



I teach the first-year graduate seminar in critical theory to MFA students at the University of Minnesota. People arrive to the class with a varied background, socially, academically, and artistically. Students hail from local Midwest and Minnesota, from the South, East, and West, and increasingly from international countries. Most have known they were artists from a very young age, and graduate school seems the logical next step, but a few are newer to the field. Some are fresh out of undergraduate programs and others are returning to school after many years on their own.

Besides the obvious distinctions among media preferences and how tied to tradition, craft, and concept they are, students exhibit a wide range of artistic practices. Studio hounds, darkroom denizens, and digital techies all seem welded to particular physical spaces for their creative production. Others use their studios more as an office or personal storage space, preferring projects that take them outside the studio walls. Many develop a mixed practice that combines immersive bouts in the secluded haven of the studio with other activities that engage more public contexts.

From the perspective of art theory, here too students evidence a range of attitudes. Some march in with a vast knowledge base already under their belt, often assuming a leadership role in group discussions. A few students resent the intrusion of so much talk and reading into their creative lives, viewing such study as one more thing taking time away from their work. Most welcome the chance to delve more deeply into art's issues and history, eager to discover their own position and to challenge what they heretofore believed.

When I ask new grads why they have entered graduate school, I get a handful of usual responses: to get more time in the studio, to get the MFA degree so they can teach, to network professionally, to gain an artistic community, and to develop a critical perspective on their work. A practical concern with a potential career in the arts rises readily to the surface, despite the fact that no guarantees exist and competition is fierce. But a person does not become an artist because it is the practical thing to do. The inchoate, internal reasons, perhaps not so readily shared, are the stronger motivators. Graduate school becomes a time to figure out those deeper reasons, the ones that will sustain you if all else fails.

Contemporary artists have no clear-cut path to follow. There are so many options before them about what kind of artistic life they want to have, how public or private, formal or conceptual, singular or varied. By enrolling in an MFA program students expose themselves to the full weight of these choices and the risk of being overwhelmed is real. Each new idea can feel like a challenge, sometimes even a threatening one. But despite any struggle or momentary self-doubt it is a risk that seems to bring out the best in our students. I am repeatedly impressed with the way each person slowly carves out a niche, gradually assuming responsibility for the artist they want to be. An MFA is by no means necessary for artistic self-determination, nor is it a capstone to that process; nonetheless it can accelerate and punctuate an incredible journey of self-discovery that prepares artists well for the uncertain future that lies ahead.