

LESSON 3.5

Perfection is the enemy of completion.

We mentioned this before when discussing the Creative Habitat and the need to “turn down the pressure” on yourself, but this problem is so pervasive and so crippling to the creative process that it warrants its own section. What’s The Problem? Perfection.

Perfection is a voice that creeps up while you’re working on a project and whispers over your shoulder, “that could be a little bit better.” It sounds like the voice of a friendly coach, so you listen. You keep re-working and polishing, and your piece does get a little bit better, in smaller and smaller increments. There’s some movement towards this quest for an ideal, and it feels important—until you realize hours or days or weeks have passed you by and you haven’t actually completed anything.

Hey wait, I think you’re off base here. We should always be striving to do our best. Why do anything halfway? Don’t we owe that to the causes we are working on?

Sure, but we have to ask ourselves: what best serves the cause? And what cause are we serving? Within the world of art there’s all kinds of myths and distortions around perfection and craft. For one, mythical artists are magical people who make things perfectly the first time, or if not the first time, inevitably through their relentless pursuit of perfection. These myths of perfection and commitment are lauded, way past the point when they are helpful or even healthy.



Such was the case with Jay DeFeo, a Beat-era painter in San Francisco. DeFeo started working on a painting called “The Rose” in 1958. When she started, the painting was nine feet tall; it eventually grew to eleven and a half feet tall and seven and a half feet wide. DeFeo worked on it in her apartment, adding layers of paint and reworking it, for *eight years*. In 1966, the painting weighed close to 2000 pounds and had eleven inches of paint on its surface. She called it quits—for the time being—only because she was being evicted from her apartment, and her painting was so large and so heavy that movers had to carve out a two foot section of the wall below her window so that it could be removed with a crane. “The Rose” was moved to the Pasadena Museum that year, but DeFeo was still not done. She got a key to the museum so she could continue working on the painting adding “final touches” at all hours. The story of “The Rose” was told with

EXERCISE 3.D

PRACTICE ‘TIL IT’S IMPERFECT

TIME: 10 MINUTES

Because we often strive toward perfection, sometimes we need to force ourselves to be imperfect. That’s the point of this exercise.

1. Think of an social issue you’re interested in creating a piece around. You can draw from a previous exercise and extend your work on that issue, or come up with a new one.

2. Set a strict time limit: 10 minutes

3. Open your sketchbook and come up with 10 (yes, 10!) ideas for an artistic activist pieces that addresses your issue.

Look closely at what you have. Though we can’t actually see your ten ideas, we bet a couple of them are are pretty good, maybe

even exciting—the kernel of something you can move closer to completion.

There’s no way to come up with 10 perfect ideas in 10 minutes, which is why we had you try.

reverence to Lambert when he was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute as an exemplar of an artist with incredible commitment to her work; an artist in search of perfection. What wasn’t mentioned in the aspirational tale of Jay DeFeo was that, at the end of that eight years of painting, her career had lost its momentum, her health and marriage were in poor shape, and she was depressed and drinking. Yes, DeFeo was committed to “The Rose”, but the commitment was misallocated. She had lost perspective.

Let’s look at a counter example: the Kingsmen. Even if you don’t know the band you’ve probably heard their early 1960s recording of the rock classic, “Louie Louie.” It won a Grammy Hall of Fame Award and *Rolling Stone* listed it as the fourth most influential recordings of all time and it’s still played ‘s still played regularly on the radio, in movies and on TV shows. The song is so popular because it is intense and lazy at the same time, there’s an undeniable drive to the rhythm, a casual ease to the playing, and has exuberant shouts in the background. It’s a good time. Find it on the Internet, give yourself a break from reading and go listen to it.

Great song!



Yeah, but it’s not perfect. There’s a mistake on the recording—an obvious one. Following the guitar solo, singer Jack Ely comes in two measures early. After two halting words, Ely quickly realizes his mistake and stops short. The drummer also notices and adds an extra fill to lead the band back into the verse. Today, this kind of mistake would be relatively simple to correct using sound studio software. “Louie Louie,” however, was recorded in just one take in 1963. We like to imagine the conversation that happened after the tape stopped. “Jack screwed up. Do we do it again?” Maybe it was the constraint of the fifty dollar fee they had scraped up to pay for the recording. Maybe they felt they couldn’t get a better take. Or maybe it was something else. But

EXERCISE 3.E

‘THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

TIME: 30 MINUTES

The goal of this exercise is to get you thinking inside the box. Figuratively and literally. It’s about creating within constraints in order to generate new ideas.

1. Take out your sketchbook and something to draw with.
2. Think of an artistic activist piece that would like to do, have done in the past, or that someone else has done and you’ve admired.
3. Draw a picture of what that piece would look like if:
 - It has to happen with one person or, if that’s how it was originally conceived, one hundred people.
 - It takes place on a busy street, a silent meadow, or at sea.
 - You are forced to work with your adversary.
 - You only have 1/10th of the budget you were counting on.
 - It has to take place within a large cardboard box.

You can draw more than one image for each prompt. The more the better actually. None of these pieces will be perfect, many may not work at all, but that’s the point. Working within constraints forces us to think in novel ways in order to escape the boxes we are placed within.

You can do this exercise anytime. Make up your own arbitrary constraints and apply them. When you don’t know what to do, when your creativity is at a low ebb, applying constraints can give you new ideas.