of ongoing issues in the industry amidst his application process. Strikes will "happen if they happen," divisive labor practices will "always be going on," and yet, continuing to purse work through application or study is an expected endeavor. This claim emerges analogous to Sito's initial sentiment that his workplace advantages felt as natural as "leaves turning colors in the fall" (2006, 4). The naturalizing of labor conflict and the benefits won through that conflict subsequently encourages artists to accept adversity, but expect amelioration. By contrast, explicit integration often appears as informative advocation, such as in the example of Alyssa in the Twitch chatroom presented earlier. She disrupts the nature metaphor by pointedly advocating for worker intervention. Alyssa announces the rally, distributes the flyer to the students, and requests their participation.

Integration into the union and animation labor politics is therefore an inherently social process. It involves transfer of knowledge from an integrated, informed party to a less knowledgeable worker or student. In the course of this project, I observed this explicit and tacit integration through four key modalities: online through social communities such as Discord, oral histories at key events such as the Rally, bonding in the workplace, and education in classes. The 2022 New Deal for Animation Rally was consequently the result of compounding systems of integration into labor activism coupled with historical precedent. The Rally itself also operated as a site of explicit integration furthering this tradition. Speakers delivered poignant oral histories about labor while attendees voiced support for the movement.

As I suggested earlier, however, integration and education are only one part of complicated feedback loop through which labor organization, change, and philosophy become solidified. What is a problem, how people approach solving this problem, and what are

appropriate attitudes to have about this problem all emerge from this process. Critically, demands are often nebulous and mercurial—another component to the feedback loop I discussed earlier. Thus, the primary objective of the New Deal for Animation Rally was to codify these dimensions. So, what were the immediate grievances the Rally aimed to address? And how do these grievances lose and reform structure to acquire new meanings?

Squinting against sunlight, a union representative shouts into the microphone "We make whole worlds from nothing! We are more than enough to make real change!" to uproarious applause. Alongside me, attendees chant "Union Power!" as they thrust their fists in the air. Glitter glue posters and painted cars gleam in the light. Art is not an accessory to the rally; it is the impetus.

To briefly summarize: the first major animation labor movement took place in the 1930s and is well catalogued by Harvey Deneroff, animation historian and founder for the Society of Animation Studies, whose father participated in what is now posthumously called the 1937 Fleischer Studios Strike. Deneroff notes that the animators, many of whom built enduring friendships from their time in local high school arts classes, felt galvanized by their camaraderie and ironically, from the family-like work philosophy the Fleischer studio encouraged. "When it became obvious that there was going to be a strike, the union members at Fleischer's seemed almost eager for the upcoming confrontation. They were firm in their belief that victory would be certain and swift—though neither was the case" (Deneroff 1987, 1). Chief complaints included unfair treatment and unequal pay for new employees. Technological advancements disrupted

traditional work flows resulting in new positions such as "inbetweener."[9] Despite the lengthy and challenging nature of this work, these employees were paid significantly less than the extant animators. This disparity prompted the Commercial Artists and Designers Union to organize and advocate for artists in these new positions.

This strike had several key consequences: 1) it led Fleischer Studios to relocate in order to escape union activities, 2) it inspired the 1941 Disney animators' strike, and 3) it ushered in the development of the Screen Cartoonist's Guild in 1938 in Los Angeles. Each of these three outcomes established precedents that continue to impact the industry today. In short: studios often seek sources of non-union labor to cut production costs, movements inspire later movements, and finally, newer, larger, more inclusive unions emerge to protect modern workers.

The last major animation strike occurred in 1982 in Los Angeles to protest "runaway productions," which is the process of outsourcing animation to reduce costs. Animators argued that this practice was personally demoralizing and financially straining for the many workers who moved to LA specifically to study and produce animation. In addition to harming LA animators, critics argued that the cheaper animation significantly reduced the quality and enjoyability of animated films (Sito 2006). Academically, scholars questioned the significance of sending not only finished American films overseas, but actual American cultural production—what does it mean for lower-class foreigner workers to make films for upper middle-class American audiences (Miller and Leger 2001)? After three months of organized protest, the strike

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[9] An inbetweener draws or poses the model between two keyframes. A keyframe displays the beginning and ending of a movement. For example, two keyframes may show a character standing, then sitting. An inbetweener provides the frames of animation between these two points to create the illusion of seamless movement.

resulted in a loss and the union conceded to the studios' interests. Today, an estimated 90% of animation is produced in Asia (South East Asian Animation Report 2018).

Through extensive outsourcing, animation production was cheaper, faster, and with the rise of streaming services in the mid-2000s, more accessible. These elements created a greater demand for animated film and TV, leaving workers and unionized studios to develop new contracts and precedents for this labor. Enter: Sideletter N. In brief, Sideletter N outlines the labor conditions for New Media, otherwise known as streaming services. Since its inclusion in 2009, Sideletter N has been a contentious agreement undergoing revisions in 2015, 2018, 2021, and now most recently, 2022 (The Animation Guild 2022). After a narrowly avoided strike in 2020, the New Deal for Animation Rally in 2022 was latest attempt to make changes to Sideletter N. The slogan "new media is not new" was a popular chant at the event and most acutely voiced a growing dissatisfaction with the AMPTP's failure to recognize labor practices that have been normalized since the mid-to-late 2000s.

"They act like they can't raise wage minimums or enforce standards across streaming services or make it fairer for workers who get laid off after one season. Netflix and all those make money from having a bunch of new stuff. So they hire animators, make one season of a show, and blast promotional material to get people all excited. Then they cancel it and it's like, what happens to all us?" Susan, a storyboard revisionist, told me over Discord. Susan's complaints underscore much of the expected precarity commonplace to the industry. Productions will end, but when and for whose benefit remain cryptic. As Susan notes, this is not just a problem for artists, but also for the audiences who "get all excited" and personally invested in new productions. If one of the primary motivations for industry work is getting to tell "real,"

emotionally powerful stories, halting productions prematurely is personally as well as financially objectionable. When I asked her about Sideletter N and the issues surrounding streaming she told me, "corporations like to act like its all ok because we're all just 'figuring things out,' and 'oh, but streaming is so new and we just don't know how to handle it yet.' And sure, maybe it was like that 10 years ago, but everyone gets streaming now. That's what we mean when we say 'new media is not new." Here she positions corporations as antagonists who manipulate the concept of "newness" to further exploitation, but these sentiments do overlook the real effect audience demands have on the production of media. In fact, combined with her earlier statements about building public excitement, Susan tacitly locates audiences on the same side as artists in these movements. Regardless of whether she intentionally chose to obfuscate the effects audience demands have on animated production, placing audiences, namely "fans," on the sides of artists indicates the primary public rally-goers like Susan are hoping to reach.

Critically, Susan's explanation of "new media is not new" does proffer a legible definition in the context of the rally, but I argue that it also does something more. I contend that statements like these begin to reveal the third piece of the feedback loop: the tendency to "liquify" demands into a more nebulous and workable form. Susan's definition compounds a lot of issues, some of which directly relate to Sideletter N, but it also speaks to troubles in the industry more broadly. In fact, while many of the rally speeches and later reporting spoke to grievances with Sideletter N, it was hardly the only objection. Other notable platforms included: workers being unfairly tasked with jobs outside their expertise, pay increases for writers earning less for animated programs, failure to hire and support diverse workers, and unequal pay between animation for cable vs animation for streaming.

The transition from opaque grievance to amorphous affective injustice was nowhere more apparent than the sticky-note wall.

Unplugged microphones are hoisted off the podium while photographers capture the final moments of the congealed crowd before it thins into an undirected, but quiet chaos. Participants shove oversized poster boards into their cars. Behind me a couple discusses where to eat lunch. I turn to leave, but I pause to take in a new observation. As attendees leave, I can see a bright colorful wall emerge behind the crowd. The wall is about 6ft x 4ft. In the center is a large poster asking attendees to share their concerns. The wall is covered in hundreds of brightly colored sticky-notes.

Where a speech requires coherence, structure, and plainness (e.g. "this the problem and this is how we intend to fix it"), the sticky-note wall is unburdened from curation. These thoughts were raw, emotive, and largely decontextualized. That is, if I were to hand you one of these notes, you may understand the frustration, but not the purpose. Scrawled in heavy black Sharpie marker were the following: "Equal pay!," "I know my worth," "BURNOUT IS REAL," "This isn't normal," "OLD media," "Just SAY GAY," "We want to afford houses," and "this job gave me carpal tunnel," amongst many more.

Although brightly colorful and eye-catching, the sticky-note wall suggests an intimacy the larger rally does not. Phrases like "burnout is real," or "this isn't normal," are not purposefully legible to broader audiences in the same way the union speeches are. The rally urges public awareness through increased visibility. Rally organizers strategize location, time of day, number of attendees, signage, and microphones. These elements are not superfluous to a successful rally, they are the conditions of its structure. By contrast, the sticky-note wall

celebrates chaos. It is a space for workers to vent their frustrations in a language immediately recognizable to only them. Accordingly, writers may use shorthand to reference multiple concerns. For instance, the phrase "just say gay," is used to both protest Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' ratifying the controversial HB 1557 "Don't Say Gay" bill into law, as well as to criticize Disney for releasing a string of animated features which make allusions to LGBT characters subtle enough to be removed for foreign audiences. "Just say gay" parodies "Don't say gay," and encourages animation studios to have their characters openly recognize queerness in the text, rather than the subtext. But while "just say gay," and variations of its sentiment featured multiple times on the sticky-note wall, these topics were not included in the union speeches.

The passion for which attendees advocated for "just say gay," and "establish wage minimums in Sideletter N" is symmetric, but the presentation and coherency of these ideas is not. I argue that in the process of organizing the rally and building integration, the translation of "liquid" variable ideas into workable public-facing grievances not only inducts more artists into the union, but it also primes workers for future labor movements. As another example, many artists cited "burnout" as a chief complaint in industry work.

"I joined this community because my burnout got so bad. I was working all the time and I didn't know what to do. I was always drawing but it always felt like there was more work. My boards weren't good enough. My designs weren't good enough. Even when I wasn't at my job, I felt this constant need to practice. I thought maybe talking to others and doing art more casually would help me learn to love art again," a Discord user said about their experience with burnout.

“Everyone burns out,” another artist said. “The studio won’t help you. You just gotta learn to manage it.”

Throughout my research “burnout” reoccurred as a frequent concern. Classes, study groups, and industry-led panels at conventions routinely discussed “managing burnout.” Paradoxically, the definition of “burnout” remained intriguingly nebulous, with varied interpretations from “being too tired to work” to “struggling to compete against others in developing new creative ideas.” Ultimately, “burnout” is able to balance these multivariate definitions because what burnout means is secondary to what burnout does: halt the process of labor. In an industry that repeatedly demands high volumes of work while placing the moral responsibility of that work on its employees, burnout is often internalized as a personal struggle rather than a corporate consequence. Artists repeatedly adopt of the persona of “tortured creatives” perpetuating the belief that personal strife creates more meaningful art (Alacovska and Kärreman 2023). Yet, when suffering for labor becomes a personal responsibility, the burden of alleviating that stress becomes one as well resulting in potentially harmful ideologies about hope and self-medication (Alacovska 2018, 2019; Alacovska and Kärreman 2023; Klein 2012).

It is unsurprising then to see burnout listed amongst the other distresses detailed on the on the sticky-note wall. However, the rally speeches and promotional materials did not explicitly name “burnout” as a chief concern. But critically, union worker’s proposals outlined changes that would improve the conditions under which burnout occurs. These changes included stricter outlines for employee responsibilities and greater enforcement of these roles. For instance, employees should not be tasked with work outside of their job descriptions and employees should not face retaliation for refusing work outside of their position. One of the proposed

amendments to Sideletter N included lowering the budget threshold which qualifies certain animated productions as "high budget." High budget productions give workers greater contract benefits including paid holidays and overtime—two advantages that may assist artists struggling with burnout. Lowering the amount which qualifies productions as "high budget" therefore grants more workers access to these benefits.

In sum, I ask how does the personal expectation to manage one's burnout become quantified budgetary changes for Sideletter N? I argued that it is through ritualized integration into the history of labor in the animation industry. As I suggested earlier, the explicit statement of grievances, the induction and recruitment of new workers into labor history, and the liquefaction of struggles create a complex feedback loop where each objective becomes an incentive for or a consequence of the others. Through the course of work or at offsite social circles, artists share their concerns and oral histories about labor within the industry. These concerns often begin amorphous and fleeting such as "feeling tired," "working too much," or "struggling with creativity." The unstructured nature of these concerns allows more individuals to relate and join the discussion. Over time, these feelings may acquire new names and slogans that shorthand issues in the industry such as "burnout" or "just say gay." Increased attention to these issues helps to shift the framing around these ideas from a natural, expected component of work culture to legitimate structural issues enabled by the studio's poor working conditions and the interests of the AMPTP to keep production costs low. Resolving these issues often requires public legibility in order to secure increased support from audiences as well as artists. At this stage, more liquid nebulous ideas undergo a public-facing translation into actionable practices. Through this process, "artists struggle with burnout," becomes "we need changes to Sideletter N that

reflect work in 2022." The New Deal for Animation Rally is an extension of this legacy. Spaces like the sticky-note wall prepare workers to re-enter the loop again providing opportunities to discuss emergent, but imprecise grievances.

Conclusion

The movement from student to industry professional encompasses both technical and ideological repositioning. Industry work is physically distinct from student work. Skills, workflows, timelines, and collaborators vary from studio to studio. These elements are typically taught "on the job," and while classroom projects such as student films act as practicums for these conditions, students unlearn and relearn work patterns at every new job. This variance often produces turbulent work environments such as late hours, disagreeable coworkers, demanding timelines, and months of unemployment. In the opening ethnographic story, industry artists Harris, Jim, and Reed lament these challenges in a livestream aimed at teaching their audience of students "what they really need to know" before entering the animation industry.

It is through encounters such as the livestream or on-the-job training, students learn to contend with "project death." During the course of animation production, projects may fail in any stage from ideation to additional seasons or sequels. Work is thusly difficult, but not guaranteed. Many students must therefore additionally adapt ideologically to industry work. This means that alongside developing new skills for this labor, students learn to reevaluate those skills and even reevaluate the meaning of labor more broadly. The idea that this work "must be done," even if it is unfair and unpredictable, encourages artists to continue producing. Critically, this

ideology is supported not only by the industry, but it is also internalized within artists personal narratives about "good work" and "real stories."

When I asked Marina, Christina, and Cayley about their interest in the industry, it was challenging for them to articulate reasons why they wanted to participate other than "this is all I ever wanted to do." Similarly, when Shanna explained to me her interest in animation over studio art, she underscored her desire to tell "real stories" to broad audiences. These responses all point a deeply personal motivation to perform this work. Many artists thusly come to this labor with extremely passionate and individualized ideologies about animation. I contend that this position is one answer to the paradox I posited throughout this dissertation. It is also the primer to later ideological shifts wherein students move from an individual to a collaborative evaluation of labor.

In the third paradox, I explore: The animation industry is a tumultuous, insecure environment that demands high volumes of work for unpredictable pay. Yet this is the same environment many animators staunchly defend as they explain their place in the industry, why? As noted above, the desire to perform this work is often deeply personal. The idea that "real people tell real stories" pervades much of the discourse about the value of animation. That is, students foreground animation's potential as a cultural product rather than purely an economic one. The intersection between digital labor and individual passion is where this research converges with Duffy's (2017) exploration of aspirational labor. But rather than working as individuals, students are preparing to enter a highly collaborative environment where the expectation is to work on "real stories" that are not necessarily your own. As Harris warns in the

opening ethnographic excerpt, “At the end of the day, it’s not about loving your project. It’s about selling it.”

Industry labor is thus not defined by an individual loving a project, but by the collective valuing that work as meaningful. This is the ideological shift students assume when transitioning from the classroom to the studio. However, the environment that encourages this shift is paradoxically unwelcoming. That is, how do students come to accept a collective interest in continuing labor when the potential for project death looms over all productions? Moreover, how do students contend with “dream death”—the bleak realization that their dream career may not be as fulfilling or supportive as envisioned? Analyzing the 2022 New Deal for Animation Rally and the broader history of animation labor in the US began to reveal the answers to these questions.

I argue that students and new workers are explicitly and tacitly integrated into labor activism. This integration structures a collective framing around what animation work culture is and what it could be. Explicit integration appears as advertising for the union whereas tacit integration appears as conversations that reify ideologies about work. These forms of integration most notably happen at sites of education, not necessarily labor. Classrooms, Discord channels, teaching livestreams, and on-the-job training were among the most frequent locations for this integration to occur. Most critically, both forms of integration accomplish the same objective: the student comes to recognize themselves within a legacy of labor rather than see themselves as an isolated worker.

The history of labor within the animation industry is rocky. Senior artists share labor movements and their consequences routinely through oral histories. When new activist

movements emerge, younger artists have already been primed for participation. Artists believe that the success of these movements depends on public support which requires legibility of key issues to broad audiences. Thus, artist's concerns are translated into formal grievances with actionable recourses. In the process of this translation, artist's liquid and amorphous worries again move from individual problems to congealed collective issues. In the example of burnout, complaints began with feeling "tired" or "uncreative." Artists may begin to internalize and address these issues on their own reasoning that their inactivity is due to a personal failure. However, through the course of discussion a larger umbrella term emerges to summarize and structure these feelings—burnout. But because so many artists see burnout as a natural and inevitable consequence of creative work inspiring activist movements to address it appears defeatist. Thus, formal grievances, like those appearing at the New Deal for Animation Rally, indirectly address causes for burnout without using the phrase as a central platform.

In sum, artists form personal and collective ideologies around the value of labor in the animation industry. These ideologies are protective offering hope and support from other artists when working conditions appear bleak. The desire to value collaboration and work in the face of precarity helps artists secure their own jobs and ensure that animated productions are made. But it also allows artists to form meaningful and powerful connections with other workers supporting a legacy of activism. These reasons are why many animators staunchly defend their place in the industry even as reality threatens their dream career.

THE SEQUEL

Conclusion

It is a brisk morning and I am writing this in a cafe outside Disneyland. The lolling fog mixes with the artificially scented Cinnabon air in a way that could only demarcate the Happiest Place on Earth. The sun will shine on Anaheim today as brightly and as boldly as the smiles of its guests. Disney is not magical. It creates magic which is a respectable and contrastive choice to a deeply capitalistic world often that prioritizes profits over people. But that's the interesting thing: Disney is also emblematic of the conditions it criticizes. Disney's animated films champion preserving against oppression, building intimacy over wealth, and pursuing one's dreams in the face of adversity. Yet at the same time, it is not a company free from salacious scandals, corporate greed, or creative monopolies, but these critiques are features of most companies, not faults unique to this one. The irony is that the animation industry, built largely from Walt Disney's passion-coded language produced in a booming swell of early Americana pride, often precludes its biggest dreamers and the people it most inspired. To be clear, that's not Disney's fault, either. Walt Disney had the unique privilege of aspiring to greatness at a time ready to inspire inventive men. The challenge now is that this is different era. Insecure precarious working conditions plague the creative industries. The years spent using Disney's legacy to inspire new storytellers now churns them out to a world lacking the social, cultural, and structural institutions needed to support them. Women in animation are still historic and novel, black creators are powerful visionaries, and everyone else is still "cutting-edge" and "never heard of." These assertions are not untrue, they are just overdue. They are celebrating new

perspectives on storytelling that have fought for years for the privilege of being "new." Alternative stories have always existed within animation and it is difficult to not cynically deduce that we reason we are able to see them now is that studio's see profit in diversity.

Throughout this dissertation I have explored several paradoxes of contemporary art education. First, why might such an established tradition have such an uncertain career pathway? Second, why would so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career? And third, the animation industry is a tumultuous, insecure environment that demands high volumes of work for unpredictable pay. Yet this is the same environment many animators staunchly defend as they explain their place in the industry, why?

To explore these questions I followed a cohort of roughly 40-60 students who made the choice to pursue an amorphous online art education after learning about various instructors and programs at the art and animation convention LightBox Expo in 2020. Over the course of this journey students joined and left. They entered new online communities, chose different courses, applied for work, went back to their non-art focused universities, and joined different industries. In 2021, I again attended LightBox Expo where I reconnected with the students I lost contact with, celebrated with those I had not, and met new aspiring artists seeking online education for the first time. The results were bleak. Of the initial group I started with, only two had successfully obtained jobs in the animation industry. A third also had a career, but they pivoted to joining the video game industry after struggling to find work in animation. This experience led me to develop one final question: why do only some make it?

In the chapters preceding this conclusion I have tried to answer all of these questions. Like the genre of animation itself, I structured this dissertation with three distinctive acts that

explore the ebbs and flows of my participant's journeys alongside the paradoxes I proposed earlier. In American storytelling, Act 1 is the moment of decision-making; it represents a point that the protagonist cannot turn back from. Act 2 is a period of growth and learning that prepares the protagonist for Act 3 wherein the hero must confront the danger that has been following them. Overall, this research captures a lot of nervous energy and to me that it is charm. The anxiety is befitting of animation; a medium that values excitement, tempo and color. It's unnerving and relaxing much like the pursuit of the dream career. It symbolizes idea that the discomfort now will one day be the security of the future.

Thus, in Chapter 1 I examined the historical and ideological structures that support events like LightBox Expo and current state of online education. I aimed to understand why artists are integrating themselves into new systems of art education and how they feel about "being a student" in a system that is decidedly not traditional. Ultimately I argued that LightBox Expo is a convergence of ideas about art and animation that have been building since the early 1900s. My participants believed that animation is about more than profit. It is also an expression of storytelling and passion. Their feelings about this passion mirror folktales about Walt Disney and his contemporaries pursuit of their craft against all opposition. The technological production of animation has changed considerably over the past hundred years, but these underlying ideologies about love have remained. However, love is not necessarily enough to stave off insecurity and as animators become increasingly worried about the future of their career, they turn to teaching for a secondary income. Aspiring artists are attracted to these courses because they allow them to become students more easily and affordably than attending a traditional art school. Critically, becoming a student is not exclusively about enrollment. Rather, declaring oneself a student

indexes a commitment to a goal. My participants aimed to be professional artists; accepting the title "student" is the first step to getting there.

In Chapter 2, I explored an emergent category of online artist: social media art influencer. These are individuals who build their celebrity through posting online art tutorials and critiques. Their identity is a brand that they maintain on multiple online platforms. Like other social media influencers, they encourage their audience to build a parasocial relationship with them and it is this audience of devotees who are among the first to pay for courses and exclusive content. But for many aspiring animators these relationships are more hopeful networking opportunities rather than friendships. Someone who follows their favorite Instagram model may not hope to be a model themselves, but these young artists often see enrolling in courses with their favorite instructor as their first "industry connection." These relationships introduce new power imbalances in art education that many online instructors and platforms are unprepared for. A lack of consistency, regulation, and support leads many aspiring artists to form their own online communities.

In Chapter 3, I reviewed Discord learning communities and the artists who work to maintain them. Students may use these communities to learn synchronously and asynchronously. Each methods results in different practices and relationships that students use to declare their place within the community. Overall, I argued that these learning communities aim to replicate aspects of a traditional education online by focusing on the ways students build hierarchy through the practice of critique. It is in these communities students also begin to practice self-branding thereby entering the social media art influencer landscape. In Chapter 4, I noted how self-branding intersects with online celebrity. Students build myths around legacy, "being

discovered," and artistic perfection to ease anxieties about entering an industry they know is not accepting a lot of new hires. A lot of these myths lead students to justify a perpetual education and delay applying for industry work at all.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I examined two critical moments in which the cohort of students I followed directly confronted the realities of their "dream career." First, students listened to a livestream where their idols working in the industry shared their struggles maintaining work. Second, several students attended a rally where animation workers argued for improved contracts. In both of these situations students grappled with the implicit the assumption that "this is the way it is." Some challenged the idea that artistic work is necessarily laborious and suffering while others upheld the idea that their success in the industry was a testament to their diligence and talent. This chapter also examined the way present animators integrate new artists into labor reform movements by sharing oral traditions about success.

In total, these chapters address the three paradoxes I proposed at the start. Why might despite its established traditions does animation have such an uncertain career pathway? Through my research I learned that the premise of this question is wrong. The practice of animation integrated into the other arts and consequently upholds many similar cultural ideologies about artistic practice in the US. Namely, there is a social assumption that art should be both boundary-pushing and experimental while also satisfying classical ideas about what art is. Paintings are good examples of this idea. The content of the painting may be bold, but the medium is artistic regardless of the subject. The history of animation in the US grapples with a similar tension. Folktales about Disney support the idea that animation is a masterful tool for artistic storytelling, but at the same time, even the earliest animated projects were predominantly commercial.

Further, as new technologies increasingly changed animated productions it led to new skills and new ideologies about how to use those skills. In short, animation does have established traditions, but they have never necessarily guaranteed a stable career. In fact, being uncertain is an operational strength of the animation industry. It suggests that anyone with great skill could enter. Again, the idea that new workers could join the animation industry without formal training upholds the juxtaposed value of tradition and experimentation that characterizes much of animation's history.

Why would so many students pursue an insecure education towards an equally insecure career? Students choices often balance high stakes against low risks. A lot of my participant's identity as an artist and as a student hinged on their commitment to their goals. For many, this passion developed in early childhood and their identity as an artist grew through years of skill building. Ironically, the idea that art should be made "from love" pushed many artists to grow their passion rather than their artworks. That is, instead of making art because they loved it, many of the artists I interviewed seemed to insist that they loved art because they made it. With so much of their identity and objectives tied to the production of art, the stakes feel personal and monumental. At the same time, younger artists are not unaware of troubles within the animation industry. There was a persistent melancholia that followed many of my participants. The belief that all industries are failing led students to make choices that felt financially responsible including spending less on their education and staying close to home. Online art education is partially so affordable because it is unregulated and unreliable. An odd benefit that emerges from this insecurity is its impermanence. There are no grades, permanent records, or transcripts. It is possible to take courses with instructors you will never meet or completely change your online

identity for a new class. The result is that the risk of failing an online art class is low. Students may make progress to their goals without having to provide evidence. In an environment characterized by insecurity, the low risks of online education ease some anxiety.

The animation industry is a tumultuous, insecure environment that demands high volumes of work for unpredictable pay. Yet this is the same environment many animators staunchly defend as they explain their place in the industry, why? Labor movements have been a critical part of the animation industry since the 1930s. These movements rely on narratives about challenging adversity to gain momentum. Often, it is the introduction of new workers which galvanize reform for existing workers. Most recently, debates about how to handle contracts around streaming services in the 2020s are reinvigorating conversations about outsourced labor that began in the 1980s. On the one hand, this long history of labor movements inducts new workers and improves working conditions. On the other hand, this pattern shapes an understanding that animation is "just like that" which studios use to continue exploitation under the guise that all animated projects are naturally tedious and difficult. Many animators and aspiring artists thusly place a high value on collaboration. Not only is collaboration necessary to complete projects and increase one's chances of being hired on another project, but collaboration is also the vehicle to improved working conditions. Artists consequently defend their place in the industry by asserting that this is simply the nature of creative work. Yet also by working together and celebrating the parts of the industry that they enjoy, they hope to enact meaningful change.

Finally, in asking my three participants who found work at the end of this journey, I examined why some artists successfully made it into the industry. The first was Anthony. He was in his early twenties and had been studying history at his local university before dropping out to

pursue art more diligently. We enrolled in Harris's spring course together. His frequent activity in the chatroom and Discord quickly made him a recognizable figure and when he moved on to other courses in the summer, several students followed his lead because they trusted his directions. He found employment shortly after LightBox Expo 2021 at an animation company in Los Angeles. On his success he said, "I don't know. I guess it's because I just kept trying. After class, I just kept trying to talk to the instructors and build a relationship. We've actually worked on some stuff together now. The teacher from my last class got me my first freelance job and I just kept pushing until I got my revisionist job. You need people to say 'hey I know him! He does good work,' but then you also gotta do the work to back it up."

Another student who found success in the industry was Sam. Sam had a small art job designing stickers and postcards before enrolling in online animation courses. Her participation online fluctuated as she would spend months in silence working on other things. "Honestly, I think it's luck. I made a character over the summer art camp that got really popular and people started to recognize me and talk to me. Other artists started to recommend me for jobs they were too busy for. And once you start doing some professional work it's easier to get other jobs. But there's a lot of artists a lot better than me out there. So yea, I think I'm lucky."

The final student I spoke to was Beth. Throughout the year Beth said that she routinely struggled with her mental health and self-confidence. She said it was difficult for her to maintain practice. Online courses provided her some stability, but there were no repercussions when she stopped participating. When her attempts to apply for animation internships failed, her depression worsened. Yet after posting her art online consistently for a year, she was approached by video game company looking to hire her. "I love it," she said. "My team is great. Maybe

there's a part of me that's sad I'm not doing animation, but honestly, the main thing I want to do is art. Working on games feels great."

These three stories demonstrate ideas about success that many of my participants already knew: diligence, networking, and consistently sharing their work. Yet, neither Anthony, Sam, nor Beth necessarily practiced these qualities more than other students I interviewed. Ultimately, there is an amount of imperceptible and unpredictable conditions that allow some students to have more success. Perhaps as a male student Anthony connected more to his male instructors. Perhaps Sam's experience working in a creative field gave her an advantage when she began working with other professionals. Perhaps Beth's isolation allowed her to keep a consistent posting schedule. There is no single determining factor. An artist's actions and subjectivities, and the industry's present stylistic interests and needs all play a role in who "makes it." The fact that there is not one way to enter the animation industry feeds into the anxiety and insecurity my participants felt. At the same time, these examples show that entering the industry is not impossible and that an online only education can provide artists with sufficient skills and networking opportunities.

In much of contemporary American storytelling, the conflict between wants and needs drives the plot forward. It is a moralistic understanding of story that suggests that narrative satisfaction comes from characters learning to accept their place in the world. Spiderman wants to be lauded and appreciated for his heroism, but he needs to learn responsibility and understand that "doing the right thing" does not always come with praise or adoration. He ultimately becomes a hero not by fulfilling his wants, but by addressing his needs. While the dialectic between wants and needs is operationally a storytelling device and the lived experiences of

individuals do produce neat narratives, understanding my participants wants and needs is nevertheless a useful analytic. As explored in Chapter 4, animation students are heavily invested in narrative. They draft their own stories, they want to work professionally on stories, and they assemble fragments of their education into oral histories called "artist's journeys."

Here is the final clue to this mystery: This has largely been a story about people who do not just want to be animators or artists; they want to be Walt Disney. They aspire to work in animation because they believe in the value of exploring their own creative worlds and sharing it with others. They want to expand their dreamscapes beyond themselves and speak to the public more broadly. Animators and artists represent the American dream—they are the benefactors of hard labor and meritocracy who are rewarded with the ability to craft the stories next generation will learn from. In a society deeply skeptical of American exceptionalism, artists remain critical icons of passion and labor. Their success says you truly can earn money doing what you love.

Yet, reality can be much more sobering. Along the way what aspiring artists need is to learn is that their hard work will not always be rewarded and that studios, educators, and even other artists can take advantage of their passion for their money, time, or labor. Addressing this need does not have to be joyless or grim, however. The recent labor movements in the animation industry and the community organization against the use of AI illustrate a lot of compassion and support. Students gathering together online to practice an interest they all deeply enjoyed was an expression of joy.

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