

DISRUPTION AT THE FOUNDRY

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Last summer, having come across the word *disruption* a number of times in a relatively short period of time, I began to wonder: Who or what was responsible for the proliferation of the word *disruption*, and what was its application? I was prompted to read about Clayton Christensen. It was the May 2012 *New Yorker* profile about the Harvard professor and businessman by Larissa MacFarquhar. The piece is called “When Giants Fail: What Business Has Learned from Clayton Christensen.” Maybe, I thought, he was the source.

The first time that I noted the use of the word was when it appeared to promote a new academy that was in development at USC’s Roski School of Fine Arts and Design, where I am currently a member of the faculty. The tagline for the James Iovine and Andre Young Academy reads: “The Degree Is in Disruption.” The second time I saw the word appear in an unexpected context was in Alice Gregory’s *New York Times* Art Market blog entry from October 2013, titled “A Home Furnishings Visionary Takes on High Culture.” Gregory’s post discussed Restoration Hardware CEO Gary Friedman’s plans to “rebrand” the corporation as “RH.” As RH, the company was planning to undergo an “omnidirectional expansion”¹ into “a platform that includes an interactive

website, blending e-commerce and editorial [sic]; a print journal; a series of short documentaries; a residency program; and, yes, a Manhattan gallery.” The post begins:

After upending the home design market with his democratizing strategy of good taste for the masses, the Restoration Hardware guru Gary Friedman is now betting he can do the same in the rarefied world of art. Will he disrupt or be disrupted?

The example of Friedman moving from the mass-produced marketplace of restored hardware to that of a “rarefied world of art,” reminds me of an entirely different attempt by an artist, in 1935, to move between specialized fields. I am thinking of the anecdote about Marcel Duchamp that Seth Price tells in his essay “Dispersions.”² Price recounts Duchamp’s failure to sell his rotorelief optical toys at an amateur science convention decades before he was to receive widespread fame for his other “inventions”—or possibly even *disruptions*—as the readymade entered that rarefied world. Apart from the humor and pleasure I take in linking Duchamp to Friedman based on their shared interest in “hardware” of a different stripe, it is more for the propositional affects of Duchamp’s brush with the amateur science convention that

I raise the point. Within the context of Price's essay, he cites Duchamp as an example of a dispersion—of an attempt to insinuate oneself into culture so quietly and without notice that the value of one's work all but disappears and is dispersed into the flow of everyday life—be it capital, cultural capital, or both. Marcel Duchamp . . . did he disrupt or get disrupted?

The word *disruption*, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is defined as “the action of rending or bursting asunder; violent dissolution of continuity; forcible severance.” While this definition holds in the general sense, *disruption* and its *theory* in the 21st century are defined quite differently. After seeing Gregory's rhetorical question about whether or not RH's Gary Friedman would “disrupt or be disrupted,” I went looking for more contemporary definitions of the word. This is how I found myself looking back to the May 14, 2012 issue of *The New Yorker* to read about Christensen and his theory of disruption. It is worth noting that while Christensen's ideas constitute a theory, the word *disruption* as a single-word entity has come to represent his theory in popular culture.

In Christensen's book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, he sets out to understand a common business phenomenon: How can large successful companies be leaders in their field one year, only to be struggling to compete the next? Why is it so difficult for a business to sustain its success?

As a case study of this phenomenon, Christensen examines the steel industry's transition from so-called integrated mills to minimills and how the once-dominant technology has all but disappeared. An integrated mill can pull large steel plates, high-end products like those used to

supply automobile manufacturers or to make appliances. An integrated mill can also pull low-end products such as concrete reinforcing bars, commonly known as rebar; but rebar manufacturing is peanuts for them since it is essentially low-grade scrap metal, the manufacture of which does little to bolster company pride or ownership, let alone big capital gain. The minimill, by comparison, makes its product by melting scrap in furnaces. The technology is cheaper and the product is less glamorous, but the minimill reduces the cost of making its sheet steel by 20 percent, compared to an integrated mill. Minimills can generate rebar cheaper and faster and since the minimills are considerably smaller, companies can have several of them on a lot to increase productivity. Even with all the benefits of minimills, owners of integrated mills were reluctant to build them, let alone replace one technology with the other.

The result of this reluctance, Christensen points out, is that all but one of the integrated steel mills went bankrupt by the late 1970s. But this is not the part of the story that matters. Where things get interesting is in 1979, the year the minimills successfully drove out the last of the integrated mills due to the sale of rebar. And it is what happens next that proves Christensen's theory of disruption. For it is when a down market (rebar) no longer has an up market (sheet steel) to disrupt, or vice versa, that you enter the realm of Christensen's innovator's dilemma: rather than innovate up, keeping a close eye and ear to what a company's customers will want and need in the future and innovating that exact product, the innovator, in order to remain successful, must instead exercise “downward vision,”³ which is, perhaps, a counterintuitive model—hence the dilemma.

After studying a few exceptions to the pattern of disruption, Christensen concluded that the only way a big company could avoid being disrupted was to set up a small spinoff company, somewhere far away from headquarters, that would function as a start-up, make the new low-end product, and be independent enough to ignore what counted as sensible for the mother ship.

Disruption as a business approach, in other words, is a model of management and a model of creating a new low-end product to compete with a high-end product, thus disrupting an “over served”⁴ consumer market with an inferior and less expensive product to replace and undermine the value of the existing product. Disruption theory was most commonly embraced in Silicon Valley, hence, an iPhone’s disruption of the telephone company’s land line and phone messaging service, or, more recently the cloud for the hard drive.

Christensen’s theory is also exemplified in practices emerging in the Academy. *The New Yorker* piece covers Christensen’s brush with the MOOC or Massive Online Open Courseware. Harvard rented a picturesque auditorium at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and filled the otherwise empty seats with models and actors and then so seamlessly edited video footage of Christensen delivering a lecture that even he was surprised by how captivating a speaker he could be. While a strong argument can be made for MOOCs’ greater educational reach both at home and around the world, there is also no denying that “distanced learning” offerings such as online classes and recorded lectures are better and *cheaper* business practice than professors in a classroom. MOOCs open new revenue streams. The reach is farther, the aims are noble, the learning is fast and cheap,

and the brand of education advertises itself. Who wouldn’t want a certificate degree from an Ivy League school? The degree is in disruption.

ANVIL AT THE FOUNDRY

The architect Charles Babcock built Cornell’s Foundry building in 1883. Babcock was elected the first professor of architecture at Cornell in 1871, and for this reason it can be said that he was the founder of the now prestigious College of Architecture, Art, and Planning. Cornell’s website says:

The Foundry is reminiscent of the row of mechanical service buildings which once lined the edge of the gorge. Also, it initiates expansion of the Arts Quad by way of a second perimeter or layer of buildings. This long, wooden, one and a half story structure, with monitor windows, serves as studio space for Fine Arts students. The monitor windows allow light to flood in from above as well as from the window-lined walls. This wooden shell incases one uninterrupted interior space. The building is a rare example of a small-scale wood industrial building on the University campus and in New York state. The unusual detailing of the fenestration and the use of different materials (brick and wood) as exterior walls is unique. The clerestory has interesting proportions and lends interest to the facade. The asymmetrical placement of doors in the pattern of regular windows is an unusual play on the otherwise repetitious elements of the facade.

Last year, Cornell’s M.F.A. director, Carl Ostendarp, requested that The Foundry be renovated to house all of the M.F.A. studios under one roof. When I came for my first visit as Teiger Mentor in February, I was impressed by the building and its repurposing of architecture. Though The Foundry never saw the likes of an integrated mill or minimill, archival images show workers in shop aprons standing before small flame furnaces with anvils in their

midst—evidence of heavy metal, liquid to solid matter, and labor—seems the perfect historic backdrop for an M.F.A. program in the 21st century, where the soft labor of network culture can intersect the heavy lifting of work made by hand in the studio.

In last year's M.F.A. catalog, Chris Kraus quoted John Kelsey's observations about a type of *nue-mobile* artist, stating that "for most artists today, the laptop and phone have supplanted the studio as primary sites of production." Further elaborating on this notion, Kelsey goes on to say, "the poststudio has become the nonsite of production as circulation, with some sort of artist plugged into it."⁵ What Kraus was pointing out by quoting Kelsey's timely remarks was a new kind of cultural condition for the artist; a kind of *disruption* of one set of values for another—the value of the artist in the here and now, *hic et nunc*, or, in this case, for the artist in Ithaca for the artist in absentia, the virtual proxy, the artist and their production as antimatter, as everywhere and nowhere. Standing in stark contrast to this new disruptive model is The Foundry and the 12 M.F.A. students that I have been working with this spring; they gather around The Foundry workshop tables every Tuesday evening to have seminar class and trouble over the topics and readings at hand.

For the catalog this year, I proposed that the group work together around the same table to make an insert—a printed foldout poster to rest in the spine of the catalog or travel outside its range. As such, the insert is to circulate as an autonomous entity that functions as a locus for the M.F.A. students' combined efforts. While the catalog represents each of the artist's work individually, the insert was to represent

the collective whole and demonstrate the mental activities of the group. While the format of the catalog is standardized, the format for the insert was an open-ended inquiry. Interest developed around The Foundry building itself as both a subject and site for individual and group production, and once this was established, The Foundry's internal logic dictated the insert's form, that of its architectural blueprint. The result of this is an insert loosely designed around a translation of units of measurement and spatial allocation into page space, which is graphic space, and finally, once published, "public surface"⁶ space.

PAGING WILDERNESS

In Susan Howe's *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, she quotes often from Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, from 1852. The first time Webster appears is on page seven in a section titled "The Public Eye." The definition is for the word *edit*:

I. *Properly*, to publish; *more usually*, to superintend a publication; to prepare a book or paper for the public eye, by writing, correcting, or selecting the matter.

Later in the book and appearing in a footnote, Howe reveals that "Emily Dickinson owned an 1884 reprint of Webster's 1840 edition. The family owned the 1928 two-volume first edition. Webster, a friend of the Dickinson family, was a resident of Amherst, helped to found Amherst College with Samuel Fowler Dickinson, and served on the board of the Amherst Academy with Edward Dickinson."⁷

Other words that Howe chooses to define are as follows:

EN-CLŌSE. See INCLOSE.

IN-CLŌSE, *v.t.* [Fr. *enclos*; Sp. It. *incluso*; L. *inclusus*, *includo*; *in* and *claudo*, or *cludo*.]

1. To surround; to shut in; to confine on all sides; as, to *inclose* a field with a fence; to *inclose* a fort or an army with troops; to *inclose* a town with walls.
2. To separate from common grounds by a fence; as, to *inclose* lands.
3. To include; to shut or confine; as, to *inclose* trinkets in a box.
4. To environ; to encompass.
5. To cover with a wrapper or envelope; to cover under seal; as, to *inclose* a letter or a bank note.

NOAH WEBSTER:

EX-PRES'SION, (*eks-presh'un*), *n.* The act of expressing; the act of forcing out by pressure, as juices and oils from plants.

2. The act of uttering, declaring, or representing; utterance; declaration; representation; as, an *expression* of the public will. (WD 426)

NOAH WEBSTER:

ER-RO'NE-OUS, *a.* [L.-*erroneus*, from *erro*, to err.]

1. Wandering; roving; unsettled.

They roam

Erroneous and disconsolate. *Philips*.

2. Deviating; devious; irregular; wandering from the right course.

Erroneous circulation of blood *Arbuthnot*. (WD 408)

The three words and their definitions that appear here are taken out of context but are important to Howe's scholarship around the poet Emily Dickinson and her act of refusal to publish during her lifetime.⁸ Howe asserts that Dickinson's writing—and more specifically its form as an object on the page with all its idiosyncratic uses of spacing, dashes, redactions, hashes, crosses, ellipses, and other marginalia—are an academic provocation. Challenging the academic establishment around Dickinson's writing, Howe insists that mainstream publishers of her work domesticated its innovative use of the English language, taming its wilderness and conforming its radicality so as to make it more legible and less disruptive to readers. While Dickinson is celebrated as one of the most innovative English-language poets ever to have lived, the visuality and form of her writing as a primary source of its genius remains obscure and largely hidden from public view or knowledge. Why is this? Would widespread publishing of these materials and their affirmation as legitimate cultural objects disrupt the publishing houses' purchase on prior scholarship?

In an effort then to recuperate the notion of disruption away from destructive economic theories of the 20th and 21st centuries and toward more productive means such as Howe's repositioning of Dickinson's writing in its native form, I conclude my writing about the definitions of *disruption* by way of a charge. The charge is for more disruptions of the kind that Microsoft Word's "reference tool" incites when asked by this writer to define the highlighted word *disruption* in 2014:

Meanings:
Disturbance (n.)

Synonyms:
Disturbance
Commotion
Trouble
Interruption
Distraction
Interference
Disorder

If we can take this list of words and combine them with Howe's citation of Webster's definition for *erroneous* in 1840, we have a mobile charge to wander, rove, and unsettle while causing commotion, interference, and disorder. I prefer to think of these definitions outside the top-down model of the corporation's new economic disruption theory and more plainly in the form of an image. Imagine Emily Dickinson and Marcel Duchamp taking a walk outside the The Foundry studios and along some of the gorges in Ithaca, quietly mining new disruptive models that insinuate themselves more slowly than water and are thicker than ice. Something tells me that art in the future will need to both withstand very low temperatures and absorb lots of heat. Pace disruption at The Foundry and enter wilderness.

Shannon Ebner was the spring 2014 Cornell Teiger Mentor in the Arts.

1 "And the brand formerly known as Restoration Hardware is not stopping at the art world. There are other bold and novel aspirations on the horizon too: they are exploring the possibilities of hotels, restaurants, architectural services, a clothing line. Last month, RH Music, which, so far at least, seems to have its sights on mostly young singer-songwriter types, celebrated its start with a private show at the Highline Ballroom in New York City, and then a concert at the Greek Theatre at the University of California, Berkeley."

2 distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2008.pdf.

3 businessweek.com/chapter/christensen.htm.

4 techerunch.com/2013/02/16/the-truth-about-disruption/.

5 2013 Cornell M.F.A. catalog, *Anomalous Documents*.

6 Jacques Rancière, "The Surface of Design," from *The Future of the Image* (London and NY: Verso, 2009), p. 91.

7 Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness of American Literary History* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 138. Page images used by permission.

8 For extensive research on the subject of Emily Dickinson's publishing history, consult note 7 for Howe's *Birth-Mark*, as well as Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 1985).