

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 6, 2007

Charles H. Traub's Do's and Don'ts of Graduate Studies

Filed under: artists, education — alecsothblog @ 6:22 am



by Charles H. Traub from the 'The Chicago Years' (1970-1977)

The Do's and Don'ts of Graduate Studies: Maxims from the Chair

from the book *The Education of a Photographer*

by Charles H Traub, Chair of photography at SVA

The Do's

- Do something old in a new way
- Do something new in an old way
- Do something new in a new way, Whatever works . . . works
- Do it sharp, if you can't, call it art
- Do it in the computer—if it can be done there

- Do fifty of them—you will definitely get a show
- Do it big, if you cant do it big, do it red
- If all else fails turn it upside down, if it looks good it might work
- Do Bend your knees
- If you don't know what to do, look up or down—but continue looking
- Do celebrities—if you do a lot of them, you'll get a book
- Connect with others—network
- Edit it yourself
- Design it yourself
- Publish it yourself
- Edit, When in doubt shoot more
- Edit again
- Read Darwin, Marx, Joyce, Freud, Einstein, Benjamin, McLuhan, and Barth
- See Citizen Kane ten times
- Look at everything—stare
- Construct your images from the edge inward
- If it's the "real world," do it in color
- If it can be done digitally—do it
- Be self centered, self involved, and generally entitled and always pushing—and damned to hell for doing it
- Break all rules, except the chairman's



by Charles H. Traub from 'Indecent Exposure' (1980's)

The Don'ts

- Don't do it about yourself—or your friend—or your family
- Don't dare photograph yourself nude
- Don't look at old family albums
- Don't hand color it
- Don't write on it
- Don't use alternative process—if it ain't straight do it in the computer
- Don't gild the lily—AKA less is more
- Don't go to video when you don't know what else to do
- Don't photograph indigent people, particularly in foreign lands
- Don't whine, just produce



by Charles H. Traub from 'About' (2003-2006)

The Truisms

- Good work sooner or later gets recognized
- There are a lot of good photographers who need it
- before they are dead
- If you walk the walk, sooner or later you'll learn to talk the talk
- If you talk the talk too much, sooner or later you are probably not walking the walk (don't bullshit)
- Photographers are the only creative people that don't pay attention to their predecessors work—if you imitate something good, you are more likely to succeed
- Whoever originated the idea will surely be forgotten until he or she's dead—corollary: steal someone else's idea before they die
- If you have to imitate, at least imitate something good
- Know the difference
- Critics never know what they really like
- Critics are the first to recognize the importance of that which is already known in the community at large
- The best critics are the ones who like your work
- Theoreticians don't like to look—they're generally too busy writing about themselves

- Given enough time, theoreticians will contradict and reverse themselves
- Practice does not follow theory
- Theory follows practice
- All artists think they're self taught
- All artists lie, particularly about their dates and who taught them
- No artist has ever seen the work of another artist (the exception being the post-modernists who've adapted appropriation as another means of reinventing the history)
- The curator or the director is the one in black
- The artist is the messy one in black
- The owner is the one with the Prada bag
- The gallery director is the one who recently uncovered the work of a forgotten person from his or her widower
- Every galleriest has to discover someone
- Every curator has to re-discover someone
- The best of them is the one who shows your work
- Every generation re-discovers the art of photography
- Photography history gets reinvented every ten years
- New galleries discover old photographers
- Galleries need to fill their walls—corollary: thus new talents will always be found
- Galleriests say hanging pictures is an art
- There are no collectors, only people with money
- Anyone who buys your work is a collector—your parents don't count
- All photographers are voyeurs
- Admit it and get on with looking
- Everyone, is narcissistic, anyone can be photographed
- Photography is about looking
- Learning how to look takes practice
- All photography, in the right context at the right time is valuable
- It is always a historical document
- Sooner or later someone will say it is art
- Any photographer can call himself an artist,
- But not every artist can call himself a photographer
- Compulsivness Helps
- Neatness helps too
- Hard work helps the most
- The style is felt—fashion is fad

- Remember, its usually about who, what, where, when, why, and how
- It is who you know
- Many a good idea is found in a garbage can
- But darkrooms are dark. . . and dank, forgidaboutit
- The best exposure is the one that works
- Expose for the shadows, and develop for the highlights
- Or better yet, shoot digitally.
- Cameras don't think, they don't have memories
- But digital cameras have something called memory
- Learn to see as the camera sees, don't try to make it see as the human eye sees
- Remember digital point and shoots are faster than Leicas
- Though the computer can correct anything, a bad image is a bad image
- If all else fails, you can remember, again, to either do it large or red
- Or, tear it up and tape it together
- It always looks better on the wall framed
- If they don't sell, raise your price
- Self-importance rises with the prices of your images on the wall
- The work of a dead artist is always more valuable than the work of a live one
- You can always pretend to kill yourself and start all over.

36 Comments »

1. I don't know how many read Vice magazine, but this sounds like a concise version of the Do's and Don't of Photography article published a couple of years back.

http://viceland.com/issues_au/v2n3/htdocs/dos_donts_photography.php

Comment by Mike Reynolds — September 6, 2007 @ 7:27 am

2. This is also in the book edited by Charles Traub, titled (I think), "The Education of a Photographer". Its a very good book with essays from photographers, critics, curators, teachers of old and new.

I think the list is brilliant ;)

Comment by Christine — September 6, 2007 @ 8:11 am

3. The Do's, Don'ts and Truisms are just so spot on!

Comment by mike — September 6, 2007 @ 8:36 am

4. "Galleriest" is an ugly and annoying word.

Comment by Robin Dreyer — September 6, 2007 @ 8:42 am

5. best post ever on this blog. that's some funny shit. ps: do you think goldin will be pissed that she fell into 'the don'ts'?

Comment by paul — September 6, 2007 @ 9:05 am

6. This is an extract from an essay that was written for the first group show i was invited to be a part of after completing my BA photography course at the University of Wolverhampton, UK.

It's by a guy named Gordon Dalton, a UK based artist.

"There are too many artists. They are selfish, arrogant and pompous. They are naively stupid, gullible and corruptible. They have a mind full of other peoples' ideas. Their self-importance holds no bounds. They actually believe there is a line between what they are and the institution. They think they are outside of the establishment whilst plotting to become part of it. Never trust an artist. They will stab you in the back.

There are too many art schools. Hundreds of universities and colleges are vomiting out thousands of graduates every year. They are breeding grounds for lazy reprobates who couldn't or didn't want to get a proper job. They are homes for failed artists of previous generations who are too jaded by the culture wars to pass on anything remotely like good advice. They should be saying stop now, get out. Instead they are saying this is how you get away with it. We are swamped by a mass of over-eager, under skilled rampant artists every year. It's getting worse.

There is too much art. Public art, digital art, installation art, socially-engaged art, environmental art, performance art, painting, sculpture, minimalism, expressionism, abstraction; post-this and neo-that. Who needs it? Who needs that kind of hassle?

There are too many curators. The old guard recognised this and protected themselves by inventing themselves as a younger, hip gun slinging version. The strongest of the new breed promoted themselves to generals, formulating new ways of becoming the institution. They have the power and the glory. They believe they are more creative than artists but still the artists look

up to them. The curators scratch each others backs and give glossy lip service to the artists. Never look a curator in the eye. They are a dark empty pit of bitterness and resentment."

This is only about a third of it..... Genius.

Comment by Stuart Whipps — September 6, 2007 @ 9:12 am

7. Oh man, you made my day with that list. Just lovely.

Comment by Bernhard — September 6, 2007 @ 9:12 am

8. A friend (chair of an Art Dept.) added this:

"If you are the Chair of the Department no one is taking you even half as seriously as you think they are"

Comment by Tim Atherton — September 6, 2007 @ 9:50 am

9. stuart – riveting. More please, if you can be bothered to type it up – or do you fear the copyright police ?

Comment by Robert Phillips — September 6, 2007 @ 10:00 am

10. This was so much fun to read. Thank you.

Comment by Georgina — September 6, 2007 @ 10:36 am

11. Shame about the family rule – Sally Mann, Richard Billingham, Nick Nixon are all obviously hugely over-rated.

As for Larry Sultan, all that family album stuff – double don't whammy!

And can someone else write on their pictures or does Jim Goldberg suck as much as Peter Beard?

Comment by colin pantall — September 6, 2007 @ 1:35 pm

12. Not sure I'm enjoying the wave of cynicism this week's theme has unleashed, though perhaps there's a lot to be cynical about. I've never been near an art college, but I guess there are a lot of disappointed people out there. I think the Old Masters would have been baffled by the idea that "art" might not be teachable, but then they'd also have been baffled by a lot what has happened in the years since Art acquired a capital letter.

Comment by Vinegar Tom — September 6, 2007 @ 3:06 pm

13. haha, how great is this?! now i know everything i always wanted to know and i think i'll get famous soon with all that knowledge...haha...thanks so much!

Comment by CHRISCHA — September 6, 2007 @ 5:10 pm

14. now I will sleep better knowing that if I just follow a few dozen rules I can achieve greatness. I like things big and red, which will make it even easier!

Comment by sean ross — September 6, 2007 @ 5:49 pm

15. Speaking of SVA faculty, this is pretty cool:

<http://stateoftheart.pophoto.com/blog/2007/09/david-levi-stra.html>

Comment by Alec Soth — September 6, 2007 @ 5:52 pm

16. hola, this is great, just because i do not agree with some of the do's (i think Citizen Kane is soooooextremely over estimated...) and the one of...if it can be digital...no sé, no sé... and I completely do not agree with some of the donts. i can cut and paste and make my own do's and dont's. thanks!
and the truisms...aren't some of them a contradiction?

alec, your blog is great!

Comment by lore — September 6, 2007 @ 6:33 pm

17. Keep up this sort of stuff Alec. I loved these do and donts. 90% are so spot on!!!
When doing my head in over trying to decide on the solution to a creative prob. this will be a great ref. to refer to. Cheers.

Comment by Darren — September 7, 2007 @ 4:40 am

18. Keep up this sort of stuff Alec. I loved these do and donts. 90% are so spot on!!!
When doing my head in over trying to decide on the solution to a creative prob. this will be a great ref. to refer to.
Great thing is one day someone will come along and do some of these donts very well and we will all be talking about how good that persons work is.

Comment by Darren — September 7, 2007 @ 4:41 am

19. even if i am 90 years old, and i make a list like that, someone shoot me!

Comment by einars o — September 7, 2007 @ 7:28 am

20. thank you for this. i just started grad school this week and i am putting this list up in my studio.

Comment by Jessica Marie — September 7, 2007 @ 8:31 am

21. Waaaay too much for me to remember. I am more of a John Cage's Ten Rules kind of guy:

<http://www.alisant.net/cca/sitespecific/cage.html>

Comment by Todd — September 7, 2007 @ 9:38 am

22. That is great Todd. But I'm pretty sure that you and I fail at Number Nine just about all of the time.

By the way, the folks at MediaShooter just made their own rules/rant:

<http://www.multimedias shooter.com/wp/?p=442>

Comment by Alec Soth — September 7, 2007 @ 10:00 am

23. Yeah, but it's usually caused by trying to follow rules one through eight. Not our fault at all. Besides, I hear they make pills for number nine.

Comment by Todd — September 7, 2007 @ 10:54 am

24. Lovely.

Comment by Warren van Rensburg — September 7, 2007 @ 11:12 am

25. Don't like the anti-analog stance. Don't like the real life=colour thing. Don't like the Citizen Kane thing (more inspiring is, for example, Christopher Doyle's work, such as "In the mood for love" and "2046" (Wong Kar Wai)).

Comment by Gustav — September 8, 2007 @ 2:35 am

26. OH MY GOD! I just became a multi-millionaire Art superstar thanks to this list. You can do it too! Just send me a hundred dollars in unmarked bills and I will tell you which points are most important...

No, seriously, it's a great list to help break out of any kind of creative block. My favorite is:

Do fifty of them—you will definitely get a show

Cheers!

Comment by Jim Casper — September 10, 2007 @ 3:27 pm

27. Such a long list, and no reference to anything that matters. All about the role. The play is the thing, yes.

Comment by Videbaek — September 12, 2007 @ 11:12 am

28. What a bunch of bullcrap.

Comment by Sam Logan — September 17, 2007 @ 4:05 pm

29. " the world is a stage and each must play his or her part." william shakespeare

Comment by robert — September 20, 2007 @ 5:23 am

30. eee
ee

Comment by robert — September 20, 2007 @ 5:25 am

31. That guy is a consistently cheesy mothafucka.

Comment by Captain SVA — September 20, 2007 @ 10:39 am

32. Home truths may hurt, but for whoever has ears to hear they may lead to seeing the light.

Comment by Paul Muse — September 28, 2007 @ 7:37 am

33. Recursive exhortation from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1977:

1. Make it good.
2. If you can't make it good, make it big.
3. If it's still not good, make it big and in color.
4. If it's still not good, see 1.

Comment by Townsend Harris — October 10, 2007 @ 11:42 am

34. There are rules to this game?

Comment by Tom White — October 14, 2007 @ 10:40 pm

35. this is great , certainly smart and funny and probably often times true .
However it is kind of silly to believe that following a bunch rules will help anyone to come up with some truly original and good work ..

i would rather second that:

- "1. Make it good.
2. If you can't make it good, make it big.
3. If it's still not good, make it big and in color.
4. If it's still not good, see 1."

Comment by A. — February 4, 2008 @ 4:51 pm

36. I fear that almost everyone who commented missed the point, which is surely a self-referential joke.

Please can we have the blog back? It was awesome.

Comment by koxx — January 12, 2009 @ 5:27 am