

# The stylistic games that visual artists play

**Henry C. Finney** It is common knowledge that fine art creativity is influenced by social convention. But there's more to know about the 'creativity dilemma'. How do artists make their choices from an overwhelming number of possibilities and how do they react to pressures to 'narrow down'? In this article sociologist Henry C. Finney gives a detailed account of the 'games' he and his colleague-students learned to play in the three years they were graduate students of painting and printmaking at the Master of Fine Arts art school in New York City.

## Introduction and background

For artists to produce anything at all, they must face a profound dilemma inherent in any creation. The dilemma's first horn is the *expansion* of choices and possibilities to be considered, an expansion which, if truly faced, can be overwhelming. The beginner may ask in desperation, 'but what shall I draw?' and the veteran often reports a recurring pure anxiety whenever facing a blank canvas. The dilemma's other horn is that *something* must be chosen, decided upon and put down, or creativity simply doesn't occur. Such is the 'creativity dilemma.'

Students feel it especially keenly, for they are less likely to have settled on a particular style or way of responding, and are, indeed, often encouraged by teachers and advisors to *open up*, to explore, to expand and try out all the possibilities. 'Ask "what if" I tried that ...' I remember so many teachers saying. However, the possibilities are for practical purposes limitless, and therefore potentially over-

whelming. Therefore, from the beginning, the artist must simultaneously eliminate possibilities, select and *narrow down* to something so concrete it can be given physical form. Only then do marks and materials eventually produce a 'work.'<sup>1</sup> Thus, creativity requires a solution or resolution of the dilemma. Paradoxically, however, *continued* creativity, whether during completion of the work or for the commencement of a new one, simultaneously requires some means of sustaining, maintaining or renewing the dilemma, for without new possibilities creativity ceases.

This is a difficult balancing act, and part of every professional artist's socialization includes some means of dealing with it. A primary thesis of this report is that most of the means for doing so involve adoption of pre-existing sociocultural art conventions. Further, not only does resolution of the dilemma rely on using conventions, but the strategies most commonly adopted for doing

this are themselves highly conventionalized. The 'craft' strategy, for instance, tends to avoid an aggressive experimentation with styles or materials in favor of traditional reproduction; the 'canonical fine art' or 'integrated professional' strategy (Becker 1982), on the other hand, typically embraces the modernist norm of continual innovation<sup>2</sup> while still working with more traditional forms and materials.<sup>3</sup> The 'avant garde' or 'maverick' art strategy (Becker 1982) seeks greater innovativeness in all these respects.

The following empirical exploration of the creativity dilemma poses some challenges for sociologists and artists alike. After the seminal work of Howard Becker, it comes as no surprise to sociologists (although it still annoys some artists and art professionals) to learn that fine art creativity is profoundly influenced by social convention. But that insight focuses only on *resolutions* of the creativity dilemma. Perhaps more disconcerting to social structuralists and postmodernists (and reassuring to those pursuing their art) is that the dilemma's continual presence and unavoidable recurrence virtually assures a truly creative process that cannot be entirely explained by existing conventions or structural pressures. We have then, the conundrum that creativity and convention are inextricably intertwined.<sup>4</sup> Creativity is one genuine possible outcome of the interaction between social *agency* and cultural *convention*.

## Stages and strategies to resolve the 'creativity dilemma'

The process of role professionalization has often been studied by sociologists. Simpson's study of Soho artists, for instance, described four stages: 1. the development of motivation, 2. the student stage, 3. the period of 'prolonged incubation' after completion of training, and

finally, 4. the emergence of the mature artist (1981, chapter 5). Supposedly, as professionalization proceeds, options narrow, particular styles and conventions are accepted, and academic stultification may even set in as one generation imposes its stylistic standards on the next (Manfredi 1982). During the course of my own training, for instance, I overheard at least a dozen conversations in which a current student or a faculty artist complained bitterly about the inappropriate datedness of stylistic standards imposed by an older generation of teachers. The conventional sociological view is that professionalization is just such a conservatizing process.

It will be useful (even if a distortion), to treat how students deal with the creativity dilemma as though it were a predictable developmental process occurring early in the professionalization process. It is certainly often seen as a developmental process by those involved. In my cohort, students' stylistic evolution and 'improvement' was evident in numerous instances; many faculty followed at least a crude implicit sequence as to what sort of instruction was best for what 'level' of student. In my own case and several others, the question of stylistic ontogeny - id est, whether certain students go through remarkably similar sequences in their stylistic development - definitely arose. However, treatment here of the overall professionalization process must be limited, for my purpose is to focus more narrowly on that small part of it concerned with 'resolving' the creativity dilemma.

## Horn number 1: having it all

### Modernist norm of innovation

Early in my MFA studies, after commenting that one of my objectives was to develop a mature body of work with a consistent style, a faculty painter commented, 'such a pity that

you are no longer naive.' He had a point, for often, it would seem, one of the most central features of artistic professionalization is a loss of naive freshness in 'favor' of a sophisticated and consistent 'personal style.'

Indeed there is a presumption (sometimes not justified, my observations suggest) among MFA faculties that their graduate students have already 'tried out' and experimented with an very wide range of ideas, media, styles and materials. Although private and undergraduate teachers of hobby and amateur artists may encourage their students to focus on some limited, traditional technique and subject, emerging pre-professional students are likely to be required by their undergraduate professors to be radically innovative.<sup>5</sup> It is their way of forcing the preprofessionals to experience the first horn of the creativity dilemma. Many undergraduate art courses seek to accomplish this by a schedule of assignments requiring an ever-changing array of imposed 'innovations' in the way students work - one day to paint like an impressionist, the next to make a collage, later to do a conventional figure drawing, only then to cut it up to make an abstraction, perhaps later still painting it over, and so on. One instructor epitomized his innovative purpose by requiring students to invent utterly new tools and media with which to draw. Some couldn't do it.

In my MFA program, and commonly at others too, I learned, some of the painting faculty routinely pressured new students to change their style of working, often encouraging them to work abstractly. It may sometimes have been due to a belief in the superiority of abstraction, but as I listened to one faculty person explain this approach, the primary reason was to force the student to innovate. There is no better way of forcing one to look the dragon of creation in the eye than to require making something never seen before.

Later, as students either returned to or fashioned styles of their own, those who appeared to be imitating or copying some other established artist or style usually earned the harshest criticism. The modernist norm of innovation is no stranger to MFA students.

#### **Dimensions and varieties of innovation**

To highlight this 'opening up' process, it is helpful to distinguish several dimensions and varieties of artistic innovation. The degree of innovation, of course, can range from minimal to extreme. Some (but none in my MFA programs) simply copy established artists or styles. Illustrating what I previously called the strategy of 'traditional reproduction,' I recall one artist in an amateur show years ago who skilfully copied the painting on an art book cover and submitted it as her own. Somewhat more sophisticated are those (a few of whom enrolled in my MFA program) who adopt a familiar style like impressionism or neoclassicism, and then seek to find their own conventional interpretation of it. The commitment to innovation is typically much greater among MFA students, however. Many of those I knew (including myself) drew from several existing styles and ideas to develop an expressive variant of their own. Such conventional innovation most clearly revealed the stylistic games that visual artists play. It is from the ranks of both conventional interpreters and innovators that most of Becker's 'integrated professionals' come (Becker 1982, chapter 8).

There were also a few students, including myself for several periods, who strove for a sort of *free invention*, a kind of 'automatism' (as in Dada) in which an attempt is made to use tools, materials, styles, trends, and ideas unconsciously, without plan, intuitively, impulsively in order to find a new vision. A course in 'new forms' especially catered to students with this bent (although I found

drawing the best vehicle for it). Faculty often pushed their students (and me) in this direction, urging them, for instance, to 'be on the edge,' to avoid 'thinking' too much when working, to 'push' one's spontaneity to the point of nearly losing control. This 'game' of following your 'unconscious' without preconception turns out to be extraordinarily difficult. Furthermore, it is socially risky, for those 'mavericks' who go too far may doom themselves to obscurity (Becker 1982, chapter 8). In my experience, moments of free invention are brief. As sociologists might say, 'free invention' is a 'pure type'.

Another dimension that highlights the first horn of the creativity dilemma is the seemingly limitless range of its substantive focus, its content. The possibilities are vast. Innovations among my MFA colleagues often focused on the tools and technology employed. Some students abandoned brushes and oils in favor of mops and tar, or computers and video, or ordinary things, including, at one exhibition, a hive of live bees. Similarly, new compositional materials may be tried, everything from food (I remember works of jello, butter, chocolate or milk) to old railroad ties to experimental polymer resins. Equally important are innovations whose focus is existing art styles. Starting a decade or so ago, 'appropriationism' became a popular postmodern 'game,' generating numerous strikingly 'incongruous' combinatorial works. Experimenting with established styles can also be more subtle, as when the artist 'reworks' or modifies some aspect of an established style (gestural abstract expressionism, in my case) to convey something fresh.

Popular cultural tastes, including images and styles from the mass media, also become grist for the mill. This may seem more experimental than it really is, as Museum of Modern Art director Kirk Varnedoe's exhibition *High and low* (1990-1991) showed. Just as Picasso and Braque

began to affix printed pop words in their works of papier collé, so too, contemporary MFA students, responding to more recent art trends, are busy using every imaginable kind of urban detritus, photographic eye-stopper and pop iconography in their work, including, as I observed in various student shows, bottle tops, pornographic photographs, condoms, beer cans, disemboweled TVs, used kotex pads, toilet seats, and much more.

Postmodern social 'deconstructionism' has further widened the range of artistic possibilities with its concern - shared by many of the MFA students I knew - with the social symbolism or meaning of their art. Consequently, both in Manhattan and among the young MFA artists I encountered, much work was infused with references to various strongly felt social issues. These included problems of racism, sexism, capitalism, ecocide, sexual homophobia, religion, war, social alienation, and others. As a sign of the times, the 1994 *Whitney Biennial* was dominated by a near obsession with 'social relevance.'<sup>6</sup>

#### **Making choices**

While some of the pre-MFA student artists I've encountered revelled in the seeming limitlessness of such possibilities, for me and some of the other MFA candidates I knew, narrowing down was very difficult. Even at our first meeting, long before the MFA, my most important painting mentor<sup>7</sup> noted that I was 'all over the place': painting, sculpture, assemblage, collage, drawing, multimedia reliefs, clay, printing, and more. With a struggle I narrowed down to drawing and painting. But with each new commitment, new possibilities arose: in drawing - pencil, charcoal, litho crayon, oil pastel, dry pastel, and ink with both pen and brush; in painting - acrylic, oil, alkyd and watercolor; for grounds - paper, canvas, panels, ceramic. As if such explorations weren't

hazard enough, I felt compelled to try out every major style since 1850, including classical realism, bits of futurism, impressionism, post-impressionism, early expressionism, cubism and finally, both color field and gestural abstract expressionism.<sup>8</sup>

After several years of patient (if critical) encouragement, my mentor, knowing we had a close enough relationship to survive the attack, finally said 'enough'. Looking at my work one day, done in my myriad media and styles, he declared in a booming voice, 'This has got to STOP! You're trying to speak in thirteen different languages at ONCE! NOBODY will EVER be able to understand you!' He went on to explain that if I wanted to develop as an artist, I'd have to narrow down and decide which of these directions to take.

It was the greatest favor he could have done. More than most emerging artists, evidently, I was caught on the first horn of the 'creativity dilemma.' I was trying to 'have it all.' I couldn't decide. My mentor and painter friend did me the kindness of reminding that, unlike younger students who still had time for it, I did not, and that to be productive in a way others could recognize I would have to narrow down. Thus, well before actually starting the MFA, my goal for it became to develop a mature and innovative body of work whose stylistic consistency would be evident to everyone. Just how I began that process, and how most MFA students and practising innovative artists seem to narrow down, is the next topic.

### **Horn number 2: narrowing down, closure and the emergence of style**

Narrowing down occurs both developmentally, during certain phases of an artist's career, and during the course of executing a particular work. The most important sociological idea to convey is that on both dimensions, artists rely heavily on artistic or stylistic conventions to

achieve closure. The most important aesthetic idea to emphasize is that creativity is achieved, in part, precisely by means of utilizing such conventions. To better understand this seeming contradiction, it is useful to distinguish two types of artistic conventions: games and strategies.

#### **Stylistic games**

Stylistic art 'games' draw their components or elements from diverse sources, including established contemporary and art-historical styles; types of materials, tools and techniques of facture; various substantive concerns; and particular systems or principles of composition. Like board or parlor games, they consist of 'rules' and guidelines for accomplishing some artistic or stylistic objective using a limited set of materials and techniques. The goals of the stylistic games artists play are typically more ambiguous than in board or parlor games, but are operative nonetheless.<sup>9</sup> Often the goals of a single 'game' are multiple, including a style like the school with which the artist identifies, similarity to works the artist has produced before, and expression of some particular visual insight or idea in a way that satisfies the artist aesthetically.<sup>10</sup> The nature of these games varies significantly between different 'levels' of the art world (Finney 1993).

As in the best games, reaching the goal is fun, challenging, and often difficult, requiring an admixture of skill, insight, concentration and luck. But unlike ordinary games, the frequently incomplete definition of the game's objective requires the artist to resolve or clarify it as s/he goes along, thus adding to the challenge.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the games artists play resemble the more general interpersonal games described by Eric Berne (1964) in that artists' stylistic gambits are often unconscious and sometimes even manipulative (Berne uses the phrase, 'ulterior motive'). They are unconscious in that

artists frequently are unaware they are 'playing' a game at all; instead, the hard work involved may suggest an experience more like pure creativity, even when later realizing they have 'invented' some technique or compositional arrangement that is already an established part of visual culture.<sup>12</sup> The ulterior or manipulative part of some artists' stylistic games has to do with ambition, with the desire, reported by very many observers, of artists to accomplish major (preferably overnight) recognition. Sometimes the manipulateness is cynical and conscious, as with Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons; but just as often it is semi- or unconscious. Under the pressure of such ambition, one naturally is attracted to that style or game judged most likely to bring success. As so often observed by commentators on the big city art world, this is the 'bandwagon' problem of artists trying to catch the next major successful trend so they, too, can be acclaimed.

Specific games, in turn, are usually part of a more general conventional strategy for resolving the creativity dilemma; choice of 'strategy' amounts to choosing a general class or type of stylistic game. When entering the art-professional toy store, one must have some initial idea of what counter to approach, since the games available differ enormously. Some require lengthy training and practice, while others allow *impromptu* play; some are highly inventive games of chance, and others focus more on predictable craftsmanship; some draw on traditions of art history, while others cater to pop culture tastes. So recognizable and widely used are these strategies of choice, they must be understood as sociocultural conventions in their own right.

#### **Strategy of traditional reproduction**

The first strategy is that of traditional reproduction. Some artists solve the problem of narrowing down by never really facing it at all.

They pick a style they love (e.g. the games of 'impressionism,' or stylized 'cowboy art') and 'paint like that,' adopting much the same pictorial subject matter, tools and materials as the style's progenitors. Such is the explicit purpose of numerous books and workshops aimed at these hobbyists and amateurs. The 'burden of an independent vision' (Simpson 1981, p. 77) is simply not part of these games. The 'production' crafts often follow the same strategy.

At their least innovative, such artists focus their skill on copying an image or scene, or imitating the work of other respected artists. They especially admire technical proficiency in doing so. Their traditional landscapes are predictably filled with sunsets, snowy mountains, cowboys, classic portraits or poses, pretty flowers, sea gulls and quaint barns in a 'game' of imitative decoration which may require a very high level of craft, and which sells very well in certain markets, but is relatively uninventive. Even some more serious amateurs and preprofessionals adopt this strategy. However, virtually no artists with this orientation were present in my MFA cohort, nor did I see any such work at several large MFA exhibitions in New York City during the study. It is more common in provincial art worlds.

#### **Traditional interpretation strategy**

A somewhat different and more innovative strategy is traditional interpretation. Its weaker representatives include those proficient and skilful serious amateurs and aspiring professionals who develop their own personal interpretations of traditional styles and subjects (Finney 1993). Stronger practitioners, such as Rackstraw Downs or Andrew Wyeth, include many professionals who develop a personal variant of some established approach, such as landscape realism - a popular professional style at the moment. These are not

copies, nor mere imitations, but fresh interpretations of traditional art styles and subjects. Such work is pleasing not only because of rendering skill and command of technique, but also because of the interpretive expressiveness that emerges from the artist's own personal touch and compositional invention.

A variant of this strategy of conventional interpretation consists of emulating a more modern or postmodern style or school. For preprofessionals earning their MFAs, this is risky business, for the stylistic hallmarks of a certain style may currently be very much out of fashion. Thus, as I and numerous fellow students discovered, it is nearly impossible today to use drips in the manner of Jackson Pollock as a major element in paintings without facing rejection as an imitator. Yet pasty, enigmatic, slightly rounded nude figures in the manner of Balthus evidently can be used without risk. Thus, the strategy here is to choose an admired school of artists that is in favor and develop one's own work in a way that adds something new. One currently prominent 'game' of this kind is identified in Charles Jencks valuable book, *Post-modernism* (1987) as the 'new classicism.' The game has several variants, all respected for sufficient innovation to give punch to a highly traditional look, and each with a number of well known artists. The variants include 'metaphysical classicism' (for example Balthus, Antonio Lopez Garcia and Francesco Clemente)<sup>13</sup>, 'narrative classicism' (for example R.B. Kitaj, David Salle and Eric Fischl)<sup>14</sup>, 'allegorical classicism' (for example Martha Mayer Erlebacher, Claudio Bravo, and Stephen McKenna)<sup>15</sup>, and 'realist classicism' (for example Philip Pearlstein, Alex Katz, and William Beckman).<sup>16</sup> A number of both faculty and students in my program chose to play a variant of this stylistic game.

#### Strategy of modernist reproduction

Modernist abstraction also attracts its student adherents and offers its own games. Abstraction, by its very nature encourages a higher degree of innovation because of an absence of given subject matter, unless one merely imitates some already well-established modernist style or artist. A few examples of this latter strategy - let us call it modernist reproduction - could, in fact, be found among fellow students. Several, for instance, played a game of 'geometric textural minimalism' which I found to be extremely popular in some Soho galleries and among MFA students at other schools as well.<sup>17</sup> One of the best known originators (id est innovators) of the style is Sean Scully. Another modernist reproduction game of 'grid variations' also had its players in my program, especially, it seemed, among photographers.

#### Strategy of modernist invention

Probably the most popular strategy among the MFAs whose work I saw was modernist invention. While certainly not the most radically inventive approach, it nevertheless involves a strong commitment to the modernist value of seeking an independent vision. Its practitioners seemed usually to start with a well-developed commitment to a particular style or 'game,' such as geometric abstraction, pop collage, or gestural abstract expressionism (my own preoccupation). The basic challenge in such games is how to move beyond mere modernist reproduction. Returning to the creativity dilemma, this is the challenge of how to be open to innovations that can help develop one's own distinctive style, yet at the same time narrow down to a consistent articulation of that style. Many artists, including myself, seemed quite spontaneously to use a similar strategy for solving the problem. Quite simply, they

invented a new game, or a variation of an old one, by combining elements from two or more different established stylistic games. The possibilities are endless: to combine photorealism with conceptual word art, lithography with computer imaging, dream surrealism with geometric textural minimalism, impressionist figuration with geometric abstraction, photographic transparencies with steel armatures, and so on. The process is similar to combining two board games. One enters the toy store already very proficient at *Monopoly* and looks for another existing game that could be combined with it - say, *Scrabble*.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, the degree of innovation involved can vary enormously.

This quality of looking for something new, for a solution, reflects a very common experience among artists committed to the norm of innovation - namely, the experience of a difficult personal search through their art. As one older artist friend commented, it is like cutting a trail through the jungle when you don't know your destination in advance.

My own experience may be illustrative. Ignoring a sideline of gestural figure drawing, my first group of paintings during the period of study embodied a stylistic game I came to call 'figurative or tonal abstraction.' As illustrated by such accomplished artists as Bill Jensen and Gregory Ammenoff, this style of painting is entirely abstract in the sense that although one cannot recognize familiar, real world things, there are nevertheless 'objects' in the painting that are distinguished from the background. A key feature of such abstraction is the clear differentiation of figure from ground. I call the style 'tonal' because the imaginary space depicted is defined in part by the means of traditional tonalism - lights and darks, *chiaroscuro*, even shadows.

Now, just as had happened several years

earlier when I began to feel 'trapped' by the rules (id est social conventions) of realism, so too, I began soon to feel stuck in this game of 'tonal abstraction.' True, I had to be much more innovative than before by inventing my own forms and objects, rather than duplicating them from the real world. But the work didn't have the luminosity or pulsing quality that Hans Hofmann had referred to so often in his writings with such phrases as 'color light' or 'push-and-pull' (1967). So, I entered the stylistic toy store, as it were, and began to learn a new game in which I had long been interested but had found very difficult to play.

The new game is called color 'plasticism,' as that term came to be used first by Piet Mondrian (1945) and later by Hans Hofmann. Without getting into details, color plasticism is a means of creating the illusion of space on a two-dimensional surface through color (and other devices), but in such a way that the relationship between figure and ground is not stable. It is ambiguous, seeming to pulse (or 'push-and-pull') back and forth. The result is a type of image that simultaneously seems 'on the surface' (of the canvas) and at the same time to offer the illusion of space.<sup>19</sup> There are many formal compositional devices that help in playing this game. The primary means of winning that interested me was color relationships; specifically, the ability of certain colors when juxtaposed to generate a luminosity of their own that can replace the 'tonal' light of traditional painting (and 'tonal' abstraction). It may be too soon to say, but the final result in my work seems to be a new 'game' which combines elements of both tonal and plastic abstraction.

#### Strategy of contemporary invention

Potentially even more innovative is the strategy of contemporary invention, which, responding to the strong influences of

'postmodernism,' consciously seeks to avoid both traditional and modernist games. The close historical association of abstraction with modernism is undoubtedly one reason for the tendency of some contemporary artists to eschew painting altogether in favor of a wide array of new media and materials, such as light, electronic and computer images, experimental photography, word art, detritus sculpture, performance and conceptualism. In this search for the new it may be somewhat more likely, to continue the toy store metaphor, that the contemporary artist will invent an entirely new game from scratch, rather than merely combining elements from several pre-existing ones. It can be a groping and even traumatic process, sometimes leading to a significant transition in an artist's development, as when Philip Guston shifted from his earlier abstract expressionist game to an utterly new one involving his now-famous crude, cartoon-like figures.

#### Strategy of contemporary reproduction

Such radical shifts or inventions are difficult feats, however, and most of the 'new forms' artists I knew in the program resorted to the same creative strategy as the modernists of drawing from existing stylistic ploys. One popular contemporary or postmodern game was 'photographic distortion,' a mixture of collage, surrealism and futurism in photography. Another was the 'funky abstract altar' game of combining lights or candles, dime-store personal mementoes, and pop images into a sort of pseudo-shrine. 'Appropriationism' was also a popular post-modern game that occasionally led to very interesting creative juxtapositions.

However, there are hazards in the contemporary approach, for the contemporary art world is crammed with passing fads claiming to be 'it,' to be what's 'hot' or 'in.' As could be seen in the work of some students (and

many more artists in Manhattan), the temptation to merely join the bandwagon was strong, with the result that much postmodern work ends up merely following a strategy of contemporary reproduction, and isn't innovative at all.

One 'manipulative' advantage of this strategy (harking back to Eric Berne) is that appearing 'in' can give the false illusion of creativity. It is remarkable, for instance, so many years after Dada, Arte Povera and the angry socialist art of the interwar years, and after the advent of 'pop,' that young artists still believe it original (to name a few games of contemporary imitation) to arrange bits of urban detritus on the floor, draw jumbled graffiti scrawls on the wall, tack together dime-store items in a dream box, or to paint nasty pictures of hated power figures or groups. Probably the single most imitated contemporary game I saw among both students and aspiring contemporary New York artists was the 'in your face sexuality' game. Manhattan and the art schools during the period of study fairly bristled with penises, breasts, clitorises, rape scenes, homosexual and sadomasochistic poses, copulations and dirty jokes. The hazard of this strategy, in short, is confusing what's 'hip' or 'politically correct' for creativity. And to the extent that young aspirants may consciously 'scope out' the art scene so they can join these new trends early, stylistic game-playing can become quite cynical and expedient - hardly a new point among art writers.

#### Strategy of market-oriented product development

Another strategy should also be noted which cut across several of the others. This is the strategy of market-oriented product development. As Jeff Koons advised younger artists at one point, if you want to be successful, just scope out your market and

make art that will succeed there. One New York artist for instance, having discovered the popularity of his rather amusing black and white stand-up cows (which he installed on the steps of Gracie Mansion), began churning them out in every conceivable format - silkscreen scenes, t-shirts, gift cards, coasters, and so on - all with minor variations of the same idea. He was successful enough, indeed, to be invited to do an 'Absolut' vodka advertisement. However, if there were any MFA colleagues whose primary production strategy was this mercenary, I was not aware of them. Creative idealism appears more the norm in art school.

#### Strategy of naive expression

Finally, note should be made of the strategy of naive expression. At its best, it is the art of a 'beginner's mind' (Suzuki 1970), an art that seems to come from nowhere and therefore somehow more directly conveys one's inner images and feelings than many strategies. It has adherents in two major camps: grassroots and faux-naif. True grassroots artists are usually not formally trained, and as a result, their honesty and directness sometimes produces extremely refreshing and interesting work. Faux-naif artists, on the other hand, are usually quite well trained, but attempt to achieve the same freshness either by imitating their grassroots colleagues or by playing some the same 'games' - such as 'my favorite memories,' 'spontaneous doodle' or 'let's make a monster.'<sup>20</sup> Interest among professional artists in such work has been longstanding, as illustrated by Dubuffet's *art brut* style and Joseph Beuys's proclamation that everyone is an artist. Although New York hosted numerous exhibitions of grassroots art during the period of observation, few examples could be found in my MFA program.

#### Concluding discussion

Several interesting broader questions are raised by the preceding observations. One is the question of what stages or processes may be involved, or even required, to complete a particular work or develop a particular style. Artists work in many different ways, so generalizations should be resisted; for instance, some artists reach closure for a work entirely in advance, by preconception. But others, including the author, extemporize as they go. In fact, there is often a dialogue between these two seemingly antagonist approaches, between concept (thesis), on the one hand, and emergence (antithesis), on the other.<sup>21</sup>

Creative works made in this second manner seem to follow a discernable sequence from openness to closure or resolution. At the beginning, almost any mark seems to 'work,' as artists often say. But as more and more are added, the process narrows and becomes more difficult. For one thing, sometimes recent additions 'don't work,' perhaps because they are inconsistent with the 'game' being played, or with the artist's aesthetic intentions or compositional standards. If this happens, many artists resort to such techniques of 'reopening' the painting as turning it upside down, adding a chance element like collage, scrubbing out large areas, or putting it away for later re-examination with a different mindset. As (or if) the creation begins to 'work,' it takes on a life of its own and the artist begins to follow the painting, rather than lead it, allowing 'its' own emerging nature to dictate what is required next. The process is a bit like inventing a new board game and reaching that point of system closure where new rules, elements or moves cannot be freely added because they contradict existing ones. A subjective visual equivalent to 'logical consistency' emerges.

For many artists, a parallel process occurs over much longer periods as they develop

increasingly consistent and identifiable personal styles. The present study provided little basis for speculating about this development. As illustrated by Piet Mondrian's or Richard Diebenkorn's stylistic transitions, abstractionism, in particular, seems for many artists to develop out of a previous interest in representation. The work of numerous other artists reveals a similar development, suggesting an hypothesis for behavioral research that just as 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny' in the maturation of higher animal species, so too, the evolution of an artist's 'signature style' may have to go through some series of historically identifiable developmental stages.<sup>22</sup> As one contemporary artist put it: 'Making art is hard. It requires a life time (...) [of] (...) gradual ripening, deepening, evolving and finally enduring (...)' (Klement 1994)

Even beyond the forces working to resolve a particular work or develop a consistent personal style, the pressures faced by artists (and probably other innovators) for closure and commitment are considerable. Among art students, the pressures include program and faculty expectations for a final show of 'mature' and 'consistent' work. Later, further closure is often experienced as dealers or mounting bills generate pressures for sales. Another influence can be the temptation to increase one's chances of recognition by committing to some current stylistic fad. The net result, for some careers, is the gradual development of a narrowness or kind of academic professionalism that can deeply inhibit stylistic innovation or its encouragement in one's students (Manfredi 1982).

These pressures for closure represent only one horn of the creativity dilemma. There are also counterpressures to renew the innovative process: the artist gets bored, artworld tastes change, new technologies emerge, sales of a certain style decline, a new artworld fad or philosophy leaves you behind, and so on. The

pressure can become so intense that an artist may consciously break away to try something radically new, as when Philip Guston abandoned his more conventional abstract expressionist style in favor of the cruder, more cartoon-like canvases at the end of his career. Or Robert Rauschenberg destroys his work to begin anew.

Such breaking away from excessive closure - that is, reactivating the creative dilemma - also occurs historically or culturally, as well as for the individual innovator. And it occurs in other fields. In art history, it takes the form of the familiar challenge and rejection during the history of modernism by an avant garde style of the one preceding it. In the sciences, at its most dramatic, it takes the form of a 'paradigm shift' (Kuhn 1970).

Overall, there would seem to be lessons in the creative dilemma for everyone. For the art professionals who still romantically embrace what Becker (1982, chapter 11) calls the 'conventional theory of aesthetics,' with its explanatory reliance on creative genius, the current research suggests the sources of creativity are much more conventionalized than often supposed. But for sociological and postmodern writers who implicitly deny the possibilities of creative invention (for example *Art in theory*, 1992, part VIII B), preferring instead to view creative work as mere 'text,' or as a reflection of underlying social or structural interests, this study reveals a process with numerous possibilities for genuine invention. The dualistic nature of this process should perhaps be accepted as a scientific and artistic koan which suggests that convention and creativity are, in reality, interdependent and mutually arising. There cannot be one without the other.

#### Notes

1. A similar dilemma no doubt faces creators in many fields, such as product design, policy formulation, organizational decision making, and of course, all the other creative arts.
2. This is what Rosenberg called the 'tradition of the new' (1982) and what Simpson called 'the burden of having to sustain an independent vision' (1981, p. 77).
3. Some traditional lines of fine art, such as conventional watercolors or academic figure paintings can better be conceived as 'crafts' in this sense, while much highly innovative craft can more appropriately be described as 'fine art'. Becker has made the same point (1982, chapter 9).
4. Among practitioners of the Eastern 'way arts', this conundrum is the familiar koan of the interpenetration of form and emptiness, of the need to master conventional forms to achieve liberated expression.
5. See Finney (1993) for a discussion of these artist category labels and the parts of the local artist stratification system to which they apply.
6. At the expense of aesthetic merit, many critics argued, such as Michael Kimmelman of *The New York Times*.
7. A student and later colleague of the abstract expressionist painter and teacher Hans Hofmann, he has himself become a widely exhibited painter and an extraordinary teacher.
8. This was not a conscious strategy, and the research provided little basis for speculating how common any such sequence of development may be.
9. Unlike the purchase or playing of board games, furthermore, the 'playing' of art style games is likely to be un or at least semiconscious. However, artists explicitly acknowledge at least some prior influences, as when one teacher agreed that all artists select particular artistic 'heros' by whom to be influenced, adding that because some are much better 'teachers' than others, such choices should be carefully made.
10. Saying that artists play visual games is not meant to be derogatory or to deny the reality of creativity, but on the contrary, to explore some of the ways artists achieve creativity in the midst of convention. Indeed, some aspects of creativity, such as successfully generating an 'aesthetic response' or speaking with particular power or relevance to the times, lies beyond the ability of the present gameplaying framework to explain. Many personal and idiosyncratic elements enter in, such as the kinds of personal color preferences noted by the great Bauhaus teacher Johannes Itten (1973).
11. Hence their frequent reference to 'resolving' a work. Yet, the possibilities for resolution are not limitless, for the artist brings numerous standards to bear, including what was originally intended, whether an unexpected result is within formal or aesthetic bounds, and whether the work is stylistically consistent - id

#### Henry Finney

was a professional artist, sociologist and writer in 1995

- est, whether it is still within the same game!
12. This is a particular hazard among beginners or those artists who choose to remain ignorant of art history and contemporary visual trends. Their 'ignorance' notwithstanding, one must suppose that through the mass media they are endlessly barraged by artistic conventions in today's 'museum without walls', and that such influences are absorbed and utilized unconsciously.
  13. Other examples include Giorgio de Chirico, Gregory Gillespie, Carlo Maria Mariani, Malcolm Morley, Sandro Chia and Gerard Garouste.
  14. Other artists include Paul Georges, Alfred Leslie, Jack Beal, James Valerio, Michael Mazur, David Hockney and Robert Longo.
  15. Others include Bruno Civitico, Lincoln Perry, Stone Roberts, Komar and Melamid and David Ligare.
  16. Others are Richard Estes, John De Andrea, William Bailey and Steve Hawley.
  17. This was one of the most prevalent 'games' tallied during a visit by the author to an exhibition at Hunter College of MFA students nominated by their major professors at most of the major MFA programs in or near New York in the spring of 1994. Of the sixty-five works that seemed to involve some kind of identifiable 'game' 15 or 23 percent, could be described this way.
  18. One must suppose that the game *Class struggle* was created in just such a way by combining the idea of Monopoly with a radically simplified version of Marxist theory. A major difference between such recombinations as these and creating new 'art games' is that the latter are much more eclectic, fragmented, mutable and non-rational.
  19. It was to this dualism that Hofmann was referring (as reported by my mentor) when he replied to a student one day at his Provincetown school, 'I may have said "flat", but I didn't mean *flat* "flat".'
  20. Like most artists, truly grassroots artists do not 'strategize' before they paint, and are not aware of 'playing' any 'games'. But the enormous interest in naive art among art professionals in recent years has ironically generated an institutionalized encouragement of such games and strategies in numerous programs among children, elders, patients and inmate populations. Vermont's 'G.R.A.C.E.' program is a case in point. Interestingly, much grassroots art, despite its frequent naive freshness, also seems highly repetitive and predictable. This may be due to the influence of visual social conventions; and it may also have to do with the more basic nature of human perception and cognition. We know, for instance, that children's art goes through various highly predictable stages due, evidently, to changes in developmental maturity. For both reasons, the 'innovativeness' of grassroots art is sometimes overrated.
  21. My father, composer Ross Lee Finney, tells a revealing

story about his only contact with Picasso after the liberation of Paris during World War II. The great master, it seems, let GIs watch him paint if they would bring an army commissary gift of some scarce delicacy like chocolate or ground coffee. Having made his offering, my father remembers an episode in the monologue that Picasso would carry on during such visits. (The 'quotations' of Picasso are only paraphrases.) 'I always know exactly what I am going to do when I'm painting,' Picasso declared, looking past my father at some larger invisible admirer. 'So I paint a stroke, and go *here*, like this,' he explained, actually completing a large brush stroke somewhat above his head to the right. Picasso then studied his latest mark. 'But then,' he hesitated, continuing to examine the work, 'but then,' he repeated, still absorbed in concentration, 'I often end up doing something entirely different, something I didn't expect at all, so instead, I go over *here*,' taking his brush off in a new direction. Wollheim regards this kind of emergent creative response to marks already made as essential to the art of painting (1987).

22. Richard Wollheim (1987) has gone so far as to argue that an artist can develop only one mature style: 'One artist, one style,' he dogmatizes at one point (p. 35). However, given the multiplicity of styles intentionally adopted by many postmodern artists (for example Gerhard Richter), the near absence of evolutionary sequence before maturity of other artists (for example Robert Ryman), and a lack of evidence that artists' development generally evolves through the same or similar stages, Wollheim's argument seems overdrawn, and the 'phylogenic' (id est predictably structured) nature of stylistic 'ontogeny' must remain completely speculative.

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