How To Make Art

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2023

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
School of Art + Art History + Design

University of Washington

Abstract

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This work describes a way of making more work. By following the loose process below, the reader is offered a guiding set of principles in order to make Art. This is a desirable outcome given the proliferation of instruction and theory which makes no effort to guide the recombinant artistic process. A tool box without an idea does not make an automobile, nor does a vision without a process. Given the abstract nature of creating meaning from nothing this work is far from exhaustive. Fortunately, counterarguments are particularly generative for the author, and he hopes they are for you too. Please enjoy this insight into:

How To Make Art

Making Art is a relatively simple endeavor. The Artist applies available material and skill to a goal with some degree of intention and boom, you've got art! This is about as helpful as any concise piece of wisdom as it demands much interpretative labor on the part of the reader. What we actually want is *good* art, made efficiently and with respect. This thesis paper subscribes to the same desire for efficiency in its ability to leave the reader with a concrete path to abstract creation.

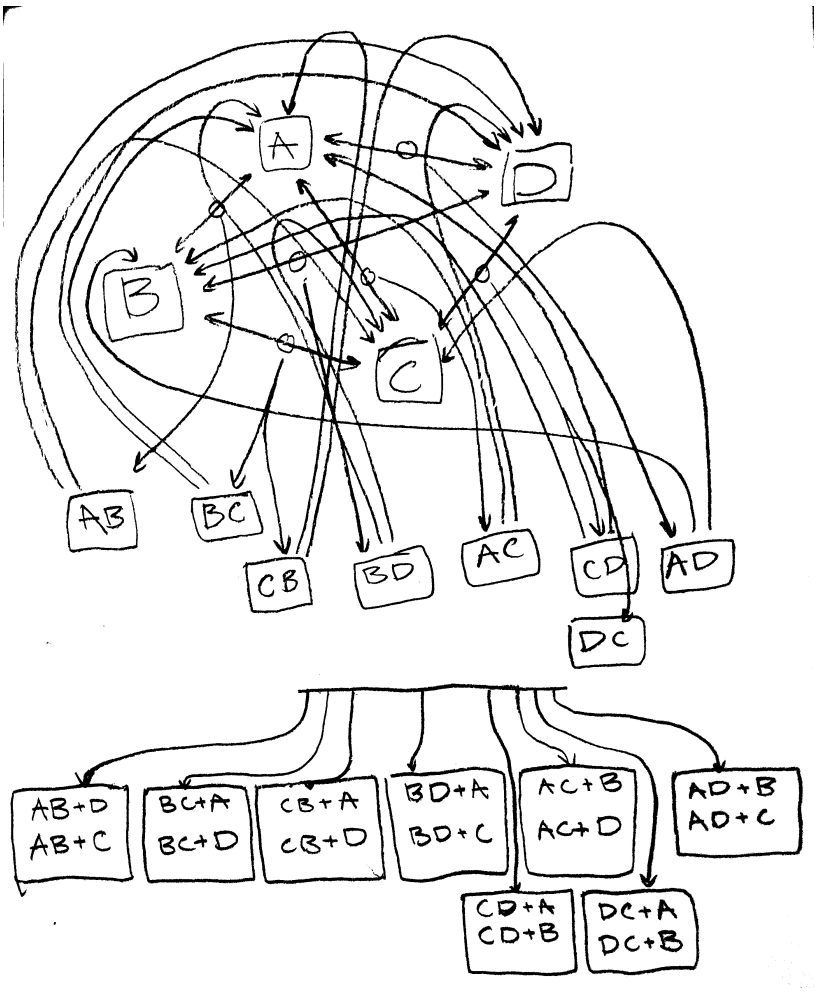
There are obviously long form answers to these main components available in libraries, .coms, and MP4s, all at our fingertips. Deep dives into material, technique, and artistic intent throughout cultures and time are so widely available as to be overwhelming at times. With so many possibilities -and skill caps seemingly higher than ever thanks to social media- I see a new need for synthesis. We need descriptions of how exactly one might make art without being prescriptive or limiting. Ways to provide ourselves with structure like a Sol Lewitt drawing, or *The Five Obstructions*.

I *love* a good Michael Heiser rock but each museum presents obstacles, each fabrication crew has certain skills, and each rock has material considerations, so I don't think it's a stretch to point out that this formula could arrive at results already achieved by other known means. Head to the comments section below with your methods, your engagement helps this cannel grow! Oh, wait, I don't have a youtube profile yet. Soon…

Recognizing the simple and the long answers to "How To Make Art" as: "Do things with stuff and reason" and "Wrap your head around human history and experience, then activate it" respectively, then our middle ground becomes "Lay out a concrete path for an artist to activate their skills, materials, and intentions into a work as concisely as possible." I respect that this is an obtuse sentence but this is the paradox of summarizing anything. So *concise* but not vague really is the key here, thinking of brilliant but impenetrable works I have attempted to digest as an artist. Taking a cue from the internet, here's a TLDR: (AKA Summary)

The artist keeps a running list (On paper, mentally, visually, whatever works) of the big three components throughout their daily life. Observing their own abilities, climbing in dumpsters and looking in give-away boxes, all while practicing metacognition as to their priorities and desires.

These categories are mashed together repeatedly in a loose algorithm. Parallel to this step, consider the outputs of this mash up process and reinterpret them. One step containing all others is exposure to novelty, pleasure, discomfort, and meaning. Sub-components of Materials, Skills, and Intentions can be used to kickstart the process, as well as ~~thorough~~ observation and getting involved in extra labor.



A diagram is worth a thousand words so I'd like to introduce our next players in this descriptive process:

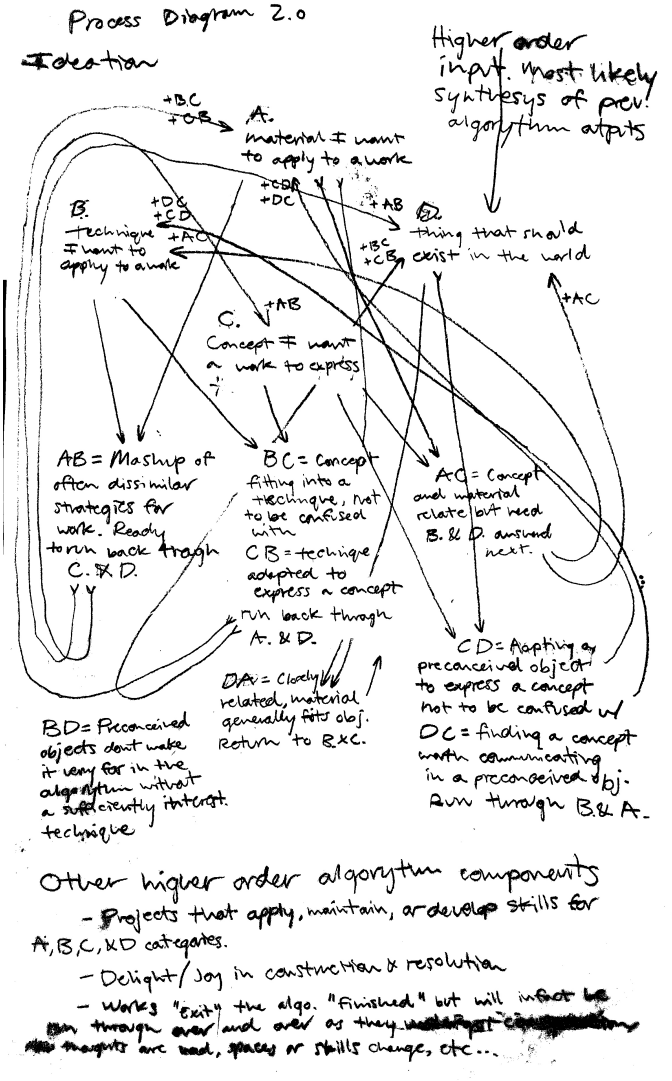
A: Material(s)
B: Technique(s)
C: Concept(s)/Intent
D: Thing(s) that should exist in the world

This visual is far more linear than necessary but can be followed as accurately as desired. A series of comparisons and smashing of ideas build up in layers.

You may wish to write down the outputs of these steps. Put them in your sketchbook and come back to them if they seem poignant or rare. But do not be afraid to let them settle like layers of algae and silt and sticks at the bottom of a lake. Under the weight of a thousand other outputs these layers eventually become sandstone or oil shale, depending on their carbon content or other factors. Someone or something will eventually come tromping through your lake bed so even the lost ideas have a chance to float back up to the surface.

Thousands of outputs may seem unrealistic, but remember that this diagram is not just for the singular piece of art. Each ingredient of the work might be sent through the process. A pedestal's materials all have their own technical needs, material availability. Ideally, even a visual style that *should* exist while fitting the concept behind the work.

The simple white gallery box, for example, meant to display a particularly beautiful rock about the size of a softball still presents opportunities. We can run any set of available woods through our construction algorithm for a suitable structure, but what size? Are the corners rounded? Does the paint have the texture of a couple dozen passes with a roller? Dozens of small questions can be answered with one to four basic priorities, cutting out much whiffle-waffling decision time.



Assume a tall pedestal for conceptual reasons (C), but made with limited material (A), and we think parallelograms are beautiful (D). Then we solve for (B), technique, check our our mental library books, and confirm our visualization of the pedestal is what we want. Great! Now run that same process after you've eaten, slept, or made some new work. Compare.

You could also have half a pedestal left over from another project, giving you A, D, and B. But it hasn't been conceptually connected to the rock yet so here you might use the algorithm to figure out which article you're going to change to tie the whole base together.

In summary, our second diagram expands on A,B,C, and D, stated above. The order in which these categories can change our outputs quite a lot but hypotheticals are inefficient as their possibilities are infinite.

Next, let's look at an example from the exhibition *Thesis Time,* specifically the work Was *I The Backpack This Whole Time?,* pictured here.

Any good science involves controlling for variables, so we need to look for a same-ish scenario done with different priorities. A fairly linear example of this came in the initial stages of experimenting with hydro forming in order to make the majority steel frame of this work.

The Material (A) was set at 20 gauge cold rolled steel, based on Technique (B). According to my research, it would serve as a good test material due to its moderate thickness and uniformity. The concept (C) was left as loose as “something functional, and my other works need seating…” A, B, and C all informed by a conviction that more hydro formed sculpture should exist in the world.

I started with a folded rectangle, moved on to welding seams in those rectangles, then brought those rectangles into the third dimension, before finally moving on to the vine-like left leg. A, C, and D remained the same while I pushed the technique further. Finally, I was ready to mess with C and made the back “leg” of the chair, pushing forward both technique and concept, all driven by D, as a thing that should exist in the world.

Okay, so you need another chair leg but you’re out of material! Out of your back stock, what fits B,C, and D? Great! Make it out of copper, but reference previous output: “chair leg.” Poke through a book, or your memory. Then make a table leg instead, because that seems funnier and D should not be ignored.

Then we’ve got a pile of metal objects that have been mentally assembled into dozens of chair-like objects… but when it come to figuring out how they should go together? Play with them like blocks. Consult the algorithm.

“Oh shoot, that’s not enough. I have legs, where are the arms? I need them structurally, what kind of arm fits this theme *and* should exist in the world?” This is where the process temporarily betrays you. It returns solutions just barely out of reach, but they seem so close, you try anyway. This is no betrayal - just try something and you’ll get somewhere, even if you let go of some artistic steps for reasons A or B.

A core part of this set of instructions is ignoring them completely. Well, ignore the diagram part at least. Just do stuff. Take any inkling you have and act on it. I was poking around in the green building early in my time at UW and complained to myself about the tables. Later, I needed to glue something but had no flat surfaces. A few days beyond that, I found myself uninspired but restless. In a bid to enable cleaner work later while also honing my skills, I just started scraping and sanding benches. And as usual, monotonous shop activities are the perfect time to plan out new work. Work one might not even be capable of had they not voluntold themselves to help out long ago. When you volunteer, you pick up skills on your own timeframe while creating meaning that feeds back into the process.

Another example might be my work with the UW farm. I only did a few shifts in the garden but we got absolutely trashed muddy and wet one time and it brought back a childhood joy I needed in this new place. Later, I welded them some signage and carefully spray painted it, reminding me of my work a a fabricator. You might think of it like oxygenating the lake, so the aforementioned layers of pond scum don't go aerobic on you.

The artist nodding along with these instructions might also benefit from pointless conversations and walks. You might argue a beneficial activity is by definition not pointless, but you don't know that until you get results. Idle chit chat about the weather became a core part of *Umbrellas Are for Californians,* as did my late night wanderings around my apartment.

The hardest part of this concept rears its ugly head. *Umbrellas Are for Californians* left me with so many outputs that the formula became difficult to build off. This is the parallel step in which the maker prunes the results of their work into a satisfying shrub. Plant it, compost it, transmute it. What survived that process? In this case: people want to be amused, myself included. They want references grounded in reality, like the weather and light. They *don't* want to see your sanding or varnish drips, so you're glad you got a lot of practice and patience. This is the value of critique. It takes the messy outputs of our art formulas and directs our attention to a few of the endless words that could be attached to a work.

The creation of works that respect the labor of the maker, the viewer, and the environment in which they are made, are by no means easy to realize. But I hope the reader walks away with a few concrete tools and insights into their making. Take mental stock of:

Materials at hand and at arms length
Skills in your pocket and in the library
Concepts in your cortex and out of conversation
Your wildest artistic desires

Get loose and have options without getting attached. Every night as you're falling asleep, or as you're waiting in line, run through the algorithm as carelessly as you desire. Eventually make the thing, and repeat!