

The Highlights - Artists Are Not



Agnes Martin. Photo by Charles R. Rushton.

Agnes Martin once remarked in a lecture that she had heard a scholar say that people were either responsible or neurotic. This, Martin said, left out the artist. I interpreted this to imply that artists should be neither responsible nor neurotic: responsible to no one, following their own minds, and free of the anxiety and distress that burdens other people. That's nice to think about, though not very realistic. But then, maybe Martin meant that artists are both responsible and neurotic...

We all know that artists are and are not a lot of different things, in all kinds of combinations. It is virtually impossible to define what it means to be an "artist" (not to mention all of the presumptions that will be made in this essay about what "art" is). In addition to being a job, making art is a way of looking at the world - you can do anything and say you are doing it as an artist. Trying to come up with a profession that is similarly flexible in definition, simultaneously very broad and very specific, is rather difficult.

Perhaps because of this, artists are always struggling to define themselves, to describe what it is that they do. The relatively recent inclusion of artists into academia and the disciplinization of art means that, to some extent, there has begun to be a standardization of what it means to be an artist. It also means that there is interest in defining and studying an artist's practice so that it can be taught.



Marcel Duchamp playing chess.

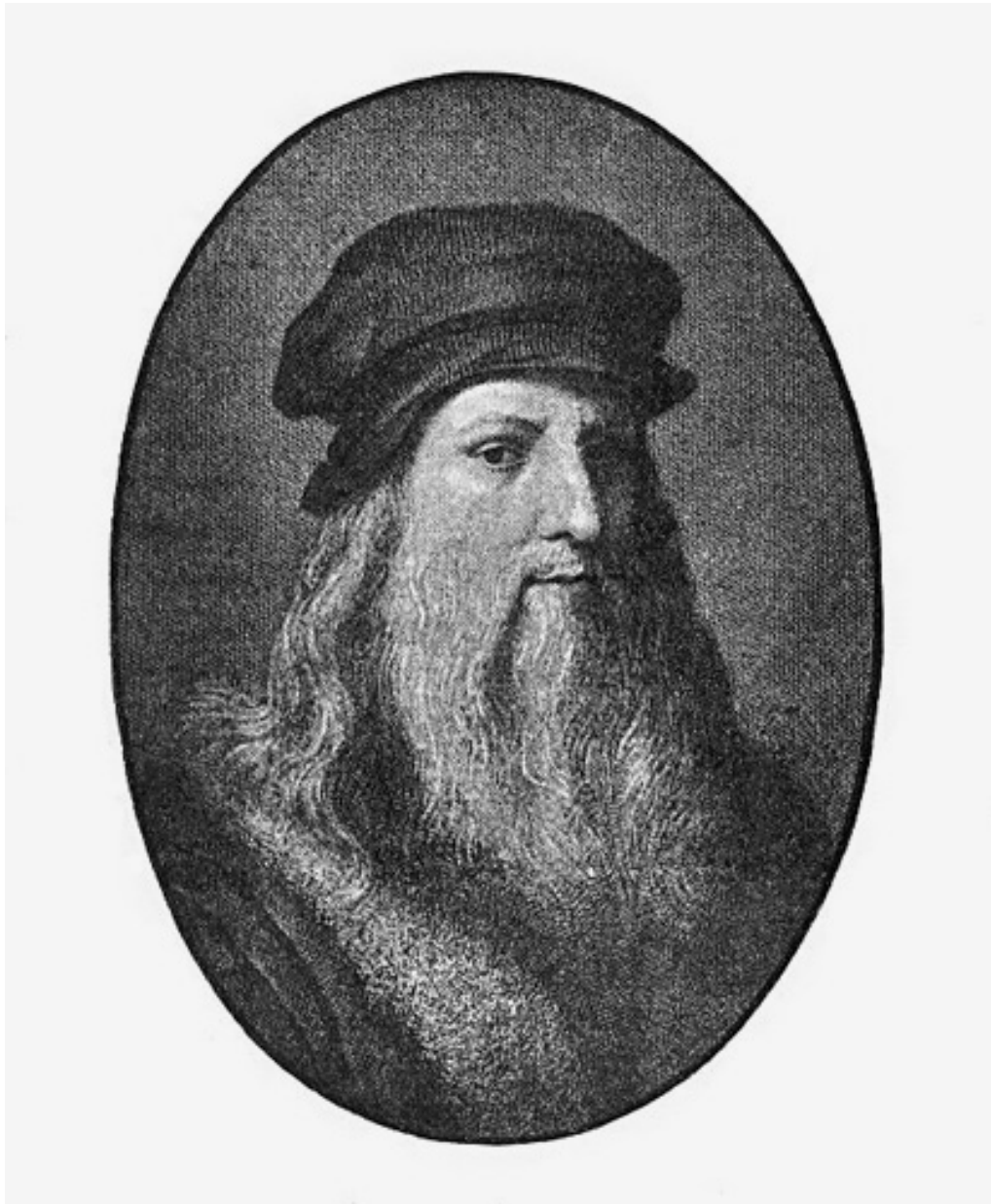
In general terms, the kind of artist that academia is interested in producing is one that fits into the academic system. Art as an intellectual pursuit, above and beyond the work of a skilled technician, is a modern idea, and the artists being produced by this system are supposed to think about their role as more than simply making things to decorate the walls or inspire piety. Artists now learn to think and write and talk about what they are making, and why they are making it. This logically leads to a lot of writing and reading and talking about art by artists, which leads to art journals and exhibition spaces run by artists.

An art historian might teach at a university, write essays, organize conferences, run an art journal, and curate exhibitions. Well, I do those things too - and all of those things are part of my role as an artist. But I also make art.

And of course there are some things that artists do that are not part of being an artist. One

artist I know works as an accountant; she doesn't consider this to be part of her practice.

Some artists play chess, and even that might be considered part of their practice, or at least an important influence. Marcel Duchamp was obsessed with chess, and really good at it. Man Ray and Francis Picabia played too. It seems that their chess-playing influenced their work both inside and outside of the studio. They all three made artworks somehow inspired by the game. In 1917, Picabia and author Henri-Pierre Roché played a game of chess to decide whose art magazine would be allowed to keep running, Picabia's 391 or Roche's Blind Pig. Picabia won; the Blind Pig folded, and 391 published nineteen issues.



Leonardo da Vinci, Original source: Hundred Greatest Men, The. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1885. This engraving has been based on a painting by an unknown artist which in

turn has been based upon a red chalk drawing thought to be a self-portrait of Leonardo. This engraving is an image representing Leonardo, not a true portrait.

Maybe it's incorrect to suggest that the multi-tasking artist's lineage only goes back to the modern era. Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his Treatise on Painting, "It reflects no great honor on a painter to be able to execute only one thing well - such as a head, an academy figure, or draperies, animals, landscapes, or the like - in other words, confining himself to some particular object of study. This is so because there is scarcely a person so devoid of genius as to fail of success if he applies himself earnestly to one branch of study and practices it continually." He might have meant that it's important to be good at painting different things, but I interpret his words to be about the importance of failure. Part of being an artist is to continually make things difficult, so that what comes out is different that what was made before. An artist is always trying to find the boundaries of what she is good at, and to try to make something out of that struggle to move outside of that boundary. Failure, Agnes Martin has said, is something that artists do, and do repeatedly - unlike other people, who are scared to fail even once.

While doing a lot of different things, and expanding one's practice outside of the studio, is not generally geared towards deliberately expanding one's personal field of failure, it does allow an artist to carry on some activities that fall outside of the constant struggle with failure taking place inside the studio. In other words, leaving the studio every once and a while can be a good thing.