The Unexpected Artist and Critic
Jared Bendis - Creative Director of New Media
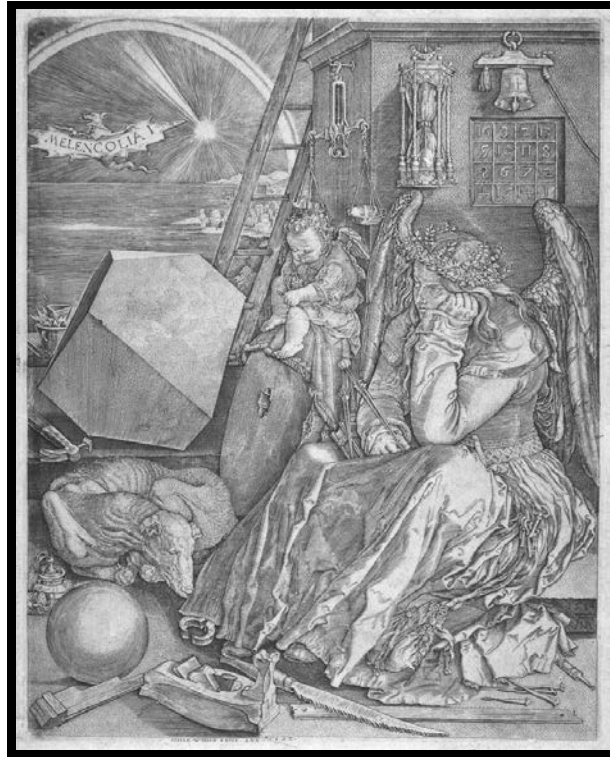Case Western Reserve University

The Ocean of Media

We live in an ocean of media. This ocean is **wide** and this ocean is **deep** and we have created many tools to help us navigate it. These tools allow us to choose **what** we watch and **where** we watch – but not **why** we watch. What we need is a compass. And that compass is a vocabulary of criticism and of a new-media literacy that we can use to navigate this ocean effectively and efficiently. Everyday this ocean gets a little deeper. We are **drowning** in media and we keep adding water. To survive we must embrace our roles as both artist and critic.

The Order of Things
As we talk about media and new-media literacy we might be tempted to jump right in and talk about media creation. After all, doesn't creation come first? Shouldn't we discuss how you paint a painting and only then discuss what **it** looks like? And while it might appear that this is the order of things the reality is much more complex. In truth, we are not talking about one specific painting but all paintings – the intrinsic concept of what a painting **'is'**. Imagine enrolling in a painting class having never **seen** a painting. Before you could paint anything you would need to understand more about what paintings are – to survey the possibilities of what a painting could be. Let me push this idea even further. Could you write a book having never read one? Now, the initial notion seems absurd. The order we discuss must be conceptual – first comes observation and only **then** creation.

Now, when I was getting my Masters in Art Education I was required to take a series of studio courses at the Cleveland Institute of Art. At the time I didn't know **how** to draw, and had **never** taken a drawing course, and I **begged** my advisor to not make me take one. So instead, he signed me up for a printmaking course with a focus on lithography. It sounded **exciting** – I was going to make **'lithographs'**. It never occurred to me that I had no real **'idea'** of what a lithograph **'was'**. And by that I mean I knew it was a form of art, that it was something you looked at. I knew it was something you reproduced – that's the nature of printmaking. But I hadn't **looked** at a print. If I **had**, it might have occurred to me sometime before the first class, also known in grad school as the point of no return, that to make a print you have to draw something first.

The next semester I took a course in the history of prints at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Every day they brought us into the print room and showed us original etchings, engravings, woodblocks, and lithographs. It was inspiring. I had no idea what the medium **could** do. In the end, my education was out of order. I needed to **see** - **then** to do. How many of us are **doing** without **seeing**?

Melecolia I – Duhrer - Engraving

I still don't know how to draw and **this** doesn't get you an A in grad school.

Bandit - Lithograph

This, however, does. Now I'm not showing you this because I think it's cool. I'm showing it because I didn't draw it. Instead I applied my knowledge of computer graphics and hand laid every pixel.

In this example I applied my knowledge of vector based graphics to hand cut the linoleum block.

But does my experience limit my creativity? Does it hinder it? Does it define it? People often talk about thinking 'outside the box'. Can we learn to be creative 'inside it' instead?

The Moving Target
Things change. It's the only truth in the world. Alan Kaye is quoted as saying that "Technology is anything that was invented after you were born." It's not a bad metric – though regardless of your age it tends to make you **feel** old. There are many ways of dividing the world. There are major events that are common to a lifetime – you either remember the moon landing or you weren't born yet. There are personal events, like what songs you listened to in high school, which have more to do with measuring your influences and experiences than an absolute timeline.

My friend Mark told me that the older you get the more pop-icons you lose. You know more names and more of them die. It's a constant feeling of expansion and contraction. And these icons aren't just people. My wife came home the other day and told me how sad she was that the local drive in theater was being torn down. We've never been to it. We've never even talked about going to it. Why would she care? It's a marker and we hate when these markers disappear.

This goes beyond people and places. It also applies to ideas. Think of the frustration felt by one generation, as their life-changing moments are looked upon by the next generation as unoriginal and trite.

A classic example is from *Star Wars*. What's the relationship here? Well in 1977 its hero & villain but in 1980 its father & son. And it's more than that. The idea that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father was big news, a big secret. For a generation of filmgoers 'the surprise' was monumental – it was the concept that defined the trilogy, the catalyst that took you from point A to point B. But for the next generation the secret wasn't a revelation at all, but foundational material for the 'prequel trilogy'.

The younger generation scoffs at us and asks, "How could you have ever been fooled by such a simple device?" And we might respond, "At that time it wasn't!" But we must remember that at one time we too asked the same questions of the generation before us.
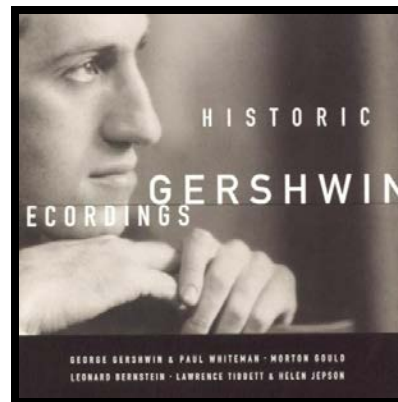
How do we address this moving target - this rolling generation gap? Is this a gap of language or a gap of concept? Is it merely enough to acknowledge it and move forward? Can we identify the markers that define our lives? What about the lives of others? Might all this just be our inability to properly analyze and verbalize our true meanings?

The World of Originals
Once upon a time everything was unique. Everything in the world was a one of a kind: a painting, a table, a book, even a musical performance. To have two identical items was the rarity. Each item had its own flavor, its own subtleties. And along with each item came a personal history of skill and experience. You have to look back on a poorly authored but hand-written book and ask: Why was this important enough for someone to spend the time and effort? Today's ability to make many copies of garbage is only a reflection on someone's ability to press a button. Today's items have no soul.

What does Gregorian chant sound like? Do we really know? We have a system, we have rules, we have a theory, and we apply that intelligently to create a performance. But what if, in reality, it sounded a lot different in the 9th century?

A more modern example is Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. I've always loved the work. In fact Bernstein's 1959 performance pretty much lives on my turntable. But a friend of mine once had me listen to Gershwin's own 1924 recording.

I was shocked. Not just the speed of the performance, but the whole tone was different. And it occurs to me that the differences come down to an evolution of media. Media can slowly change and transforms over time. Can you imagine what this work will sound like in another thousand years? Well you don't need to because it probably won't be any different. And we can blame recorded music on that. The mass distribution of identical copies tends to codify and solidify the 'right' version or the 'right' approach. If all I heard were live performances then the nuances would be the tradition – the evolution would be part of the experience and the world would benefit from the change. Not just change but the ability to change.

Don't get me wrong; people are doing amazing things out there. When Dangermouse remixed the Beatles White album with Jay Z's Black album he was defying this convention and pushing forward. I'm not talking about copyright issues – that's a whole different can of worms. We **groan** every time an artist comes out with a 'cover album'. We say they are going for a quick buck. But shouldn't true creative re-interpretation be praised? Isn't that real talent? How can we all find this talent in ourselves? I'm talking about the ability to think past the locked down versions – to still **feel** the original book after you've **seen** the movie.

So how do we put the soul back in our media? Can we advance our current value systems by hearkening back to a time when the scarcity of items and experiences strengthened their worth? Should we go to more concerts, plays, musicals? Visit more museums? Should we try and remove the virtual from our life? Or do we need to add something to the virtual to make it more meaningful?

The Breaking of Content from Experience
Methods of mass production such as movable type, other forms of printmaking, and interchangeable parts were a revolution not just of distribution but also of the conceptual division between content and experience. It enabled the virtual experience. At one point in time the only way to hear a piece of music was to go and hear it performed. And what you heard was different every time. Content and experience were bound together and that relationship was significant.
Imagine now, in our **modern** times, the difference between watching a film at an IMAX theater, a regular movie theater, at home on DVD, at home on cable or satellite, on YouTube, on your iPod Video, or here in Virtual Reality. The content is stable, some could argue identical, and it is only the experience that varies.

By what metrics do we measure the experience verses the content? What is the value system of our threshold of experience? Are there generational differences? Am I just too old because I don't like to watch TV shows on an iPod? Is it a weakness that I prefer the immersive nature of a movie theater or really a strength that I can let myself be transported my media? Has mass distribution lowered our threshold of experience? Do we accept less quality for better availability?

A friend once told me we were going to see ABBA in concert. And as the concert date approached I realized that I hadn't seen an announcement for ABBA in the paper. On the way to the concert she told me we were not going to see ABBA but the group 'bjorn again – The ABBA experience' – a **cover** band. Now this probably sounds like a nightmare on many **many** levels. But in fact it was interesting. Here was a band that specialized in giving the audience the experience of an ABBA concert. It was fun, it was playful, it **sounded** good. While I can't tell you I've seen ABBA live, I probably know what it would have been like. And as you sit there and roll your eyes; is there any difference in going to a renaissance fair or medieval dinner?

A few years later I was in Finland and found out that the real ABBA was still on tour. Would that experience have been better? Would the performance have been better? I'm not asking you to compare an ABBA cover band in 2000 with the real ABBA in the 1970s. I'm asking you to compare ABBA 30 years after their prime to a cover band that is devoted to recreating that prime.

It doesn't always work. My friend Mace told me he saw a great Beatles cover band called the Mop Tops but he was really bothered by the 'right handed' guy doing Paul McCartney. It was enough to ruin it for him. But how many others noticed? Was he too informed?

At the same time, why was it so magical to see a 75 year old, not quite all there, Don Ho when I was in Hawaii for the NMC summer conference?

Why was the moment so significant that I had a 'Tiny Bubbles' sing along at my wedding?

Now it all depends on whether you value the content or the experience or, better yet, the interdependent combination of the two. We have all seen pirated movies on the Internet. Some people download them to keep them, to create a collection like others collect DVDs. My threshold for quality is too high, which is funny because I listen to records. And while my brain can hear the music under the static it refuses to see the images under the MPEG artifacts. I demand more. I know when I've looked at movies on the Internet it was simply to be tied over until I could buy the right version – the good version – the real version.

I have purchased the James Bond movies many times. I purchased them on videotape and DVD in full-screen and widescreen I know HD is around the corner. My Pink Floyd friends have similar stories about Dark Side of the Moon. We value the **content.** And along with that valuable content we want to a more valuable experience.

And we are willing to pay for it! Think about that $35 t-shirt you bought, or almost bought, at a rock concert. Was it the image you wanted? Or was it to prove you were there – a physical reminder of your precious experiences?

So how do we raise the bar of both content and experience? And by this I mean how to we raise the bar of the appreciation of both content and experience? Ubiquity be damned!

A World of Choices
When we go to hear live music we have to make choices based on certain limitations. There is the limitation of time and timing. When is the concert? How many performances are they giving? There is the limitation of space: How many people can attend simultaneously? There was a revolution of synchronous and asynchronous mass media distribution: radio and records. And everything changed again.

How have these mediums affected our ability to choose? Did giving us more choices help us find what we wanted? Is there a limit to how many choices are useful? Did we surpass it?

I'm always amazed about how people will watch on broadcast television – commercials and all - a movie that is sitting on their shelf. We've all done it – we've all talked about a movie we've seen 50 times on TNT or HBO. Why don't we just pop it in the DVD? What is it about this temporal medium – this non-stop flow of information - that is more compelling to us? Or is it simply familiarity and laziness?

We see another change with time shifting. I love time shifting. My DVR is my friend. I realized how powerful it was when after only 2 weeks of having a DVR at home, I tried to hit pause on the TV in my office. The sheer power is intense. I can finally hear every word and experience every moment. Because while my home theater isn't as immersive as a movie theater, it doesn't matter because I can keep replaying a scene until I feel I have encoded it the way I want.

At first I was just clever with the DVR. I would pause a 9pm TV show for 15 minutes and then start to watch it so it would end at 10pm exactly with no commercials. I was reallocating the time according to my rules. But now we've become experts. And in my house, if we think we might want to watch a new show – we record the first few episodes and if it gets canceled we delete them without watching them – no disappointing separation anxiety.

Does time shifting help or hinder? Are we watching more TV or less? Better TV or worse? How is the tool affecting these choices? How do we express those decisions?

Verbalizing Criticism
Imagine a new restaurant has just opened and you decide to sample the cuisine. How do you order from the menu? If you see a dish you like, you might order it and then compare it against previous experiences. You might even qualify that experience – the eggs Benedict at this restaurant weren't as good as another's, but then again these were 1/2 the price.

A friend once suggested I try eggs Benedict with avocado. I said I didn't like avocado. He persisted that I should try it, because he felt that the texture was a 'unique sensation'. I again repeated that I didn't like avocado.   "Oh!" he said, "You mean you *'dislike'* avocado." To him the terms 'don't like' and 'dislike' have different usages the former passive and the latter active. It's a fascinating distinction. I was pleased with this discovery – not a new vocabulary word but a new word usage, a personal context in which I can place something in the scale of my own experiences.

I explained to him that as a fat guy I don't simply tolerate foods - I either 'like' or I 'don't like them. It's that way of thinking that probably made me overweight in the first place.
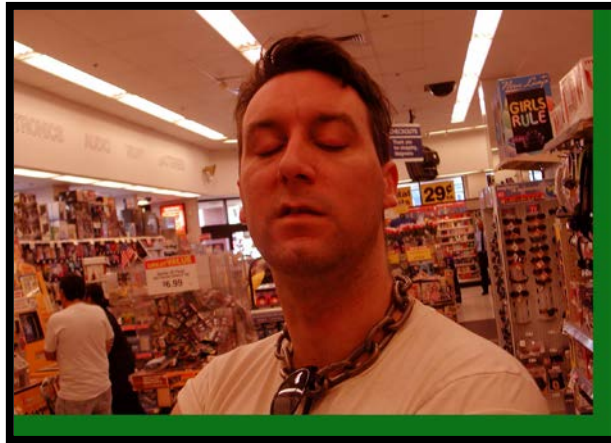
As Mark Twain said "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."

When I was in college I used to write songs, but all I had was this Casio keyboard that could only play one note at a time. So I wanted to find a keyboard that could play more than one note at a time – the technical term for this is 'Polyphonic'. Well one day I was in a toy store and there is this big box and right across the front it is marked 'Polyphonic Keyboard' – I mean that's the actual name of the product.   Amazing! It's exactly what I was looking for. And it was only $10. So I bought it and when I got it home I noticed it wasn't like any keyboard I'd ever seen. All it had was an On/Off switch with no other settings. So I turned it on and it made this whirring sound. And as I pressed a key I heard the slow whine of air flowing through a reed producing a note. Yes, I purchased a toy reed organ – which technically **is** a polyphonic keyboard. The problem was the more notes you played the slower the response time. It was complete garbage but exactly what I asked for. A friend of mine borrowed the keyboard and accidentally left it in the sun. All the keys melted together and in the end it would only play all the notes at once.

Where did I go wrong using the right words? How do we learn to use the right words and better yet, correctly? To verbalize our criticisms? What makes something good or bad? Right or wrong? How can we exercise and expand our vocabulary?

Well let's start by looking at this picture. I use this image in my multimedia class as a Photoshop quiz. What's wrong with it, and how would you fix it?

These are two separate questions. First you have to verbalize, in English not techno-speak, what is wrong with the photo. "Its bad" isn't enough. So let's go through it. It has an unnecessary green border which we need to crop out. His face is too dark but the background looks alright so we need to adjust the exposure - just on his face. The background is crooked and this is a hard one to fix because we need to rotate the image some without rotating it too much. And if we rotate it then we need to crop it again. He also looks a little too orange. And of course his eyes are closed. And how do we fix that? Simple, just take another photo.

I don't want my students to touch a photo in Photoshop until they can talk about it. I want them to be able to say not just what they like or don't like but how they might improve on it. To do this they need to have a vocabulary of design – they need to be able to understand the difference between value and hue. They need to also understand the conventions of design. They need to learn the grammar of the visual world. Yes, it is another system of rules. We teach our children grammar so that they can better express themselves. We want them to wield the tool of language efficiently. They must also wield the tools of visual design.

My students learn that they must approach Photoshop in 2 stages. The first stage is truth. They must learn to attempt to restore it to its true form. That is to make the picture look like it '**should**'. Of **course** this is subjective, but it encourages standards. It's about finding one version of the truth – building a personal work ethic. Yes, the image can be warm or cool, cropped to find the 'picture within the picture', and even blemish corrected to create the proper psychological effect.   But it's important to draw the line because stage 2 is the Art or Creative Phase. And this is where the gloves are off.

When I sent out invitations to my graduate thesis show; people assumed that this image was done in Photoshop. I found this out because they were surprised when they saw the real mosaic mask – which this is a **true** picture of. In the digital age it's much harder to make something true than something artistic, and this is just my opinion but I still want students to be able to make the distinction even if they choose to ignore it.

When I was in painting class as an undergraduate I remember my painting instructor looking at a work and saying that the only way to improve it was to start over.

I had drawn a C painting and it was going to stay a C painting. He didn't tell me to start over – he told me to acknowledge it for what it was, move on, and to learn from that experience.

I'm always astounded when I go to see a bad movie. And I see a lot of them. I'm astounded how many of them feel like they haven't been proofread. That someone didn't take a step back and tighten things up just a bit. But its funny cause how often when you watch a movie of a musical do you think to yourself – wow that was the best take? Because you know they did several. So when I watch these bad movies I have to remind myself how bad it probably was before they got it as **good** as 'this bad'. They rarely start over; they just accept the C. As a media consumer we should not!

Now let's take a look at a real painting. It's Giorgione's The Tempest. If this were at Art History class I would ask you to describe it, tell me what you see, tell me what it means. Well I won't. I could tell you a variety of theories about what it means. And the more theories I told you the less likely you would have one of your own and that scares me because it fresh ideas that the world needs the most. But I'll get back to that.

The Tools of Choice
We have turned into a society of choice. We have created so much content that we now have a glut of radio stations, TV station, and movie theaters. The Internet is overflowing! And we demand that everything be documented and recorded and that we have access to what we want, when we want, and where we want it. It has created a boom market for DVDs.

Who would have thought a TV show like *Charles in Charge* would have new life on DVD? Are our search and time shifting tools fostering quality? Today *Charles in Charge* wouldn't have survived 2 episodes, wouldn't have found its rhythm or its audience. It's contradictory. Because how do we re-build a culture that supports the nurturing of ideas when our fleeting dissatisfaction is translated into 'off with their heads'? We all need time to grow. And in many ways the competition is so fierce that it appears that individually we might never succeed.
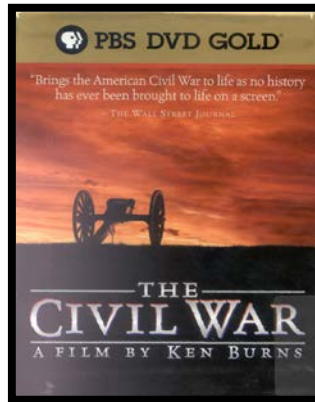

A World of Authorship
We live in a brave new world of authorship. Education is constantly changing. The knowledge pool is getting larger and students are being asked to contribute to it. Students are becoming researchers and authors. How does authoring a paper change the nature of its creation? How important to education is public speaking and presenting? Who defines these new standards? And how do we make sure that teachers know how to evaluate the new-media (let alone teach it).

Oscar Wilde said that "We teach people how to remember, we never teach them how to grow." Does an education of authorship better prepare students for their post educational life? Is that teaching them do grow? And do trends in new-media even have a place in education?

Over the summer I worked with a group of High School students who were going to create a documentary about a house in Cleveland that was a stop on the Underground Railroad. I was one of several instructors and when I got them I asked them if they had ever seen a documentary – they all groaned because they had all just been shown an hour of Ken Burns' Civil War.

As you can imagine this didn't go over very well. They didn't like it. I spent some time trying to have them verbalize what they didn't like about it. If you can't verbalize what you don't like about something then how can you avoid doing it yourself? So I asked if they had ever seen a documentary on their own. Nope. Not a one. No A&E biographies? No E True Hollywood Stories? No VH1 Behind the Music's? It turns out they all had seen a VH1 Behind the Music before and not only that but they found common ground in having seen both VH1 Behind the Music's on TLC before and after the death of Lisa 'Left Eye' Lopez.
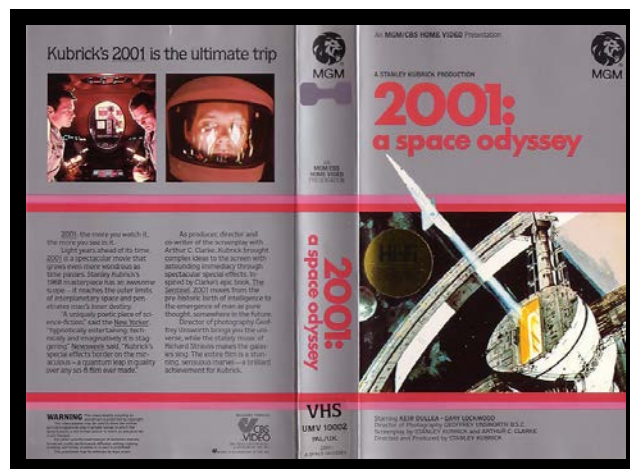

From there it got a little easier. Forcing them to watch a documentary doesn't necessarily give them the experience of watching a documentary - which is a prerequisite for creating one. Sure we force students to do things all the time, but there is a threshold. Funnily enough, it was surprisingly harder to find a **movie** that they all had seen in common. If in doubt you always start with Titanic.

Everybody's seen Titanic. Well most people have – that's what the box office figures tell us. But in this group they hadn't. And to my horror we found the only movie they had in common was Scooby Doo.

What do you do with this? How do you teach filmmaking when all you know of films is Scooby Doo? Does it go back to **doing** without **seeing** first?

And it works both ways. A film professor told me that he was so upset to find out that his science fiction students hated seeing 2001: A Space Odyssey. He **really** thought they were going to like it. A 2 ½ hour 60s art film whose first 25 and last 23 minutes are without dialogue? Why shouldn't they hate it? It wasn't made for them. At best you could call it an acquired taste. So how do you help them acquire it? We must learn to first realize and then to manage our expectations of ourselves and our students.

Now, we've all been to an art gallery and heard someone say – what's the big deal – I could do that. And I always respond – but you **didn't**. We don't value the ideas as much as we value the implementation. Thinking is not the same as doing. It's not enough. The other day my friend Tom and I were talking about making a movie. We're always talking about this. And I said to him – what's wrong with us? We have the desire, the equipment, the ideas. I mean look at us – we have means, motive, and opportunity – where's the murder? So we had to re-evaluate what we really have. Do we have the means? Maybe. We have access to the technology, sure. But are we versed

enough, not as passive observers, but as active creators to actually go out and film a movie? We have motive – the desire – but even that can be seen as limited to just 'talking a good game.' And as for opportunity – we have to make our own opportunities and the only way to find the time will be when we make the time. It's like a bad novel. Now matter how bad it is its better than mine because I haven't written one.

New-Media Literacy
With the renewed call for new-media literacy we must acknowledge that New-Media is more than just a medium, more than just a language. It is a competency required for our very survival. Our first goal should be to level the playing field and **then** to raise the bar. We must not fall into what I like to call – the Hammock Syndrome.

Every night as I lie in bed I think of myself swinging ever so gently in a hammock. It's paradise. But every time I go to buy hammock I find that I don't like the way I feel in one. It's uncomfortable and it's awkward. You see; what I really want is to feel the way that I think other people feel when they lay in a hammock. There is this sense of universal insecurity; that everyone else is getting it and I want to get it like they get it. What I am saying is that the experiences have to be personal, they have to be real, and you need to be aware that it's not enough to embrace the trends - you also need to **understand** the trends. And remember that not everyone likes swinging in a hammock.

So who is going to heed the call and lead the charge? And does the charge require leadership or subversion?

To quote Gauguin – "Art is either plagiarism or revolution." Which shall we aim for?

I wanted conclude by going back to an early point – it's hard to escape from information. Once a seed is planted, it will grow. It's impossible to **unlearn** a thing.

If I show you the old logo for Case Western Reserve University you might go 'that's interesting". But once I tell you it looks like a fat man carrying a surfboard; its over - that's all you will ever see again.

A Call for Censorship?

So do I condone censorship? I've been accused of it recently and in some ways I don't resent it. I think we need censorship. I think we should censor ourselves.   We need to remove from our lives the idea of the one right way. To become a little more jaded so that we can leave our minds open. It's the only way that as creators we can rise above being recyclers.   We also need to remove from our lives the bad things. As artists and as critics we should not accept the unacceptable. We need to expect and demand quality and not just create tools to help us get to the good stuff. Tools alone will not be our salvation because gone unchecked we will drown in the sea of media.

Thank You, Any Questions?