On Being Naïve: A Queer Aesthete in Art Education

ADAM GRETEMAN
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

“In Crisp’s life and aesthetics then offer a place to start thinking through the naïve as a form of failing to live up to one’s societal expectations in an artful way along with cultivating sensibilities to survive historical changes.

In this article, the author utilizes the work of Quentin Crisp to explore the possibility of cultivating the naïve as a way to reframe failure. To be “naïve” is perhaps a form of failure; a failure to be worldly or knowledgeable in one’s doing and becoming. Accusations of naiveté are used, after all, to distinguish the work one is doing from others that have not “gotten it right” or fail to see what you as a scholar see in a more critical, less naïve, vein. What I ponder here then is this thing called “naïveté?” How might the “ naïf” help (re)frame failure or illustrate one way failure might be reframed for us in an aesthetic way as artist-teachers? Can the naïve succeed in its failure to be worldly?

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author: agreteman@saic.edu
The naïf arises as an indispensible element in a system of epistemological checks and balances; recurrently naïfs may be seen unwittingly critiquing and counterbalancing the dominant knowledge regimes of a given era. (Cresap, 2004, p. 34)

There is a current trend in various social theories, particularly queer and feminist, to disappoin, to embrace failure, or “feel backwards” as a way to intervene, interrupt, or contest the social worlds we inhabit (Edelman, 2004; Love, 2007; Halberstam, 2011). In addition, failure has become an emerging topic in the self-help and business advice markets (Harford, 2011; Heath, 2009; Lewis, 2014; McArdle, 2014). Failure is having some success these days and people, including myself, are hoping to experience some type of success in thinking about or through failure. It has become an object of intellectual inquiry and ironically only the successful engagements with failure will succeed. There is a right way to fail when failure becomes objectified and caught up in the grinder of the academy. Some will fail to articulate successfully the purposes, uses, or feelings of failure while others will get published, read, and engaged. These articles will perversely fail at failure. They will be deemed “sophisticated” or “rigorous” or “serious.” They are not naïve. They are worldly in that they travel the world of scholarship to provide thoughtful commentary or analysis of failure.

I am skeptical of this turn to failure, perhaps because I am not sure what failure is or perhaps because I am afraid of failing. Or perhaps as an adjunct professor – part of the growing second class of professors – feelings of failure are all to real both psychically and materially. As such, I am drawn to the naïve, which allows me to survive the feelings and material realities of “failing” in the emerging new economy of higher education. To be unworldly or naïve – critically – allows me to do the work I do when the odds are against the arts of teaching, research, and making as contingent faculty. If failure is a reality, does the naïve offer a mentality that allows me (and maybe you) to keep engaging in the intellectual pursuits that may not garner particular ideas of success, but allow me (and maybe you) to live in creating alternatives?

In this article, I ponder the promises of a queer aesthete who can be read as “naïve,” but critically so. To be “naïve” or to be called “naïve” is a form of failure; a failure to be worldly or knowledgeable in one’s doing and becoming. Accusations of naïveté are used, after all, to distinguish the work one is doing from others that have not “gotten it right” or fail to see what you as a scholar see in a more critical, more worldly, less naïve, vein. What, I ask here, is this thing called “naïveté” in the midst of all kinds of failures – economic, political, and educational? How might the “naïf” help (re)frame failure or illustrate one way failure might be reframed for us in an aesthetic way as artist-teachers to survive?

This is precarious territory. If I fail to write in a compelling way about the naïve, I succeed at failure. My article is a failure and perhaps I will, upon failing, “learn” something and redeem myself later after I am less naïve about naïveté. If I succeed in writing in a compelling way and am published I experience success, but my article fails failure. If you are reading this, I have succeeded, but my article has failed failure. My ideas will have become approved by a disciplinary structure that framed and perhaps reframes concepts that inevitably still create distinctions between “success” and “failure.” Yet, to engage in such conversations, complicated to be sure, are necessary to work through complicated ideas, conversations, and encounter scholarly debate. Perhaps proceeding
 naïvely is a way to move through such precarious conceptual terrain, recognizing I cannot be completely naïve in doing so? And this terrain is precarious, in part, because more often than not scholars and critics will quickly fall back on expert knowledge and their worldliness to critique ideas. Knowledge of critical social theories born out of a hermeneutics of suspicion put knowledge first, often negating how such knowledge disallows (or allows) people to relate.

Following Sedgwick’s (2003) call for reparative readings, I turn to naïveté through the work of Quentin Crisp whose artful way of living might offer art education a particular approach to thinking through failure. Crisp is less of an artist in the traditional sense – although he himself was an artists’ model – and more of an aesthete in the classical sense. He might be an artist-teacher who, as James Daichendt (2010) reminded us, “are not just artists who teach; their artistic thinking process is imbedded within various elements of the teaching process” (p. 10). In his self-confessed and self-evident homosexuality Crisp offered a compelling aesthetic lesson about the “naïve” and the challenges necessary in the art of becoming or for him developing a lifestyle. Crisp (1984) noted;

The search for a lifestyle…involves a journey to the interior” and…This is not altogether a pleasant experience, because you not only have to take stock of what you consider your assets but also have to take a long look at what your friends call ‘the trouble with you.’ Nevertheless, the journey is worth making. (p. 4)

This requires eschewing competition as “competition of any kind encourages a man [sic] to make comparisons between himself and other people, which is a completely misguided activity of the mind” (Crisp, 1984, p. 14). Such naïveté – that we can survive capitalism without competition and we should aspire for a lifestyle cultivated by the self – is not to be confused with ignoring history or forgetting the gains of social movements. Instead, naïveté becomes through Crisp an aesthetic of living and a living that teaches how to ethically encounter the other and become the self with style.

Quentin Crisp is now part of the historical record. He is of interest to me because he lived through the shift from homosexuality being seen as a form of failure to being more accepted in some regards and some places. Homosexuals were, for much of the 20th century, viewed as “failing to grow up” or as existing in a state of “arrested development.” Being an artist was, as well, a sign of homosexuality for many. Yet, today as homosexuals gain social acceptance, they have come to be seen as normal with a place at the table of acceptable society. Crisp’s life and aesthetics then offer a place to start thinking through the naïve as a form of failing to live up to one’s societal expectations in an artful way along with cultivating sensibilities to survive historical changes. How do I maintain queer sensibilities amidst what Duggan (2003) called the “new homonormativity” (p. 65)? And does this dandy of the 20th century provide a reminder of what was in order to create what might be should we naïvely believe we do not have to become the image of what is “today’s success?”

A Naïve Project

Accusations of naïveté are often met with horror or shame for one does not, in these days of multiculturalism and diversity, want to be seen as “not worldly;” or as “lacking worldly experience and
understanding.” Being “inexperienced” or “gullible” in the world gone mad with criticality is, well, the antithesis it would seem of the sensibilities sought by critical work – be that critical work “liberal,” “conservative,” or “progressive.” Such accusations of being naïve or making naïve arguments are not flattering. Within art education, one prefers to be flattered for one’s worldliness, experience, and criticality than be labeled a naïf. To be a naïf is to be a failed scholar and a failed artist-teacher. But does being such a failure offer one ways of relating to others in ways that does not use knowledge to assault those one encounters?

Education’s project is to do away with naïveté – to move students from being naïve to being “critical” or “educated” or “learned” or “appreciative” of art. If we take David Labaree’s (2012) assessment of the different purposes of education we might see whether the purpose of education is social efficiency, social mobility, or democratic citizenship that all require a different movement from the naïve to the educated. However, naïveté with regards to education seems to exist in a strange balance for the naïve might operate in two different directions. As Kelly Cresap (2004) noted, “naïveté may be couched as an absence of positive qualities (e.g., manners, breeding, intellect, morality, maturity, education…); or conversely as an absence of negative qualities (e.g., pretense, stuffiness, hyperintellectualism, moralism…)” (p. 30). To be accused of being naïve then can be taken in positive or negative ways.

“You’re so naïve” can be an insult pointing out that you lack a proper education or your manners are not as sophisticated as they need to be. Yet, “You’re so naïve” can also, be leveled as a complement to illustrate that you have not been over-educated or imbued with too much pretension. You’re so naïve – in such a moment – shows that one has not gone too far to become stuffy, pretentious, and “over-educated.” To be called naïve is no simple manner, but rather a dangerous matter, particularly, for artist-teachers. One would seemingly want to be naïve in one way the word operates. One wants to be seen as lacking pretension or over-education but one would seemingly not want to be naïve in the other regard as being uneducated or uncouth. It is with the former that I am advocating for and developing here.

To be naïve might fail to live up to expectations but it might allow us to relate to others differently. As Cresap (2004) noted in his engagement with the naïve, naïveté “in spite of its reputation…may be a fellow-feeling; a recognition of shared humanness” that allows us to meet naively (p. 29). It will be my contention that privileging the naïve offers an alternative to thinking and feeling through art education and one that allows me to continue with my general skepticism towards knowledge. And so to do so, I turn to a that naïve pedagogue named Quentin Crisp who advanced an aesthetic lifestyle grounded in failure that offers to resuscitate queer thought in this age of its waning style or institutionalization (Ferguson, 2010). My project, however, is not new, but builds upon the work of Foucault (1989, 2003) and Rancière (2009, 2011) who themselves are skeptical toward knowledge and intrigued by naïve statements and relationality.

The naïve as a sensibility that art education might cultivate more in students and teachers counters current trends in art education that seek mastery, accountability, and standardization. Such a move will fail to meet such standards, but perhaps succeed at creating alternatives that help release the imagination (Greene, 1995). It is the naïve – or the balancing between the two senses of the naïve being either under-educated or not over-educated – that offers an alternative sensibility to the market-based mentalities of neoliberal educational reform. The naïve
sensibility I explore reframes education to be less about knowledge acquisition and more about education’s responsibility to develop “fellow-feeling.” Charles Bingham (2011) noted that if knowledge is ubiquitous then schools matter not to gain knowledge (although that’s still important I imagine) but because they are a place where people meet…and the “ naïve” is a sensibility that queerly creates spaces for meeting with less regard for knowledge and more regard for ethics. How do I meet you who are different in ways that do justice to your uniqueness, your difference, and my own becoming?

There is of course a paradox in writing about the naïve. To bring the naïve under the microscope of critical scholarship moves it away from its seemingly lack of understanding. It is to make it understandable and worldly – to perhaps repair it to its rightful and useful position by intellectualizing it. Such work seeks to make the naïve understandable and useful for the “sophisticated world” – even if it does so in a transgressive manner. However, to engage the naïve is also a task of uncovering what criticisms of naïveté have covered over in attempts to ostracize this unworldly and gullible sensibility. There have, of course, historically been figures that utilize naïveté to do their work. This form of naïveté, what Cresap (2004) called “cultivated naïveté”…“is the strategic withholding, disabling, or refusal of knowledge; an apparent ignorance that nonetheless wields a critical edge” (p. 27). Following Cresap, my own interest in the naïve is about how it disrupts the normative ideas about criticality and how in its performance, the “ naïve” illuminates blind spots and binaries in knowledge (its lacks and excesses) to offer an ethical sensibility to engaging difference aesthetically instead of epistemologically. Naïveté is quite simply an alternative relationship to knowledge that is less interested in “knowing” and more interested in provoking or evoking some type of relationality – a “fellow-feeling” that is beautiful.

Crisp offers a naïve style for the 21st Century where knowledge is ubiquitous but still requires ways of “doing” things with others. This project of naïveté is a project that is not committed to “depth” or trying to “expose” or “uncover” the truth of the naïve. Rather, it is about the surface. It is about style and developing a style of teaching aesthetically. Or, to draw on Foucault (1989), “what I’m looking for are not relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than the consciousness of men” rather “I try on the contrary to define the relations on the surface of discourse; I attempt to make visible what is invisible only because it’s too much on the surface of things” (p. 46). The naïveté of Crisp illuminated through his incessant focus on style the promises of performing the naïve as an orientation toward the other, of meeting the other naively to do the hard work of living in the midst of violence.

On Subjugated Knowledges, Ignorance, and Queer Pedagogies

There is, of course, precedence in thinking about knowledges that are not “established” or “proper.” My project on the naïve through Crisp follows in the footsteps of others who are likewise interested in knowledge’s limits. In Society Must be Defended (2003), Foucault proposed we turn to “subjugated knowledges” that have been “buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations” (p. 7). These knowledges, he says, are “ naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (p. 7). Halberstam (2011) noted in The Queer Art of Failure “these forms of knowledge have not simply been lost or forgotten; they have been disqualified,
rendered nonsensical or nonconceptual” (p. 11). Ideas, phrases, concepts seen as naïve then are not merely speaking about the unworldly or gullible nature of those ideas, phrases or concepts but pointing to general power plays that are playing out to discredit such things.

Jacques Rancière (2011) took up these inferior knowledges calling attention to history and how history in his sense “is woven by people as they construct a situation in time out of their own lives and experiences” (p. 80). Arguably, the people Rancière was interested in (e.g., working class, poor) naïvely assert their own knowledges – (proper channels be damned) – to construct their situation and illustrate their ways of being to weave such a history. They teach themselves and engage their world beyond the walls of the university. In The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1991) Rancière attempted to distance himself from the university knowledges, hierarchically imposed by the master/professor, to instead insist on equality. Equality, he argued, is the presupposition of human existence. “Equality it not given, nor is it claimed,” Rancière argued, “it is practiced, it is verified” (1991, p. 137). Such a statement might be read as rather naïve. One who is worldly knows equality is not present. Yet, Rancière wrote “one need only learn how to be equal in an unequal society” and this is “what being emancipated means” (1991, p. 133). Rancière suggested ignorance as a non-pedagogical possibility, a “non-method” providing “five lessons on intellectual emancipation” and these lessons emerged out of our original “state of learning” the mother tongue. Rather than teaching students how to follow (the assumption that students need explication to learn), Rancière showed how students might be led to learn – the presumption of equality that individuals can learn with guidance not explication. As he noted in The Emancipated Spectator:

The pedagogue does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified. (Rancière, 2009, p. 11)

This approach asks that teachers allow – guide – students to get lost so that they, as individuals can figure out a way through the confusion and towards some form of understanding. Students do not need to be taught, they need to be allowed to engage their world through their own will. Teachers fail their students, if we follow Rancière, when they explicate and assume a right way to fill the minds of youth to be worldly, according to the teacher’s views. The teacher, or more so Rancière’s “ignorant schoolmaster,” is tasked instead with verifying the student’s methods of learning. “He [the ignorant schoolmaster] will not verify what the student has found; he will verify that the student has searched” (1991, p. 31). The student must develop abilities of investigating the world - a world in which the student has as much access to as any one else.

It is this orientation to learning and the world advocated for by Rancière that a case for naïveté can be made in art education. The art student is oriented in a space that pre-supposes equality toward the naïve and away from ignorance. Their orientation to learning is one of intrigue and inquiry that is less about getting it right, but about engaging in the pedagogical relationship in a way that disrupts the master-student hierarchy in order to create alternative ways of relating to the other and to knowledge. The master of Rancière is, however, less about “ignorance” and more
about a “critical naïveté” that knows but
does not use such knowledge to dominate
the student. It is through Crisp’s life that we
can see a naïve schoolmaster, who learned
about life on his own without a master
explicator telling him how to live, learn, and
know. He was “self-taught”, naïvely
assuming he had a right to survive and thrive
in the homophobic world he inhabited.

A Dandy’s Naiveté

Quentin Crisp was both a “self-confessed” and “self-evident” homosexual
who allowed himself as the homosexual
other – still feared in some circles of
education – to speak as “teacher” (Rofes,
2005). Yet, Crisp was not a teacher in a
traditional sense. Rather he worked as a
nude art model, teaching through his
nakedness. He was an artist-teacher through
form. Living after the famed trial of Oscar
Wilde and coming of age before, but living
through the liberatory days of the 1960s,
Crisp (1997) noted throughout his
autobiography The Naked Civil Servant that
the climate towards homosexuality was (and
still is) chilly at best, downright violent at its
worst. And Crisp not only survived in such
climate, but thrived in his life taking on
through his aesthetic choices the
homophobia of the mid-twentieth Century
England and bringing his style to the shores
of the United States in 1981. He was an
artist-teacher who never explained the world
but naively related to it aesthetically,
nakedly pointing out with wit, lessons we
might imbibe and wrestle with together.

Crisp was not a sentimentalist nor
did he see the shifts in sexual politics over
his lifetime to be a sign of progress. He
wrote “in becoming a public pastime and a
topic for incessant conversation, sex has not
increased in style. Indeed much of what it
formerly possessed it has lost” (1984, p. 25).
Homosexuality once had style – outlaw style
perhaps – but upon its acceptance it has lost
style. And style was of concern to Crisp and
something he distinguished from fashion. He
was not a “slave to fashion” as dandys are
often seen because for him “fashion is
instead of style” (p. 29) and fashion is what
happens “when you don’t know who you are”
and “have to consult the papers” to
create via others one’s fashion (p. 29). It
appeared from Crisp’s accounts that he has
known himself throughout his life – even as
his sense of self changed. “You have to
polish up your raw identity into a lifestyle”
(p. 4). He was stylish, effeminate, and
refused to change his style because of the
external world’s – at times vitriolic and
incredibly violent – response to his ways of
relating in the world. Style was still a
process, but a process that was not based on
trends like those of fashion. He may fail at
fashion, but such failure illuminated his
success at his lifestyle.

In relation to his process of
embracing homosexuality as his lifestyle,
Crisp illuminated a counter-hegemonic
stance and a stance that illustrated ways of
cultivating a self. Rather than offering a
critique of the hegemony of heterosexuality,
he provides in his living and writing
counter-hegemonic strategies.

By this process I managed to shift
homosexuality from being a burden
to being a cause. The weight lifted
and some of the guilt evaporated. It
seemed to me that there were few
homosexuals in the world. I felt that
the entire strength of the club must
be prepared to show its membership
card at any time, and, to a nature as
dramatic as mine, not to deny rapidly
became to protest. By the time I was
twenty-three I had made myself into
a test case. I realized that it did no
good to be seen to be a homosexual
in the West End where sin reigned
supreme or in Soho, which was
inhabited exclusively by other outcasts of various kinds, but the rest of England was straightforward missionary country. It was densely populated by aborigines who had never heard of homosexuality and who, when first they did, became frightened and angry. I went to work on them. (1997, p. 27)

Crisp worked on those outside of traditional haunts of queerness, experimenting with bringing his queer aesthetic to those outside, uncomfortable or unknowing of queerness. Less of getting along in the ghetto of sameness or playing it safe, Crisp moved to live in the heterogeneous world, risky as it was. These were not direct lessons, but lessons he gave through his style and naïve ways of being in the world. In a Q & A about his views on homosexuality, Crisp (1984) offered a lesson via homosexuality. When asked, “Does the homosexual’s lifestyle of a survivor have anything to teach people?” he responded:

Oh yes. They will have the burden and the enjoyment of being survivors, of being outside and of being aware that everyday that they live is a kind of triumph. And this they should cling to. They should make no effort to try and join society. They should stay right where they are and give their name and serial number and wait for society to form itself around them. Because it certainly will. (p. 29)

Rather than seeking inclusion through assimilation, Crisp’s idea of living is doing so in a way that allowed others to join in the “homosexual” lifestyle. His inclusion sought to shift the canon and form of the world by maintaining and cultivating new styles of living against the norms. Homosexuality failed to live up to and grow up in the straight world. And in failing it opened up alternatives, naïvely going where no one had gone before.

Art has often played this role – pushing against boundaries and inventing new ways of encountering the world. Crisp’s naïve wit and wisdom may come across rather cliché, but it is an informed sensibility that is lacking in contemporary (art) education. For Crisp (1998)

…education is a last wild effort on the part of the authorities to prevent an overdose of leisure from driving the world mad. Learning is no longer an improver; it is merely the most expensive time filler the world has ever known. (p. 8)

While not an educational researcher or reformer, Crisp in his naïvete realized that education due to the reforms of the 20th century became less about learning and more about other things. We can look to the work of Labaree (2012) again who illustrated the failure of educational reforms to do anything at the level of teaching and learning and really only impact the rhetoric of education. Yet, it is Crisp, as an outcast, who through his experience in education and his work as a cultural critic that saw through the rhetoric in order to wittily note the reality that education was not about learning, but to minimize the amount of leisure students have in their lives. Education was, and perhaps still is, an assault on the pleasures of living.

Of course, Crisp’s naïveté was not merely about pleasure. He illustrated throughout his autobiography the challenges and struggles he faced as a self-confessed homosexual who, as he wrote, “wore makeup at a time when even on women eye shadow was shameful” (1997, p. 1). He wrote of facing violence at the hands of
others and struggling to cultivate his lifestyle. Yet, throughout this – in his belief of never conforming – he maintained a sensibility, an aesthetic orientation toward the world that illustrated his need for relationality. He wrote, “I learned very early in life that I was going to need people more than they needed me” (p. 10). Humorous, of course, since we by our nature need the other, Crisp is in fact needed – posthumously – to see the world through his rather naively-tinted glasses. He was a critical naif that failed to abide by commonsense; instead he relied on the sensibilities of fellow-feeling through his own feelings for, well, fellows. His homosexuality in the changing sexual politics of the 20th century compelled him to develop his style and live aesthetically in a way that focused less on accumulating knowledge and more of using knowledge – in the form of witticisms – to relate to others.

Conclusion
The naïve shows an absence of an education while simultaneously showing an absence of over-education. The naif has an education, but it refuses to rely on it. To develop a theory of critical naïveté asks that we not take ourselves too seriously – a challenge in academic writing – and that we bask in the unknown and getting lost to find ourselves new potentials (Lather, 2007). As Halberstam (2011) noted “being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant” (p. 6). Art is often seen as frivolous and often this is something art educators fight against. We are a useful, economically important area. I don’t disagree. But I worry that in making such arguments we fail to do the work of aesthetics and the naïve belief that art for art’s sake does something unquantifiable. This is, of course, something difficult to do in an age of accountability. And it is something that comes with risk.

Quentin Crisp offered a rather stylish and naïve approach to living in such a world of risk by refusing to be taken seriously and living as his style saw fit. Instead of wallowing in self-pity or seeing himself as “suffering from” the indignation and violence of the homophobia pervasive in his world, he choose to naively glorify his choices and the life style he developed over time. While homosexuality was then viewed with disdain and had legal, medical, and moral consequences, Crisp refused to become moral and “fit in.” He claimed his equality, rather than believing he should have to fight for it. Instead, he wrote “I couldn’t really afford virtue, so I settled for indignation with vice” (1997, p.87). While outcasts are outcast for refusing the normative order and for some the move is to seek acceptance, Crisp engaged in, what Richard Ford (2007) called, queer theory’s penchant for “gleeful disregard of social conventions” (p. 478). His approach to living – an approach that he realized required him needing people more than other people needed him. But, he brings us – decades after his death – to dream of alternatives. And Halberstam (2011) reminded us

The dream of an alternative way of being is often confused with utopian thinking and then dismissed as naïve, simplistic, or blatant misunderstanding of the nature of power in modernity. And yet the possibility of other forms of being, other forms of knowing, a world with different sites for justice and injustice, a mode of being where the emphasis falls less on money and work and competition and more on cooperation, trade, and sharing animates all kinds of knowledge.
projects and should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naïve. (p. 52) It would be problematic to dismiss Quentin Crisp, that English dandy, as a naïve homosexual who flaunted it. Rather, his life, a rather aesthetic one, provides an example of how the naïve offers a critical alternative to successful living and reframes failure while at it. Less wrapped up in achieving success, nor interested in writhing in one’s failures, Crisp offers a middle passage, a naïve passage through living aesthetically. His living is not a failure, but rather moves us outside of that binary of success/failure to offer perhaps a third way of going about it, gleefully with some sugar in one’s tank to survive and thrive.

References