

## On Graduate Education:

### Is it Worth it? A Primer (with Memoir) for the Art History Graduate Student

by Susan Sidlauskas

If you are reading this, you are likely a graduate student in the field wondering whether to stay. Or perhaps you are a faculty member, worrying about the ethics of advising PhD students in a non-STEM field. Your students may be peppering you with questions such as: How will I pass my qualifying exams? Do I really have to take German? How do I find a topic for my seminar paper? Will I ever get a talk accepted to CAA? Ever?

For the *students* reading this, there is one question that trumps all the others: Will there be a job when I finish? You're wondering whether you've made a terrible mistake. At this point, your family and even some of your friends are asking what it is you *do* exactly, and when will you be *done*. They will envy your summers "off." Many people you encounter will not have heard of the field of art history, which tends to be offered these days only in the wealthy suburban and private secondary schools. To be polite, some will ask you what you like to paint.

Compounding the anxiety, there are those websites and wikis, the ones that confirm your worst fears that only a fool would dream of pursuing an advanced degree in the humanities. Gawker may have gone bankrupt from the settlement it was forced to pay to Hulk Hogan, but unexpectedly, not long ago, they hosted a chat for adjuncts in the humanities.<sup>1</sup> The frustration, even bitterness, of the recent PhDs and ABDs was palpable—understandably, as many had endured extreme commutes to multiple, ill-paying jobs, little or no professional respect from the departments with which they were affiliated, and virtually no time, let alone energy, to write. Many contributors were especially aggrieved with advisors who had failed them: *Why didn't my mentors tell me it was going to be like this?*

After nearly a quarter-century teaching art history, first at the University of Pennsylvania and now at Rutgers, navigating the rocky terrain from adjunct to tenured professor and everything in between, this particular advisor would like to offer graduate students – and perhaps those of you who mentor them – a different way to think about the jobscape before you. This is not a corrective, exactly. That would be irresponsible; we all know about the diminishing number of full-time academic positions. But I do want to suggest to students that in spite of all the uncertainties, there are excellent reasons to remain exactly where you are—whether you decide to spend two or three years and graduate with a master's degree, or commit yourself to the long slog of the PhD. (My only stipulation would be to avoid incurring a debt that could force you into the kind of job you never wanted.) But let me be clear: it's not because there's a prize awaiting you. It is because of who you will become in the crucible that is graduate school. Although you may not have fully experienced this just yet, dedicating yourself to a substantial, difficult project over a long period of time is transformative, and will shape you permanently for the good. Building an idea from scratch changes you.

You have probably heard the commonplace that academic arguments are so contentious because there is so little at stake. I would suggest to you that precisely the opposite is true: *everything* is at stake. A genuinely original idea comes from deep within yourself and must be fortified by all the pertinent evidence that you have had the imagination, patience and rigor of mind to gather. When we take the greatest risks, we have a chance to do our best work. By the time you have finished your degree, whether that takes two or seven years, you will have tested yourself in a way that relatively few attempt. Your anxiety about your professional destiny is understandable, but

don't let it eclipse the relative freedom and the resources you have right now. Never underestimate the importance of your cohort, for example. And know that although it may feel as if you are being judged and found wanting every single minute of every single day, you have embarked upon a process of self-realization that no one can take away from you. Unless you let them.

It has become a cliché to discuss the importance of failure to eventual success. “Fail better,” those Silicon Valley CEOs say at their TED talks. Mike Birbiglia, the gifted actor and writer, recently published a short primer on how to succeed “small” in the world of comedy, which I believe has applications to our own field. Speaking of a recent appearance on the David Letterman show, Birbiglia wrote that his successful five-minute routine was “mined from three hours of so-so material that I'd tried and failed with for six years.” That sounds about right. Following Mr. Birbiglia's example, my hope here is to demonstrate that even the worst defeat can set into motion a positive outcome that you would never have anticipated. Even if you are marked by the experience, you may well develop a fortitude that will surprise you.

I guarantee you that most professors with a full-time tenured position have had at least one spectacular failure. And here I don't mean getting booted off the stage at CAA for going over the allotted time; the article that took years to write, which has just been rejected by the fourth journal to which it was submitted; the conferences or workshops you have not been invited to, when so-and-so (fill in the blank—we all have that one person who seems to supersede us at every turn) has attended every single one. And then there are the countless job applications that go unanswered. (I'm still waiting to hear from Barnard that I didn't get the job for which I was a finalist; it's been 15 years.)

I have never received anything—a job inside academia or out, a fellowship, the acceptance of an article to a journal—on the first try. The first time I submitted an essay to *Art Bulletin*, I was crushed by the breathtakingly negative report from the reader. “Banal” was the kindest adjective I can recall. I was so discouraged that I couldn't look at the manuscript for months. When my desperation to have something published began—just barely—to exceed my fear, I realized that some of the reader's assessments were so clearly biased that they could be set aside. But other criticisms, I had to admit, had the ring of truth. I rewrote the essay, refuted the objections I believed were unjust or irrelevant, and clarified my argument. When I finally resubmitted it to the editor, it was accepted the next day, as long as I agreed not to use “privilege” and “foreground” as verbs.

I learned two lessons from this experience: first, there is useful and there is useless criticism. Learn to distinguish them, something you'll become better at with practice. Make sure to profit from the former, and try to forget the latter, even as you will feel compelled to allow it to cling to you like one of those thistles you can't get off your sweater. Second, don't let anyone else decide that something you've written is *not* worth publishing. If you feel strongly about your idea, test it out with at least a small circle of trusted interlocutors, and then keep at it as long as you can stand it. If you decide that the fifth rejection would put you over the top, keep it somewhere. (We used to say “put it in a drawer”; now you put it in Dropbox.) Those orphaned essays have a way of resurfacing in entirely new contexts: the academic's version of adaptive re-use.

When the *Art Bulletin* article was finally published, I was teaching as an adjunct at Penn (where I had earned my PhD several years earlier), undergoing what turned out to be a year-long audition for the Assistant Professor position I eventually did get there. One day, I received a hand-typed envelope from a Michigan address I did not recognize. It was a letter from Rudolph Arnheim, sending his warm congratulations on the article. We struck up a correspondence that lasted even after he could no longer type the letters himself. When he died at the age of 102, I reflected on how this unexpected, sustaining exchange never would have materialized if I had succumbed to that cranky reviewer's dismissal of my work.

Including that year-long audition, it was five years after graduation before I landed the job at Penn. In the meantime, I patched together adjunct teaching positions, and then got lucky with a couple of postdocs. Our older daughter was born within a year of graduation, and I became intimately familiar with the costs of combining family and work. (Incidentally, when asked, I advise graduate students *not* to wait to have children if they have the option, as long as they have endured the exams, produced a dissertation outline, and completed at least some of the most demanding travel needed for research.)

Chances are that if you do have a child during graduate school or a transitional period of part-time work, you will do something idiotic. You'll feel as if you have lost your bearings: you will ask yourself whether you should try to rewrite that dissertation chapter, *or* apply for a position as a set designer for daytime TV. (I had decided that this was one of my options.) You will wonder how you could ever have thought you had the smarts to be an academic.

Here's something I did during the first year of my older daughter's life, when I lived in a fog of sleep deprivation. I had a two-year postdoc at Columbia (note: I had been an alternate for this fellowship) and had just given my Art Humanities students their final exams. I was carrying twenty-five bluebooks home with me on the subway back to Jersey City. After I arrived at the World Trade Center stop, and headed toward the PATH station, I realized that my briefcase was no longer with me. Those exams were riding on the number 1 train, unless someone had already heaved them into the trash. I rushed home and started frantically calling every MTA lost and found office for which I could find a number. Nothing. Two hours later, I received a call from the Art History and Archaeology department. Apparently a homeless man had fancied my abandoned briefcase, but not the bluebooks inside, so he had dumped them on the subway train's floor. A man, whose name I never learned, recognized what they were, gathered up each and every one, brought them home and started calling Columbia to track me down. I collected the complete set the next day from his doorman in Battery Park City. One disaster averted. The worst was yet to come.

Failing to receive tenure at the University of Pennsylvania was a public humiliation that no one saw coming. In retrospect, I sensed that something was amiss when a senior colleague pushed me into a corner at a CAA meeting to explain—at excessive length—why he had not been able to write a letter on my behalf (incidentally, letter writers are never identified to the candidate). After that encounter, my heart sank as I approached the conference book exhibit and saw that the paperbound proofs of my book (an expanded and rethought dissertation that I spent way too much time writing) were invisible amidst the glossy dust jackets and large posters devoted to the latest products of far more prolific scholars.

The negative tenure decision was made at the Provost's level, which means that my work was evaluated by those who knew very little about the field. Many of these senior scholars were, I suspect, more accustomed to the benchmarks expected in the social and lab sciences, where collectively written articles can number in the tens, even for very young scholars. An assistant professor with "only one book" (an absurd phrase in the world outside academia, you realize) which is not even "between covers" yet, as deans like to say, a few articles and a teaching award has simply not excelled at the level necessary to be an associate professor. In fact, at a school like Penn, a teaching award can be the kiss of death, a sign of priorities seriously out of whack. (A colleague had told me this at the award ceremony; I assumed she was joking.)

As Penn allows everyone who is denied tenure to come up a second time, the committee was likely to have been tougher than it might have been otherwise. But this was no comfort. Fortunately, the History of Art Department, including two senior professors who had been my advisors, swooped in immediately and negotiated with the dean for an extra year before my next attempt. It was pointed out, subtly, to the powers that be that I had not had either a maternity leave or time off the tenure clock for my second child, perhaps an actionable omission in the case of an appeal.

I am not going to tell you that being denied tenure wasn't awful. It was. For a while I was the person no one wanted to be. People observed me for signs that I was cracking up. When even a glimmer of my sense of humor resurfaced, I was extravagantly praised for my great strength. I was unsure what the conventions were for managing public humiliation, whether there was something between complete social withdrawal and brazen self-assurance. In many lines of work, this would have been the moment to quit. But as the shock wore off, I dug in my heels. What about all that intellectual capital I'd built up over the past eleven years? What about all those paintings and photographs I wanted to write about? What would Rudy Arnheim, who had said that perseverance was the secret to his success, say if I abandoned what I'd regarded as my life's work? Bolstered by the absolutely essential support of family, friends, mentors and not least, my students, I decided to hang in there for the second round, even though there was no guarantee of success.

My colleagues at Penn went the extra distance on my behalf, and I will always be grateful

to them. And so did my family. Before that nightmarish school year had ended, my husband had arranged for me to travel to Zurich (which we could not exactly afford at the time), so I could visit the *Cézanne: Finished-Unfinished* exhibition I'd never thought I'd be able to see, although I very much wanted to write about the portraits of Madame Cézanne. When I saw ten of them, all clustered together on the white walls of the Kunsthau Zürich, the book suddenly seemed possible. It was my way back—along with a lecture on Sargent I delivered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art the following fall.

The invitation came when the curator called me at my office at Penn to congratulate me (mistakenly) on getting tenure. She never missed a beat, and invited me to give a lecture on whatever topic I was thinking about. The talk and the reception that followed, attended by family, friends, students and mentors, was a high point of my professional life (and in fact much more fun than our wedding), and it came within a year of my worst defeat. The book finally came out—dressed in a glossy jacket (there was even one of those big posters at CAA, thanks to Beatrice Rehl at Cambridge University Press). There were a handful of new articles and two book contracts, one on Cézanne, the other on Sargent. That time, tenure went without a hitch.

Although it was very difficult to leave Penn, my intellectual home for so many years, being at Rutgers has given me opportunities I never anticipated. (True to form, the first time a position in my field was advertised at Rutgers, the search was canceled.) I doubt I would ever have taught a large lecture course called “Art and Medicine,” for example, now one of my favorite classes. At this large rough-and-tumble university, there are multiple opportunities for unexpected collaborations.

At both Penn and Rutgers, it has been a privilege and even on some days, yes, a joy, to watch my students' thinking become deeper, braver and more subtle as they research, test out ideas with one another, and write. That deepening happens in fits and starts, and almost never on the schedule you imagined when you first entered your graduate program. No one claims this process is easy. Research often demands extensive, costly travel and the acquisition of multiple languages. And a nearly unimaginable amount of tedium is part of every ambitious project. (The riskiest ideas need the most fastidious references.) Then there is the isolation of writing, which is unbearable for some, and has occasionally prompted the entirely honorable decision to leave.

If those queries from your family about the exact date of the completion of your master's thesis or dissertation start coming too fast, remember that in choosing this life, you are going against the grain of twenty-first century America (as I'm writing this in the weeks before the election of 2016, the divergence seems especially extreme). Consider for a moment how often journalists have used the word “professorial” to describe President Obama over the past eight years—in part as a rebuke to a man who is averse to the glad-handing (and backroom deal-making) that someone like Bill Clinton relished. But what writers are really saying is that “Professor” Obama seems only to *think*, not to *feel*. (We know better at Rutgers; he gave a truly stirring speech here at the 2016 graduation ceremony, just before icy hail pounded the 50,000 spectators.)

In addition to dispensing advice about how to produce good comedy (such as “the key to writing is ten bad drafts. Maybe twenty.”), Mike Birbiglia offered this observation to aspiring comic writers: “Cleverness is overrated, heart is underrated.” We could substitute “fashionable theorizing” for cleverness (not that there's anything wrong with theory...), but the idea is the same. The kind of nuanced, multi-layered, deep, prolonged looking we learn to do as art historians *is* a form of feeling. That necessary combination of intellectual rigor and imaginative interpretation enables us to envision cultures, historical moments, and lives very different from our own. We need not give up “feeling” for “thinking.” In the best art history, they are always intertwined.

Finally, some bits of practical advice: I've already stressed the importance of your cohort to you; but remember that *your* presence matters to others. By the time you are in your second or third year of study, you are living, breathing proof to rookie students that there is life beyond those exams; that in fact, actual human beings who look and sound a bit like them—only smarter—have come up with dissertation topics. They will think to themselves, “perhaps I could do that too.” Also, if you don't show up for departmental events, you will miss the opportunity to have the kinds of casual but engaged conversations out of which ideas emerge, and confidence becomes shored up. A sense of community mitigates a great deal of the harshness that can surface in any graduate program.

In seeking an audience for your work, don't focus only on CAA as a venue. Consider the growing number of excellent graduate student symposia, as well as the interdisciplinary conferences. These are smaller events, but tend to be more congenial. You will meet colleagues whose work you admire who may become lifelong friends. Don't let the inevitable rejections linger too long. Give yourself twenty-four hours to feel awful about the rejection of your conference abstract or fellowship application, and then permission not to. At home, it's extremely important that your partner and/or cluster of close friends support what you do, even if they don't always understand it. It's worth taking the time to explain what you're working on, even if your idea is very much in progress. Your loved ones will appreciate being admitted into a world that can appear exclusionary from the outside, and your occasional absence and inattentiveness will be more easily forgiven. If it's at all possible, try to write at least a little every day; even a brief attempt helps dissipate that black cloud of worry.

There are more people than you realize who share your professional and intellectual anxieties; and some of them have begun to organize. For example, recent PhD's Karen Leader and Amy Hamlin have begun a project called *Art History That* (or AHT), whose purpose is "to curate, crowd source, collaborate on the future of art history."<sup>2</sup> Things may actually be looking up in the job world: this past year, four recent Rutgers PhD's accepted tenure track positions at small state schools and county colleges with vibrant programs and a supportive faculty. If you are willing to be flexible geographically, there are still opportunities to teach.

One of the biggest challenges that faculty advisors face is that we must re-orient the way we support our students, and affirm that a job that happens to be in a museum, or a publishing firm, or a corporate art collection, or an auction house is no "back-up." It is a success. To that end, we need to educate our deans about the need to re-configure the metrics by which their version of "success" is measured. Too often, the only kind of employment that counts on the administrative spreadsheet is a full-time academic position. Faculty need to give a pragmatic form—through both informal mentoring and more structured workshops – to our insistence that there are many worthy ways to exercise the skills our students have acquired. And we need to mean it when we say it. The nuanced strategies for synthesizing evidence; the analytical skills that long, concentrated looking brings; the ability to make connections that no one else would have thought of: these are habits of mind that can be adapted to any number of positions. Employers will be happy to have you.

In the meantime, plunge in. Take intellectual risks. Be generous to your fellow students; you will be repaid tenfold. Be especially kind to the first year students; you may have forgotten how terrified you were at the beginning. If you are struggling, come talk to one of us. It's true that we have our own preoccupations and worries. We are all haunted by blown deadlines. But like you, we are working to sustain a belief in a collective enterprise whose benefits can greatly outweigh the costs, as long as we play the long game.

*Susan Sidlauskas spent a total of eight years as a graduate director at the University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers University. She is the author of *Body, Place and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (2000), and *Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense* (2009), the winner of the 2010 Motherwell Prize from the Dedalus Foundation. She has recently published essays on the medical portrait, which will be part of a book on nineteenth-century medical photography called *The Aesthetic as Evidence*, and is writing a book on Sargent's later portraits called *John Singer Sargent and the Physics of Touch*. She was a 2014 Guggenheim Fellow.*

**Notes**

I want to thank the editors of the *Rutgers Art Review*, Stephen Mack, Hannah Shaw and Kimiko Matsumura for inviting me to write this essay, which I hope has done at least some of what they'd intended, which was to humanize the current experience of art history graduate students. In particular, I thank Stephen for hashing out some topics with me, and pointing me to the Gawker site, which I mention in the essay. I would also like to thank my friend Ilona Bell, who asked just the right question at just the right time. I also thank the editors for their patience in waiting for this piece. A broken ankle this summer threw a wrench into what was already an overly optimistic schedule of writing and research.

1. Hamilton Nolan, "The Horrifying Reality of the Academic Job Market," May 17, 2016, accessed May 19, 2016, <http://gawker.com/the-horrifying-reality-of-the-academic-job-market-1776914525>.

2. <https://sites.google.com/site/arhistorythat/home>.