

Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking Study Guide

**Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards)
of Artmaking by David Bayles**

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Plot Summary

Art and Fear is a non-fiction book written by artists for artists. The point of the book is to help the young and/or struggling artist survive in the art world and to conquer the various difficulties, obstacles and fears that the developing artist faces. These difficulties come in two varieties: internal and external. Internal obstacles are those obstacles that the artist has within herself, such as fears about herself, fears of others, an inability of the artist to find her own work. External obstacles are the difficulties one faces in the world of art, such as managing art production, finding time to pursue one's own work, teaching in the academy, interacting with the art community, managing one's art network, and so on. The authors divide the book into two parts, the first concerns internal problems, those associated with the individual creation of art; the second part concerns external problems, dealing with the outside, academic and conceptual worlds.

The first chapter describes the nature of the problem that the artist faces. Creating art is hard. It requires one to learn skills; it is much more than talent. The artist often thinks she can learn how to create art by looking at it. Further, the artist has to tango with the art establishment. The artist is under many false impressions and is the slave of her fear and her external world. Chapter two covers the relationship between art and fear. Fear in art is made possible because there is a gap between one's vision for a work of art and the execution of that art. Failure is always possible. Imagination creates fear because it can always outstrip one's abilities. Materials create fear because one can be in short supply or unable to decide what materials to use. Uncertainty creates fear for the most obvious of reasons. Chapter three covers fears one might have about one's self, such as that one is a poseur or lacking in talent. Chapter four discusses fears about others, fears that one will be misunderstood, rejected by the community or disapproved of. The fifth chapter aims to help the artist find her own work through conquering these fears.

Part II contains the remaining four chapters. Chapter six discusses problems with the outside world generally, including managing one's art production, handling competition with other artists, and so on. Chapter seven focuses on how to handle the academic world, not only as a faculty member but as a student or a book writer. Chapter eight covers all the external "conceptual" difficulties the author must tackle, such as maintaining one's habits, being creative, and developing one's craft. In chapter nine, the authors encourage the reader to ask important questions to come to her own answers about how to be the best artist she can be. They emphasize that all artists have a free choice to give art their all or to decide to disappoint themselves. They can choose to risk failure, or they can accept it without trying.



Chapter 1, The Nature of the Problem

Chapter 1, The Nature of the Problem Summary and Analysis

Art-making is a struggle. The authors point out that much art is unfinished, inauthentic, repetitive, juvenile, and overdone. This will lead the artist to ask how art should be done, and why the artist sometimes fails. Art may be harder to create today, as individuals have more liberty to create and less institutional structure to inspire them. Art involves doubt, departing from others; there is no Church to dictate what is beautiful. Further, art-making is not based merely on talent, nor that talent is innate. Talent, luck, fate and tragedy all matter, but they do not aid in the day to day creation of art.

So the authors make a few assumptions on which the rest of the book will rely: (1) Art-making involves skills that can be learned; (2) Art is made by ordinary people; (3) Making art and viewing art are different at their core; and (4) Art-Making has been around longer than the art establishment. The authors want the artist to not give up just because they do not feel like a genius, to realize that creating art is hard, but that it can be learned, and that one can pursue artistic interests without caring what professional artists and art connoisseurs think of them.

Chapter 2, Art & Fear

Chapter 2, Art & Fear Summary and Analysis

Most artists quit. This is not necessary. Further, they quit due to human troubles; those who continue must learn not to quit. Figuring out how not to quit is crucial. Artists will quit at particular moments that feel appropriate or when they lose sight of the purpose of their art. All artists have these fears and it is beating the fear that matters most. Quitting, further, is distinct from stopping. Quitting requires stopping and not starting again. To be an artist, you must always start again. Further, one must not lose motivation when the original destination of the art evaporates; say the show where the work was to be presented is canceled.

This is a particularly difficult problem for students, who graduate with no support network. The authors recommend that students form networks with other friends, so as to not have their support system disappear when they graduate. They also recommend working at a museum if possible. Part of your life must be bound up in art in order for your art to have purpose. Further, young artists must learn to accept their fears, rather than being paralyzed by them. There will always be disappointments. Vision, further, will always go ahead of execution, so the fear of a failure to execute one's vision is always present.

Imagination is important as well. Once the first few creative decisions are made, most of the remaining decisions are fixed. Completion will almost always disappoint. Imagination can always outstrip accomplishment. Imagination and execution should correspond when a work is finished, and to actually finish, one must discipline one's imagination. Similar lessons apply to materials; artists will often obsess over getting the right materials. While getting the right materials is important, one must be aware of their limits. Finally, uncertainty will always be present. It will never be obvious what will come out of your original plans. What you end up with can be different than what you started with. Control is rarely the answer; tolerating uncertainty is.



Chapter 3, Fears About Yourself

Chapter 3, Fears About Yourself Summary and Analysis

One debilitating fear is the fear about one's self. Some fear that they are poseurs, mere pretenders of doing art. Many worry that they are faking it. When the artist is not extraordinary, she sometimes feels fake. Further, young artists often become self-conscious about their work, and over think, obsessing about their every move. The authors advise artists to stop focusing on themselves, but instead focus on the art. A person can pretend to be an artist, but she cannot pretend to be making art, even if it is bad.

The authors turn to talent. Many worry about whether they have talent; the authors claim that this is a waste of time. Not only can talent not be controlled, but it is only a small part of what matters. Since talent is "what comes easy," talent cannot be all that is required. If only talent mattered, the greatest works of art would be those most easily produced. Further, many of the greatest talents fail to produce anything of value. Talent is a constant that one can do anything with. So when the artist wonders why art does not come easily to her, it may be because making art is hard. You should not care whether you have talent, you cannot know whether you have talent, and whether you have talent makes no difference to how you should proceed.

Perfection is also something that causes artists fear. The perfect becomes the enemy of the good, for when the artist produces something good but wants it to be perfect, she sometimes wastes time on a piece improving it slightly; and other times she makes it worse. Perfection usually produces paralysis because all humans are flawed. Next, annihilation is a fear. Artists have "dry spells" where they produce little, but during that time many artists feel as if they do not exist. This is "annihilation." You cannot be afraid of having a part of you die when you stop creating for a time.

Next, fears come from the sense of "magic" in the great artists, as if their talent appeared out of nowhere, that there is a "finishing touch" that one's art can never have. However, that too is wrong. Art-making does require a special something, but no one really knows what it is, so stop worrying about it. Finally, expectations cause fears; many hold themselves up to expectations that are impractical and destructive. Further, the line between expectation and fantasy is thin. Instead, focus again on one's work and set expectations for progress for the work.



Chapter 4, Fears About Others

Chapter 4, Fears About Others Summary and Analysis

Art is usually made alone, but the reactions of other people still matter. Whether or not they should create problems for the artist, they do. Sometimes we imagine critics surrounding us, become paralyzed by positive distaste, or follow the priorities of others. Artists only care about impressing others when they feel uncertain or insecure. One should seek constructive criticism, but remember that one's art is one's own.

Artists often look for understanding. This affirms one's humanity, but it imposes a risk because it gives power over you; they have the power to hurt you. The artist should place time between finishing the art and showing it to others, so she can make her own judgment about the piece. Further, do not worry about being misunderstood because bending to the understanding of the many produces bad art.

Next, the artist should be careful about seeking acceptance. Caring too much about acceptance allows others to decide whether your work is art at all. The need for acceptance can clash with one's work. You may stop yourself from doing your own work to do work that increases your acceptance. Artists often face a dilemma between taking risks to do things others have yet to understand, which risks acceptance, and doing something acceptable, which takes no risk.

The authors next distinguish between approval and acceptance. Acceptance only involves the community regarding your work as art, but approval requires that they actually like the work. In many cases, the two come apart. One's art can be accepted without being approved of. Sometimes the two work against one another. In supportive communities, the two are tied. Seeking approval is even more risky than acceptance; it gives others even more power over you because you are asking more from them and relying on more from them accordingly.



Chapter 5, Finding Your Work

Chapter 5, Finding Your Work Summary and Analysis

Art is always bound up with what the individual desires. Feedback is total and our art is always tied to who and what we are. Whatever we put in is what we get out. The scary thing about art for this reason is that it does not lie to you. If you are lazy, your art will be. If you work hard, your art will show diligence. The true artist always bears this fact in mind. She never feels unafraid of it; instead, she learns to master it rather than letting her fear of the truth overwhelm her. Instead, the feedback she receives from her work improves her.

One of the most serious barriers to doing good artwork is letting feedback throw the artist into uncertainty. If an artist is creating a work and does not know how it will turn out, she may fear that it will reflect something inadequate about her. Sometimes the artist can see the finish line—that line between one's vision and one's current degree of execution. However, art is best understood by those who make it, not those who view it. The vision is only secondary. As a viewer, an artist can reach far and experience things across the globe and far into the past. However, the art made by the artist is concrete, and always reflects who the artist is. To do good work, you must be a part of your community and your time.

The problem with merely viewing and beholding art is that these activities cannot teach one how to create art. Instead, art comes from one's experience of one's own life. We view what is outside of us, but art comes from within us. Many makers want to imitate their activities as viewers because of the pleasure they derived from it. However, it is so hard to produce from an other's perspective; even trying to do art from one's own past perspectives is extremely difficult if not impossible.

We always and inevitably take our own perspective at the time. One problem with much modern art is that it does not understand this. Many artists try to crib from the images of other artists or popular culture to express themselves, but they cannot do so because the images and ideas they draw on are alien to them.

Finding one's work can only come from within. However, relying on what is within you can also risk failure. Many artists will create until they run out of ideas; then they will feel like failures, wondering if they have run out of ideas forever or if their ideas were always worthless.

Probably neither is true; the artist has merely stopped creating for the moment. Instead, the authors recommend focusing on the day, not getting caught up in everything that has happened before or the disasters that might lie ahead. Instead, when stressed, think back to a time when your mind was clearer and you felt more relaxed. Mimic those habits and your work will resume most of the time (but not always).



The tools you use are important for finding your work as well. Only certain ideas can be expressed via certain tools, and other ideas only with other tools. Types of artwork, art tools, styles, canvasses, media, and so on all shape what the artist can say. In many cases, a crucial problem for the artist arises when she must decide whether to use familiar materials or new ones.

In any event, correcting one's methods mid-way during the creation of a piece of art is quite difficult since many of the artist's methods are sub-conscious. They are skills, the ways in which the artist makes subtle decisions, and are hard to articulate. Sometimes imposing a self-disciplining structure can help, as is discovering useful forms to express yourself. Additionally, small rituals and conventions help one stay at work.

Finding your work means finding that work you are meant to do and how to do it. Once this is accomplished, particulars stop mattering.



Chapter 6, The Outside World

Chapter 6, The Outside World Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6 begins Part II of the book. These cover matters of art and fear once a work of art is completed. New problems arise after this has occurred and they must be addressed separately. These problems force the artist to interact with the rest of the world; the authors refer to these problems as "ordinary." However, they emphasize that the problems are not of no consequence.

There is more to art than simply producing artwork. Sometimes one must manage a gallery, clean one's studio, and mail various items. Funding matters, education matters, publication matters and exhibition matters. Sometimes these activities help to promote one's artwork but other times the outside work gets in the way. In many cases art is quite expensive. Further, artists have bad reputations to the outside world, particularly because their work is often subversive.

Accordingly, the author must be aware that there will be attempts to censor his work if it is too risqué. However, the artist can only make progress by challenging boundaries. Art must be produced unguardedly. Many of our sources of art-making, the ideas that inspire us, are commonplace, but others are not and they are to be explored. New artwork enlarges reality.

Having a Master's of Fine Arts is not required to produce art. Art existed long before degrees. However, most contemporary artists have official training, and a degree often opens doors and helps pay the bills. Simultaneously, degrees can sometimes get one involved in the art establishment, and this can have a corrupting effect. Regardless, one can find one's place in the art world anyway.

Competition is another problem in the world. It is a part of human nature. The best artists make use of competitive energies, such as in their exhibitions and publications. Artists continually use raw energy for their own purposes. Artists ideally would not conceive of themselves as competing with one another, but instead as competing to produce the best work. However, unhealthy art environments abound. Further American society encourages vicious competition.

Many will rate artists in terms of their recognition, acceptance, approval, grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, popular shows, profiles in artistic magazines, and so on. Competition often focuses on meaningless status metrics as a result. Many will resent the fact that they are not as well recognized as they should be. Everyone feels this resentment to some degree. The authors assure the reader that as artists, they will suffer defeat, and that everyone will check their rank in the pack. You have to have confidence in yourself so as not to get caught up in negative competition.

Artists are particularly subtle and manipulative. They have to be to get funding. However, one must avoid becoming seen as corrupt and manipulative because it gets in the way of one's work. Further, creating artwork for a commission can bend one's work into commercialism. Artists often have to decide between making money and producing good art; most do both.

Artists with great self-discipline often cannot handle the restrictions that others place upon them. The art network, those you associate with to produce, distribution, and edit your work, will inevitably restrict you in various ways. After you die, your art will be wholly controlled by these individuals. There is a myth of the lone artist, but it is a myth.



Chapter 7, The Academic World

Chapter 7, The Academic World Summary and Analysis

The authors argue that art programs in college have an important and positive function, but this is an unpopular position in the art world. The authors admit that these programs are not that important, but they are still important. Most artists dread the idea of being a faculty member, as it would crush their creativity. The idea of going to school is also thought to bring about conformity. Further, art teachers have bad reputations.

Unfortunately, the cards are stacked against art teachers. Hiring committees rarely select primarily for teaching talent, and judging teaching ability is difficult. Further, many universities want the artist to have a specialty, which may limit the artist's interests. Many MFA graduates are destroyed in the very process of applying for jobs. Newcomer talent is ignored in many cases. Teaching experience is often measured in terms of years rather than any other metric.

Art ability, however, will win some notice. Universities can often attract good artists, but whether one gets the job will often be affected by one's reputation in the art scene—having lots of exhibitions, many publications, recommendations, peer approval, fellowships, and so on. Yet while universities can get artists on board, they rarely effectively sustain the artist's ability to do her own work.

One problem for universities is setting priorities; they often weight indicators inappropriately. They often make demands on the art teacher or professor that prevent her from doing her own work, often exhausting her. The old dream of doing one's own work often dies. However, teaching is often a reward in itself and helps you to share your ideas with others, and it sometimes improves your own art.

The authors encourage art teachers to center their teaching around their interests so as to cover their duties and interests at once. Plus, teaching involves learning, but the teacher must still struggle to preserve her freedom to control her own art, but also to control her own teaching. Yet academic policy typically gets in the way by implementing regulations that either serve no function, or produce bad outcomes for artwork. The academic is thrust between two poles—teaching and artwork. That is how it goes.

Teaching, again, teaches the artist. However, when teachers stop being students, they also often stop making their own art. What are the other alternatives to education? There are many, but options are not always reliable. Universities may strangle the young artist, and art classes are often slowed down with students who do not care about art. And the world really does not care if you do your own art anyway. People outside of art do not think of teaching or doing art as a genuine profession. Admittedly, the academy does not effectively prepare one for other jobs with marketable skills.



Art education in graduate school and undergraduate school often pushes artists out of their interests. Some change majors and get other jobs, and some of these people pursue art on their own. The tragedy of lost graduate students is particularly widespread, but many academics ignore it. Artistic survival is very difficult, and many end up forced into teaching. To teach one must have an MFA; further, the job market in art teaching positions does not expand, and has not for some time.

There are many books that concern art or artists. However, they are full of false impressions of real artwork. They paint portraits of genuine art and they discourage the reader of these works from doing art themselves. Artists must resist this rejection and make art work within their own lives. As the authors have emphasized before, viewing complete art is rarely useful for the artist to learn how to make her own art.

The finished work does not reveal the questions the artist had to answer. This process of decision-making is largely opaque to non-artists. Art critics have a hard time grasping this fact. Books about art, sometimes written by art critics, only value the art that is easily reproduced in textbooks, which is a pity. Thus, much of the study of art and the teaching of art involves knowledge that does not aid in art creation.



Chapter 8, Conceptual Worlds

Chapter 8, Conceptual Worlds Summary and Analysis

The authors note that Henry James asked three questions of the artist, only the third of which is surprising: (i) What was the artist trying to achieve? (ii) Did he/she succeed? And (iii), Was it worth doing? The first two questions are practical, and they help to focus the artist. The answers also help to group artists into schools and understand them in these terms. However, the third question must now be asked. The artist must consider why she does what she does, what she values in her art, and she must structure her artwork accordingly.

The best art will bring something good out of both the viewer and the creator. It should challenge both. One must resist aiming at perfection, but simply achieving challenges. Those who do the best simply aim at the best practice of their art as they can. The artist should seek the challenge not only to reassure herself but to achieve a measure of feedback on the quality of her ability and work. However, challenges can often be set by others and become technical, sterile and a draw on creativity.

Criteria of judgment become systematized, which has various disadvantages. The artist must still master various concrete and widely understood techniques, which will make the production of art much easier down the road. However, the ultimate aim of the artist should be to use art technique as a means to illustrate ideas, not as something to be used to display in order to wow the art community.

Art differs from craft, but the distinction is not so clear. Craft includes the techniques involved in producing the art, whereas art is something further. Art advances the field as well, and exists in the 'leap between pieces' not within pieces. Art sometimes works against craft because it seeks the new.

Craft often follows a particular plan, albeit sometimes ones that takes great skill to achieve. This is not as noble of an achievement as art. Craft is "derivative." With art, perfection is impossible because it is innovative, but with craft, perfection is possible. Aiming at perfection means that one will inevitably exercise one's craft rather than produce art. Craft has to be mastered and overcome. Artisans aim at craft; artists aim at art.

Sometimes artists feel as if their new work undermines their old work, illustrating embarrassment with a previous stage in the artist's development. The early work seems simple and flawed. The authors suggest that this is not the way old work should be viewed. It should be seen as part of a developmental process. Seeing one's past flaws can be discouraging and humiliating but it can also be a positive sign of improvement.

The authors turn to discuss habits, which are necessary in order to focus on the new. They describe habits as "the peripheral vision of the find." The idea is to master and



sublimate the routine in order to focus on creating. However, having too many habits can produce monotony, yet without them, life is too unordered to create. Habits must be balanced. It is also important to take the art world's denigration of habits with a grain of salt. They are essential to do good work. Habits should be practiced and cultivated.

Further, do not adopt the habits of others; instead, form your own habits. Discover what works for you. Do not be derivative. You may display the influence of your teacher, yet this can be overdone. Again, you must find your own work. Thus, form your own habits; they will, in the end, comprise your very style. One's artistic style is shaped by all of those acquired and unconscious habits, so your habits are a part of you.

Many believe that art and science are—at some deep level—united. Art produces "archetypal" forms where science reveals beautiful and new things in the world. There is something transcendent about art, something concrete about art. Yet while many civilizations have survived with only the most minimal science, no culture has ever existed that did not produce art.

The authors argue that science concerns sets of phenomena, whereas art concerns particular concrete cases. Concrete cases are available to any age, but science is harder. The scientist seeks regularities, the artist irregularities. Yet art maintains a certain transcendent truth.

Self-reference can be obnoxious. However, artists often reference those that came before, and this can be effective and honorable. It helps to connect one's art to the past. In some ways, art is autobiography, but autobiography can be done well or poorly. Art is somewhat about the self and self-expression, but it is still something in the world and something done as a service to the world. Artists not only express themselves but describe matters that are bigger than they are.

The authors move to describe metaphor. For art requires metaphor. It can rarely represent things as they actually are, and when it does so, sometimes direct representation is boring and fails to get at the deep reality behind what is being represented. Metaphor aids our understanding of ideas and reality and, in a way, acquaints the artist and the viewer with reality again.

Many artists experience conceptual jumps via conceptual connections; metaphor helps to bring about cognitive shifts and creativity. Further, the world cannot always remain as it is. It will change, but it contains elements of stability, and then can be tied by metaphor.

Chapter 9, The Human Voice

Chapter 9, The Human Voice Summary and Analysis

Art and Fear confronts the obstacles to making art. They want to communicate the difficulties in the work and then allow the reader to clear her own path. However, there is no one way to overcome your fear as an artist. Instead, the authors suggest that the young artist focus on answers to a set of questions. The best artists will be those who ask the best questions. Some of the major questions that produce fruitful answers are asking what artists have in common, how artists become artists, how artists secure time to pursue their own work, and how artists create work that satisfies them. Further, the authors recommend focusing on why so many quit art. These questions may have answers, but any answer is going to be hard to articulate.

While many features of artists vary, there are still constants, such as the stress of art, the need to create one's own space, to understand the distinction between viewing and creating art, honing craft and technique, and so on. Within the artist's own life, she will find constants in the way she works, in her interests, in the patterns she responds to and so on. Constants give life stability and are worthy of one's focus.

The authors end the book by arguing that art is worthwhile because "to make art is to sing with the human voice." The work is ordinary, but it touches the face of something transcendent. Yet art is not a wholly mystical pursuit; it contains monotony, error and trials. The artist must grapple with the issues that confront them. Each artist has only herself to rely on. The artist must choose between doing her best work and taking a risk of disappointment, or not giving one's all and guaranteeing unhappiness. Being uncertain of failure is superior to being certain of it.



Characters

The Artist

While "the artist" is no particular person, s/he is the main character of the book. The authors are writing for the artist, the one in search of how to best engage in her profession, how to navigate obstacles inherent in artistic practice and how to create great artwork that reflects the personality, ideas and world of the artist. The artist faces numerous challenges throughout the book, but they can be generally divided into two classes—internal and external challenges. Internal challenges are those within the artist herself. The artist can often be the victim of her own fear. These fears are made possible by her expectations, uncertainty, imagination and the gap between her vision and execution. Even her materials can limit her in ways that cause anxiety and apprehension.

The great fears, however, are fears about herself and fears about others. The artist often fears that she will annihilate her personality if she stops working, that she lacks the certain "magic" required to produce good art, or that she has no natural talent. She can also be the victim of her expectations. However, she can also have fears about others, that she will not receive their understanding, acceptance and approval. The artist also faces obstacles outside of herself navigating the outside world of ordinary problems, the academic world with its time-sucking regulations and constraints and the conceptual worlds of craft and habit. The authors provide the artist with a path to navigate these obstacles herself.

The Art Community

The art community includes all those persons involved in the creation, teaching, learning, criticism, production, exhibition, recording and photographing of art. Of course, the heart of the art community is the artist, but she is far from alone, and the set of artists does not exhaust the members of the art community. Many are involved in the creation of art, including materials manufacturers, assistants, and secretaries. Teachers, some of whom are artists, teach art students. Students themselves must learn art for themselves. There are many art critics and there are companies and individuals that aid in the nuts and bolts of art production and exhibition organization. There are those who record and reproduce art as well.

The art community can often drain the artist, bind her and so on. When she is too reliant on their understanding her work, accepting her as an artist or approving of her work, they acquire an enormous power over her. The artist begins to identify with the opinions that others have of her. She can be given great fame, honor and pleasure from the art community, yet the art community can also reject, disapprove of or misunderstand her. At worst, they can completely ignore her. The artist must develop an internal integrity



and self-respect in order to interact productively with the art world; otherwise, she will be consumed by it.

The Veteran Artist

The veteran artist is the artist who has survived her own artistic development and grappled with the many issues artists inevitably face along the way.

The Teaching Artist

The teaching artist is the one who gets sucked into academic life, teaching art students in primary and secondary education, undergraduate and graduate students. The teaching artist faces a dilemma over how much time to allocate towards teaching and how much to allocate towards pursuing her own artwork.

The Quitting Artist

Many artists are consumed by fear and quit creating art.

The Art Network

The art network is the collection of individuals that help the artist create and exhibit her art.

The Enemy Within

The enemy within is the insecure part of the self that lives on fear. This enemy can destroy the artist.

The

The authors discourage the artist from spending too much time contemplating whether she is among the truly talented. Such people are few and far between and many of them amount to nothing.

Art Students

Art students are those who learn art from art teachers, but many of them are uninterested in art and waste the teaching artist's time.

The Academic World

The academic world is the world of people associated with colleges and universities. They can crush the artist with duties unrelated to her pursuit of art creation.

Artisans

Artisans are masters of crafts, of the great technique required to perfectly produce replicas, but the artist breaks boundaries and moves beyond mere craft.



Objects/Places

The Art Studio

The art studio is the artist's sanctuary; it is where she creates art.

The Exhibition

The exhibition is where the artist displays her art to the public.

The Classroom

The classroom is the residence of the teaching artist.

The University

The university often draws in and traps many artists who cannot otherwise support themselves.

Materials

Art materials are crucial for creating art but they must be handled with care.

Talent

Talent is something of a phantom idea for artists. The authors discourage speculating on whether one has it or not.

Books about Art

Books about Art often prefer artwork that is easy to display and cannot adequately capture the process of producing art.

Art

Art involves moving beyond craft to challenge boundaries and embody new ideas.



Craft

Craft aims at the perfection of technique but it does not transcend boundaries as art does.

Free Choice

All artists have a free choice of whether to give their art their all.

Magic

Magic is that supposed quality of a work of art that makes it true art. However, this quality resists analysis and articulation.

Expectations

An artist's expectations can disappoint and discourage her.

Uncertainty

The artist must learn to live with the uncertainty of accomplishing her vision, but this is better than not trying at all.



Themes

Free Choice and Uncertainty

In the introduction to *Art and Fear*, the authors proclaim that their book is about making art, but that this requires something more than mere skill or talent. The book instead concerns "committing your future to your own hands, placing Free Will above predestination, choice above chance." What could the authors mean by this? Too often artists allow themselves and their futures to be defined by others and by their own fear. This leads them to become discouraged, ready to quit and destroys their energy for and love of art. However, the artist must persevere and this can only be accomplished by a free choice. Talent is not to be focused on, according to the authors, because it is out of the individual's hands and worrying about it bears no fruit. Further, the fear produced by the uncertainty inherent in the artistic process must be wholeheartedly embraced by the aspiring artist.

To avoid uncertainty is to fail to take risks, to fail to commit wholly to one's art and craft; it is, in short, to sell one's self short as an artist in many cases before the artist has even started truly practicing art in the first place. The artist must believe in her own power, in her ability to commit her life energy to the project of art-making; without this belief, she cannot be a true artist. It is for this reason that *Art and Fear* is about "committing your future to your own hands," for only the artist can be responsible for her success or failure. She places "Free Will above predestination" by believing that ultimately it is her choice to be an artist or not, not anyone else's and not fate's. When choice is placed above chance, the artist is focusing on her ability to control what she can and stop trying to control those things that are out of her hands.

Finding Your Work

The theme of part one of *Art and Fear* is learning how to "find your work." This phrase may initially seem confusing. How could one fail to find one's work? The artist is wherever she is doing her work because she is the one doing her work and must therefore be present. However, the authors are after something deeper; they mean that the artist must be able to find her work despite the restrictions placed upon her by reality and society, not to mention the barriers her own fears place on her.

The major obstacle to finding one's work is fear, and fear manifests in many ways and has many causes. Fear is always possible because the imagination can always outstrip ability, because there is always a gap between vision and execution and the fact that the artistic process is full of uncertainty. The artist can fall into the grip of the fear that she is a fake, that she has no talent, that she lacks the "magic" to produce art. Further, she may cause herself anxiety by unnecessarily aiming at perfection, identifying too strongly with the actual practice of art-making and being crushed by failing to meet her own expectations.



Not only this, but she must also deal with her fears about others. The artist will ask herself whether the art community will understand her work, whether it will recognize and accept her as an artist and whether it will give her their approval. These fears often render the artist very vulnerable, such that if the art community does not respond in the way the artist would like, she is inevitably crushed.

Only by navigating all of these fears can the artist get over herself, others and her fears and find her work.

Ordinary Problems and Social Interactions

The ordinary problems that the authors discuss in *Art and Fear* are the problems of the artist relating to her social world. She must engage not only in the individual production of art, from vision to final execution. She must also struggle with the nuts and bolts of life in the art world. The reader may understand these "nuts and bolts" under two aspects: dealing with the details of the process of artistic production and the social interactions associated with the practice of art-making.

First, the details of the art process are facts of life that the artist must struggle with. She will face long periods of, perhaps, gallery management, cleaning up her studio, acquiring materials, mailing forms, portfolios, and so on. She might have to prepare interviews, decorate portfolios, and engage in the arduous process of fund-raising. These themes arise in part two of the book because they are essential parts of the art-making process that can produce anxiety and that are rarely revealed to the aspiring artist ahead of time.

On the other hand, there are social interactions the artist must engage in. She must successfully manage and interact with her art network, secretaries, materials salespeople, exhibition managers, and those who pay the artist to produce art. She may also feel the pressure to produce commercial art for the funds and will then have to cater to the tastes of the people at large. Further, the artist has to interact with other artists, sometimes constructively and other times competitively. The art community also brings its own challenges, including the art critic, the art viewer, and the art purchaser.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of *Art and Fear* is that of its authors, two professional artists, David Bayles and Ted Orland. As veteran artists, they have collected advice into this short book in order to help the young artist avoid the various pitfalls that confront her in developing from a young artist to a professional. Their primary interest then is in helping the young artist, the one who wishes to pursue art for its own sake, for the truth, beauty and nobility in it. They emphasize above all that the artist seeks something transcendent and must do what she can to achieve it.

They also emphasize, as an important value, the idea of individual responsibility and choice. The individual artist is not alone, but she has no one to fall back on but herself. She must become a person of integrity, who is not fully reliant on the reactions and attitudes of others. Further, she must make a free choice whether to give her art her all. In this way, she must take a risk, the risk of failure. However, their value system is clear: taking the risk is better than not trying at all.

The authors also exhibit more familiar biases. They clearly believe that most people are wrong to not care about art or artists. They dislike the academic world, arguing that many academic policies and requirements stifle the artist's creative abilities. However, they do not wholly denigrate teaching. They also mildly approve of fine arts degrees, but they recognize that these degrees can produce conformity. In general, the authors love art and love the young artist. They want art to be created and the young artist to maintain her love of art and hone her art-making skills with her fears in check.

Tone

The tone of *Art and Fear* is one of cautionary, learned, often stern hope for the young artist and love of art itself. *Art and Fear* is not just about art; it is also about fear. This generates the book's cautionary tone. Fears and pitfalls surround the artist. She faces fears about herself and fears about others. Everywhere there lurks a danger that can frustrate or discourage the artist.

Thus, the authors often talk about how fears can suck the life out of the young artist; they react strongly to the effects of these fears on the character and drive of the artist as well. Caution is urged. However, the authors recommend that artists navigate their fears and barriers with care, as men who have been through all of this before. They come off as veteran artists, as men who know the ropes and the dangers of creating art and interacting with the art world. They rarely come off as arrogant, but instead their tone is one of loving and encouraging teachers. The authors are hopeful that the artist can persevere. In fact, they are certain that there is hope for the young artist so long as she faces the reality of her fear and engages in self-control.



She must also—and this is crucial—decide to give art her all, to make art her first love. The authors have a condemnatory tone towards those who quit and refuse to make this decision. While they hope the young artist will succeed, they do not want to shield the artist from tough decisions; this form of sternness comes through clearly. Yet the authors also have a loving and mystical tone. They are still in love with art, and they believe that it touches something deep within the human spirit. In fact, they proclaim that "to make art is to sing with the human voice."

Structure

The structure of *Art and Fear* is clear. It has two parts. Part I introduces the problem facing the artist—her fear. Part I contains five chapters; the first lays out the book's central problem, and then it makes several assumptions about the artistic process required in order to proceed with the rest of the book. Chapter two outlines the central relationships between art and fear. The authors explore the facts of the art-making process that enable fear to be a powerful negative force.

These fears divide into roughly two categories—fears about yourself and fears about others. The fears about yourself are the fears the artist has about her own inadequacies, whereas fears about others are the fears that concern how the art community will react to the artist's work. These matters are covered in chapters three and four respectively. Chapter five wraps up part one by helping the reader to understand how to navigate these fears, thereby allowing her to find her work.

In Part II, the authors turn to focus on the obstacles that arise once art has been produced. The individual must now interact with the wider world. They divide the world into three: the outside world, the academic world and conceptual worlds. The outside world, covered by chapter six, concerns how to deal with ordinary problems that arise in the art-making process; chapter six helps the young artist to navigate and understand the academic world. Chapter seven focuses on different conceptual tasks of art, and their relationship to other persons. The book ends with chapter nine, a brief chapter explaining how art helps the young artist not only find her voice but to speak with the "voice of humanity."

The chapters of *Art and Fear* are short and are divided into clear and helpful subsections. These sections are often interspersed with stories and illustrations of the argument at hand and often reference famous individuals, such as Van Gogh or Hemingway. The chapters also sometimes include questions that the artist should ask herself in order to help conquer her fears herself.



Quotes

"This book is about what it feels like to sit in your studio and classroom, at your wheel or keyboard, easel or camera, trying to do the work you need to do. It is about committing your future to your own hands, placing Free Will above predestination, choice above chance. It is about finding your own work." (i)

"Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeing, experience treacherous, judgment difficult." (1)

"Artists don't get down to work until the pain of working is exceeded by the pain of not working." (9)

"We have met the enemy and he is us." (23)

"Don't look back—something might be gaining on you." (37)

"You could not step twice in the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you." (49)

"When bankers get together for dinner, they discuss Art. When artists get together for dinner, they discuss money." (63)

"To see far is one thing: going there is another." (65)

"The world is not yet done." (69)

"When my daughter was about seven years old, she asked me one day what I did at work. I told her I worked at the college—that my job was to teach people how to draw. She stared back at me, incredulous, and said, 'You mean they forget?'" (79)

"The answers you get depend upon the questions you ask." (93)

"When you start on a long journey, trees are trees, water is water, and mountains are mountains. After you have gone some distance, trees are no longer trees, water no longer water, mountains no longer mountains. But after you have traveled a great distance, trees are once again trees, water is once again water, mountains are once again mountains." (109)

"Your growth as the artist is a growth toward fully realizable works—works that become real in full illumination of all that you know. Including all you know about yourself." (112)

"Computers are useless—all they can give you are answers." (113)

"To make art is to sing with the human voice." (117)



Topics for Discussion

What is the role that free choice plays in Art and Fear? Give two examples.

What do the authors think about "talent" and its relationship to art work?

Name two fears discussed in the book that the artist may have about herself. Explain their features.

Name two fears discussed in the book that the artist may have about others. Explain their features.

What do the authors mean when they suggest that the artist "find your work"?

What is the role of uncertainty in Art and Fear?

What are some of the "conceptual worlds" mentioned in Part II? How do they relate to the other worlds the authors discuss in Part II?