

FIVE (MOSTLY HIDDEN) COURSES I WITNESSED
IN SOME CAPACITY WHILST AT ART SCHOOL
by Andrew Berardini

Foreword

Is it found in the smeared pre-school primaries on butcher paper applied plein-air under the loose supervision of Mrs. Warren, as we captured as best we could Nature in the interlocking diamonds on the distant chain link fence and the mangy patch of dying grass?

Is it in the lengthy dissertations of Sandro as he nervously plucked obscure French philosophical phrases from the air with his nervous, birdlike hands to lionize Messrs. Deleuze and Guattari, periodically mixing into his potent brew of Continental theory subtle insults at either one of his many ex-wives or the numerous sworn academic nemeses?

Or can it be found during the crit and the workshop, our hearts and minds spread-eagled, our egos exposed, hopefully shielded in solipsism or craftsmanship, while our fellows, poke, prod, puncture, and pillage our soulful attempts at capital "A" Art?

Where in the graduating grind of modern education from pre-school to grad school is the act, the process, the assignment from which we actually learn to be artists? More exotic specimens of teaching creativity can be found than those few listed above, with quite a few seeming like failed conceptualist party favors or worse chakra tappers at new-agey self-realization retreats.

There are a number of classes I've taken, courses heard about, and assignments turned in that have felt justifiably edifying even sometimes astonishing, but very few of them as far as I can tell train one to be an artist.

There's a general (though quiet) consensus that art can't be taught. James Elkin's even wrote a somewhat curmudgeonly book on teaching art called straightforwardly enough *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, and Howard Singerman's thorough but inconclusive tome *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* deserves a due mention here. (The user reviews on Amazon are pretty darned interesting in both cases, most bagging the modern art school as elaborate balderdash.) Whatever the history, personal or historical, people still go to art school and follow through with their assignments with the expectation that they'll learn how to be an artist, and some even stumble out of those schools as artists (though arguably many may have actually started by walking in that way).

How exactly does one teach another person to be an artist, to have an imagination, or at the very least an imaginative lack of one? To have an innate understanding of how to respond to the human condition of our moment? To create something that can cut through all the thickish bullshit of modern life and its semiotically astute advertisers to do something that is actually meaningful? You can't but help fall back on vague, abstract verities of truth and beauty at this point, though most art likely deals with how slippery those two verities are. Truth and beauty aside, most students are hoping to go to art school and learn how to make great art and barring that at least "make it" as an artist. Any assignments or assigners purporting to teach anyone how to "make it" in art however, should be bound, tarred, feathered and subsequently presented as a senior thesis project touching on the themes of treachery and retribution.

While at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, getting my own seemingly useless Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in writing and in close observation of the school's sundry professors, distinguished visitors, and abused adjuncts, the best I could figure what art school and its assignments could do (and with great success!) is not to teach how to be an artist, but to teach how to act like one.

The list below are not exactly assignments per se, but like all other tasks inexplicitly and secretly assigned in life of learning art, they are likely more consequential than the ones to which we've actually been assigned.

Five (Mostly Hidden) Courses I Witnessed in Some Capacity Whilst at Art School

#1 Openings

Every Thursday, the School of Art would host "openings," exhibitions by mostly grad but sometimes undergrad students, accompanied by the exhibiting students purchasing school-subsidized wine, beer, and water, sometimes laying out tables of food as subtle bribes to lure faculty, staff, and colleagues to linger around their exhibition, forcing some kind of consideration through proximity.

The opening ceremonies also built into them a proximity to power, though much of the action still happened as ever behind closed doors (studio or otherwise), there's was an expectation that you could gauge your own success (at least in conquering the system) by the amount of faculty in attendance at your opening. And if off-campus curators, dealers, or collectors schlepped the thirty miles north of Los Angeles, you could almost guarantee faculty attendance who either aspired to get splashed by the slough over of youthful success or just hankering to feel cosmopolitan. Distinguished off-campus attendees could also easily silence the most dunderheaded of classmates during the

lowliest aspect of art school, the somewhat sadomasochistic event known popularly as “the crit.” (Note: CalArts had one of the most famous of said crits, the aforementioned “Post-Studio” founded by John Baldessari and torch-carried up until recently by Michael Asher, which under his hands became something like 10-hour exercise in endurance where one student would be discussed for the whole time by his/her peers, which sounds to me excruciatingly dull, but has a sort of “getting-your-money’s-worth” ring to it.)

Learning to attend openings at school gives students a working idea about what a goodly amount of Saturdays over the next ten to fifty years will look like. Openings being a form of training for future professional activities part-and-parcel of acting like an artist.

#2 Patronage

A few professors would hook their students up with dealers and curators (or even on the fudgey ethical borderline, collectors), but as far as I could tell this act of generosity rarely transpired at CalArts, though it did with verifiable regularity at other art schools around Los Angeles. Quite a few artist-professors appeared to me selfish in this regard (though often to happy to take the most technically savvy on as nominally paid assistants), even though its quite difficult to get a foothold if somebody older than you doesn’t take an active interest.

But patronage, practically called any number of things, is one of the things that the art world absolutely depends on in various degrees as a by-word for art’s relationship to capital. Most art has, to use Dan Graham’s phrase from “My Works in Magazines Pages,” “difficulty attaining the status of ‘art,’” depending on whether someone with capital spends it. Whether that capital be influence or money, there’s an exchange of it. (Note: I don’t want to make too fine a point about this, cause most everything that makes art great has nothing to do with this junk, but the status, distribution, and promotion of art depends on it, and in talking about how to act like an artist rather than actually being an artist, capital and vaguely sinister terms like “gatekeeper” are a part of that.)

This patronage can be derived from any number of sources, but from what form of patronage one draws from in art school is some kind of flimsy indicator of how an artist will carry out their post-graduate career. Some students who were more expert than the others at capturing grants (from the Javits Fellowship to the Skowhegan Residency for example) but who were perhaps untalented at the actual function of being an artist could almost depend on academic jobs running art departments at second- and third-tier universities, this mastery of bureaucracy preparing them for their exclusively administrative careers. Which is just to say that being able to understand and exploit

different kinds of patronage is built into the structure of art school, ensuring different kind of artistic careers post-graduation.

One artist I know (MFA UCLA) aptly called his graduate education “welfare for artists,” patronage at its simplest and perhaps best.

#3 *Conversation*

The language of contemporary art is one with a specific lexicon, words and phrases come in and out of style depending on the intellectual fashion, but there are a few standbys. Baldessari’s *Terms Most Useful in Describing Creative Works of Art*, 1966 - 68, though modestly dated, is still pretty much in currency. Terms change, semiotics once muscular word of the early ’80s has been delegated to the undergrads (though a conversational knowledge of Roland Barthes is requisite is appears for most everybody) while the current fashions tends towards words like like “practice” and for some newer *au courant* French theoreticians like Jacques Ranciere.

The most famous class in regards to learning how the patter works at CalArts, Michael Asher’s “Post-Studio,” was more a test of endurance than perhaps even an actual conversation. But “crits,” especially Asher’s, were less commentary about one’s work, (which given the limitations of group think, the insights rarely appeared useful) and more a hardcore initiation into the rites and rituals of art speak, or put less pejoratively, the methodology and language of the discourse surrounding contemporary art. The students are likely studying magazines from the New York classics to the academic fringe (available in the library or in special department specific lounges), looking to find a chink, an entry to understanding how it all works and more than ever to learn the patois, the patter. Through the crits, students find a way to internalize this language. The brightest tend to use this language to their own advantage as opposed to becoming a victim of it, which is one starts making art with only the tools of art speak; it’s like watching a dictionary trying to fuck itself, amusingly novel for a few clicks and sort of off-puttingly masturbatory after that.

Learning the parlance of the context can be helpful in navigating what it means to be a working artist in this moment. But this like any other guidelines can be handily ignored if something better comes up. What one learns in school and what turn out to be actually useful don’t always coincide.

#4 *Studio Visits*

As I wrote earlier, much of the action of learning how to act like an artist happens behind closed doors, often in the studio. Thankfully, artists don’t have to have crits post-

school, but they do have to have studio visits. In grad school, they receive some versions of training to act appropriately in these circumstances. Usually visiting artists/critics/curators are paid some amount of money in the low to mid-hundreds (though sometimes higher) to perform the theater of a studio visit. The visitor behaves their version of the rite of the studio visit, from being entirely cagey to asking numerous, invasive questions, from chatting about everything around the work to barking at the artists and telling them what to do.

Though in the purest sense, the performance of the studio visit is talking about ideas, a pure space unsoiled from the sticky fingers of the art marketeer, but it's almost guaranteed that if a visitor gives opportunities to students then they'll be invited to return with the reiterative honorarium which might include a plane ticket and hotel to help sweeten the deal (and most people in the art trade need to come to Los Angeles for example at least every once in a while). This invitation to trawl for talent in the form of a visiting lecture can easily backfire though, the biggest names aren't always the best connected and tend, by the nature of their bigness, to be fairly self-involved, but fancy names add a nice, rich burnish to a program even if they're functionally useless.

#5 "Listening/Seeing"

This last one is the only authentic class that I thought was the best example of a course, a series of assignments, to teach someone how to act like an artist. The course description is the kind that makes CalArts so strangely attractive:

F 456 Listening/Seeing

4 units

Each week a different location (either urban, rural, or wilderness) will be visited for the purposes of listening and seeing. At the end of the visit the class will meet within the location to discuss what each has individually experienced. Attention will be given to how the experiences of listening and looking can translate into the making of images and sound. A written journal is required to document what has been heard and seen, and each student will be required to do extensive research on one of the locations visited. Some of the specific sites are: an oil field, emergency hospital waiting room, Death Valley, the Los Angeles Port in Long Beach, San Fernando Road, and 29 Palms military base.

• Permission of instructor required.

Taught by filmmaker James Benning under the auspices of the School of Film (not Art), this course attempts to teach something which I think is invaluable to an artist, simply paying attention. As I never took the class, I only have the half-garbled memories of classmates of mine coming back starry-eyed, wandering back to their writing tablets and

studios dripping with a spectral overflow of inspiration. In practice, it may even be different than what I imagine it, but I am inspired by its example.

Arguably a little hippie-ish and poetic, but a far cry better than the faux-professional course also taught at CalArts called “Getting Your Shit Together” which ostensibly teaches you how to be a *professional artist* and whose real purpose as far as I can tell is to calm the fraying nerves of students approaching graduation and the debt notices from their student loans which arrive shortly thereafter.

Benning’s “Listening/Looking” class appears to give one a space in which simply keeping your eyes and ears open is important. Applicable of course to filmmakers trying to find a decent location, but I think useful to almost everybody. Whether the post-grad artist’s practice is defined by closed circuit art references, studio games, or all out craftiness, or even whether the student goes on to be something that has nothing to do with art, listening and looking with keenness and clarity seems a gift and a rare one.

I’d argue that besides all the laughable rites and rituals one undergoes in art school to teach the dubious skill of how to act like an artist, this class and classes perhaps like it, teach what I think is a really important thing, awareness, to see and hear what most people miss and perhaps even to see what is not yet there, to see what is possible.

Though no one can teach you to be a visionary, it is possible however to teach someone that having vision is important.

Postscript

Though it’s easy to discuss art education with a certain amount of jokey cynicism, this experience for many can be less insufferable than I’ve characterized. Through individual actions of teachers, friendship of fellow students, and just life going along on its petty pace whilst one is in school, art school can be life changing in all kinds of indecipherable and almost impossible to calculate ways. I do believe that awareness (like perhaps the kind that Benning attempts to teach) is really important and can possibly be taught, if the teacher is willing to teach it and the student willing to learn it.

If art school can do anything besides add a polish and a routine to a would-be professional, it can reveal that the world (and art by extension) is full of possibilities, to which one only has to be aware. The diamond pattern of the chain link fence takes on a psychedelic perspective, reading too much philosophy can give one a mystical feeling, and perhaps standing in the middle of a studio surrounded by bored and sallow classmates, something clicks and the you realize that you’ve been doing it all wrong or

better yet, all right. Awareness is an epiphany, which with luck, someone out there, perhaps even an assignment can teach you.

What is the moment, the assignment, the heuristic to use the parlance of the education trade, that transforms one from a lump of unstudied, unshapen clay into the muscularly rigorous and whimsically imaginative contemporary artist, equipped like an aesthetic ninja for the twenty-first century?

You know, we had a saying, uh, that those who can't do teach, and those who can't teach, teach gym. And, uh, those who couldn't do anything, I think, were assigned to our school.

—Alvy Singer in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

If you're worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise old fish explaining what water is, please don't be. I am not the wise old fish...

[This joke really] is about simple awareness - awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: "This is water, this is water."

—David Foster Wallace

I seriously debated including this note as this speech has been released as a book post-DFW's suicide, marketed heavily during the graduation season of May and June alongside Dr Seuss' *Oh! The Places You'll Go!*, meaning its become one of those stand-by educational bromides. Despite it's descent into graduation kitsch, its message is useful and, in basic, can be read as life is often very difficult, don't be too much of an asshole, and please try to be more aware. As well as DFW simply being by my lights an awesome writer, this message seems apropos here (a conversation about art and assignments) about what can and cannot actually be taught.

It's not such a bad thing to me that more and more people aspire to be artists (either through craft or theory), in a way almost any human activity I think can benefit from being done more artfully, but it still goes back to the fact that most people I know don't think art can be taught. It does beg a number of questions, if true, what is art school for? And, what does an artist do that's so special it can't be taught? How do you teach someone to be playful, imaginative, and aware? How do you teach someone to see things that aren't yet there? How does one accomplish the difficult task of breaking the

students out of the habits of their minds, out of the habits of conventionality, status quo, and conformity so that they could find the gaps and problems in art, culture, and society in their own time and address them as only an artist can, with originality and vision?