

School Is Out

RETHINKING ART EDUCATION TODAY

Introduction by STEVEN HENRY MADOFF

In recent years the role of the art school has moved to a position of prominence, pushed there by the encroachments of an aggressive marketplace and the professionalization of every aspect of the artworld, from the dominance of gallery and museum brands, to the cultural tourism of art fairs and biennials, to today's art itself now so often created precisely for the scale, spectacle, and capitalization of these events.

Under such pressures, art education has become the subject of widening debate, raising a range of issues and questions. To whom should the academy be responsible? Presumably to its students and faculty. But what about to its local community, as a social stakeholder? To the global community, on which it makes its mark as a moral authority or as a talent factory? Should the art school be a research center that enlightens conceptual practices while de-emphasizing skills, or a course of study in entrepreneurship, presentation, strategic thinking, and other matters to prepare young artists for the ruthlessness of the market? Or is art school in the 21st century simply the physical surrogate of MySpace and YouTube—the spawning ground as social network?

Of course there are numerous ways to answer these questions and many others—and a range of conferences and publications attests to this. As an outgrowth of my involvement with a series of international symposia sponsored by the Anaphiel Foundation in Miami, I recently brought together two of the most distinguished artists and art teachers alive today, John Baldessari and Michael Craig-Martin. Their conversation captures some essential lessons from their experiences over 30 years at CalArts and UCLA, and Goldsmiths College in London, respectively. And in their voices we hear the seriousness, wisdom of hindsight, and risible memories of two old pros whose improvisations and practicality still shed light on the issues facing art schools now. Lane Relyea lays out many of these with vehement clarity (and more than a few moments of *j'accuse*), describing exactly what is at stake in this continuing conversation, and what alternatives are in play to rehabilitate the noble, broken, and endlessly malleable legacy of art education. One of the more interesting questions concerns the very nature of the academy: Do we even need this centuries-old institution anymore? Claire Bishop suggests that the very concept of the art school is being eroded by new initiatives that artists and collectives are establishing—initiatives as fluid, itinerant, and potentially expansive as the artworld itself.

Conversation between JOHN BALDESSARI and MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN

MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN: It seems to me the most important thing about art school is the creation of a sympathetic ambience, in which people feel comfortable and free to act according to their own instincts. You have to make a place where people feel at ease to be who they are, and bring what they have naturally in themselves to bear.

I think that's also true for the people teaching there, and the more students are put into a situation where they're at ease, the more successful the experience can be. You can't make it successful, but you can create circumstances where these things can happen.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I totally agree. You have to set up a situation. You can't teach art; that's my premise. When CalArts started—I don't know how it was at Goldsmiths—we just eliminated grades. We had pass/fail. You can't use grades as a punishment, to force students to attend class or do this or

that. They are there of their own free will. We also had no curriculum. In other words, you chose from a menu and made up your own dishes.

One thing I worked very hard on at CalArts was to try to provide a sort of aesthetic ambience that wasn't already present in Los Angeles. So I purposely avoided inviting any LA artists to join us. The faculty were all pretty much from New York. And I started an active visitors program of mostly European artists, who would do shows or work with the students or whatever.

But basically you're acting like Cupid, trying to make relationships between the artists. I tried to set things up where something might happen—like I assigned David Salle to drive Daniel Buren around. It might just be dead in the water, but then again, sometimes something happened. It's certainly not just about us as teachers.

MCM: That's what I say; you put something together. I mean, you build a school on the social circumstances that exist at any one time, and schools change in response to what the situation is. Goldsmiths is really a school created in the early '70s by artists who formed their basic ideas in the late '60s.

And it's very interesting, John, what you're saying about the unstructuring of CalArts. These were all the things that we did at Goldsmiths, too. We didn't even have classes, and students weren't attached to anybody in particular. Everyone who taught there was available to every student.

JB: Yeah, comparable to that, we had one guy teaching the equivalent of critical studies, and class was in session whenever you met him on campus [*laughter*], which I thought was really very good.

MCM: The golden period of Goldsmiths was when the people who became so successful just had a chemistry between them. The school, for a relatively short time, was in a particular building in which you had the art library, all the studios, all the workshops, the bar, and the canteen. That was unbelievably useful, a kind of powerhouse of a place where everybody was rubbing up against everybody else. It generated a kind of competitive companionability.

JB: I assume it was open 24 hours, too.

MCM: Yes. You could go there any time at all.

JB: Right. We winked at students living in the studios. They weren't supposed to, but it was a way to supplement their meager existence.

And one thing, too, I think we should look at more is that period of the late '60s and '70s you mentioned. That's when everything seemed possible. Social change, I mean, and art was exciting.

MCM: It was the collapse of authority, of a sense of received ideas, when everything was under question. So naturally art education was part of that questioning. It became possible in Britain to do certain things in education, because all the conventional constraints were put in doubt. And so if you wanted to just ignore them, or undo them, you could.

You can't do that now. I don't know about America. The situation in Britain today would make the kind of school that Goldsmiths was in the '70s unthinkable. It would never get off the table. Somebody would announce the plan, but when everybody stopped laughing, they'd throw you out. And I've always thought that it's not what you teach the students, but that a principal part of the function is to attract the students to come, to bring those people together. That's what creates the school. It's not just that these are great teachers, because sometimes really interesting artists are not the greatest teachers. But if they feel comfortable, and there are people attracted to meeting with them, working with them in some kind of way, that's where a school can shine.

JB: Well, right or wrong, I would say again that you can't teach art, but it might be a good idea to have artists teaching. So at least you have people who profess to be doing something we call art, and it might be interesting to hear what they have to say about it.

MCM: Yes. It's very important to have people whose central world is not the world of education. The great thing about having artists teaching in an art school is that they bring their experience of what it is to be an artist in the world into the school. And so this thing you can't teach, you're teaching by example. You're teaching by your presence. You're teaching because you're sitting at lunch with kids and they're learning as much at lunch, if not more, than they are when you're talking to them in the studio.

JB: Well, you're demystifying the idea of an artist. They're not somebody that's in a book or magazine or museum. They're ordinary people. Now and then they'll do something good. Most of the time they don't. [Laughter.]

MCM: And they're just trying to figure out how to get by.

JB: Yeah, exactly. And you learn that art is not orderly: you don't go A, B, C, D and end up with art.

MCM: Which is why you can't have a proper curriculum. There are no basic things. What's basic for one artist is not basic for another. The amazing thing about young people is that they can jump in at a very sophisticated level, without actually understanding what they're doing. Somehow that innocence also allows them access to something. And so a part of teaching is helping them to realize what it is that they've stumbled on.

JB: Art schools are unlikely bedmates with universities. The university is a home to a physicist or some kind of biotech lab, but it's not a home for an artist. It's a very uneasy alliance. And people on the faculty can never understand why you don't have a Ph.D. They just don't get it.

MCM: I couldn't agree more. When I went to Britain, I was amazed, because there was a whole set of universities and then there was a whole set of art schools. Everybody knew there were things called art schools. It was part of the social fabric of Britain. And they ran parallel to each other. We didn't do the same thing as the kind of education in a university. We were there for all the bright, awkward, and skeptical young people for whom university education was inappropriate. You had these two streams of higher education—it was a brilliant structure.

Then, in 1987 Mrs. Thatcher thought, I'll upgrade all of these pathetic little places that are not universities and make every college in Britain a university. And all of the structures of the university, which were irrelevant and harmful to art education, were put in place. There are hundreds of kids in Britain doing Ph.D.'s—*Ph.D.'s!*—in fine art.

Now what's going to happen is that we're going to end up with schools run entirely by people with Ph.D's, who have no experience of the artworld at all. It couldn't be worse. If you want the highest level research, you need to go to Jeff Wall or whomever. You need people who are out there, in the world, doing what it is that an artist does. That is the equivalent of being a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. Conversely, of course the minute an artist feels a constraint from an institution, if they have any option at all, they're out.

JB: Yes. The only way I got Sol LeWitt to teach was if he didn't have to go on campus—you'd meet off campus. We just hung out in a bar, and that worked. It's like all the planets surrounding you have to line up in the right way: the right students, the right time, faculty, city.

MCM: If you're one of the kids who's in that group, you get an advantage that just as good a student doesn't have three years earlier or three years later. And it's the breaks. There are these strange moments when things can happen.

JB: And you don't know about it until after the fact. An art school will have an incredible reputation for things that happened about five years ago, but you didn't know it back then.

MCM: And then it's changed. Initially I was teaching entirely in order to make a living, and it never occurred to me that I'd spend so much of my life doing it. But then I think that both you and I were people who, once we were doing it, had to make it interesting and enjoyable for ourselves, and so we got engaged in the question of what it was that we were doing.

JB: Well, we had to support ourselves. I tried other jobs, and they were pretty boring. I wanted something that was related to art. I started out as a public school teacher, and slowly, as I went on, thought, if I'm not going to have to commit suicide, I'm going to have to make teaching like art. Or somehow a form of art. And if I could think of it that way—and art is about invention—then how could I make art interesting for myself and not go out of my bloody skull? So I just tried crazy things with the students. I can remember one class when I just put up a map of LA on the wall and some student would throw a dart at it. We would go there for the day with some cameras and just fuck around.

Conversely I learned a lot about art by teaching. You don't teach by lecturing. You try to communicate, and that's not lecturing. You know you made a point when you see the light in a student's eyes—"Oh, yeah, I see." But you don't just tell him and walk away. It's a flirting game.

MCM: I agree completely. I certainly found one of the reasons why I had to stop doing it was because to me teaching is something that has to be done over a long term and increasingly I didn't have the time. I don't really trust one-day teaching. I sometimes said to students, "I could tell you everything I know, everything I could think of saying to you in a day or two. But it wouldn't make any difference, because you'd understand all the words, you'd write it all down, it would all make sense, and it would be absolutely useless to you. The thing you have to do is you have to act it out. I say the things; you act the things out. Over two or three, four years, you say, "Ah, now I know what you meant." They have to find that moment themselves.

JB: I've always been painfully aware that when I'm teaching, I'm not. And when I don't think I'm teaching, I am. Students are watching you. You are teaching all the time, even when you don't know it.

Roy Lichtenstein made a beautiful point once. He said, "You can be in a museum, looking at the best painting in the world. A beautiful woman walks in—what are you going to look at?" [*Laughter.*] But that's very profound. And if you're lecturing in a class and there's a car crash outside, you better bring that car crash into what you're saying, or you've lost them.

MCM: Yes. I don't know how to do something unless I get engaged in it like that. I'm either in or I'm out. I ended up being in for much longer than I ever intended.

One of the issues that's different from when we started teaching is that there are artists these days who become financially independent much younger, without ever having had the experience of teaching. And they are reluctant to become engaged in teaching later on, because they have no experience of it. It scares them, and they think, Why would I bother doing it? And even if they are slightly interested, when they get there they're a bit intimidated, because they don't have the experience, the kind of grassroots experience that people of our generation had.

JB: It's about being terrified, too. CalArts has such a reputation that a lot of artists wouldn't come there because the students would just tear them apart.

MCM: And they would, too. I stopped teaching about seven years ago. I found that I was no longer comfortable in the situation that art education in England presented me with.

Also, my own situation had become distorted because I had become known outside the school as somebody who taught. My relationship with students, from the generation of Damien Hirst and Liam Gillick and those people for whom I had been just another person in the school, had changed. Afterwards, when it became a thing that I'd somehow been involved in the success of that group, everything changed. And I felt very uneasy about it. The question of the market is so far from our original experience.

JB: Yeah. Well, I could see a sea change happening right about the early '80s. Once a year I would invite an art dealer to come to CalArts. I invited Paula Cooper and she was very upset afterwards. Why? Because the students didn't want to know about the artists; they wanted to know about how much money the art was selling for in the marketplace. From then on it was changed. And listen, when parents read about the success of art in the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, kids are no longer going to have a fight with them about going to art school, you know? They'll have a fight about becoming a doctor or lawyer! [Laughter.]

MCM: Yeah. "Why don't you go into something safer, like art?"

JB: So I think the reasons for going to art school have changed now. It's so you can hook into a network. It's a huge marketplace.

MCM: You know, in Britain when Damien curated "Freeze," he was in his second year at Goldsmiths. The kids had no idea about money. They weren't thinking about it. There was no money in the artworld in Britain. It wasn't a central part of Damien's ambition any more than it was anybody else's. But there was an ambition to make work and get it seen quickly—"We're not waiting around for people to come and validate us. We want to engage." That attracted commercial interests quickly.

JB: I don't know. I'm still an idealist. I do think that if you can get a group of really interesting people together, you're going to attract good students. And it'll be sort of like the Frankfurt School in New York, you know? Something might come out of it.

MCM: I think, in all of these changes, at some fundamental level, there's good, authentic art and nongood, inauthentic art. And this has always been the case. There have always been artists who made fortunes who were of zero interest as artists. So the question of there being money in it is a distraction. When somebody can spend a million dollars making something, it's hard not to take it with some degree of seriousness because of how much has been thrown at it. But it's just like the movie industry: it spends a fortune on films that flop. It's not a guarantee. Nothing's ever a guarantee.

JB: I think what is omnipresent is always this cloud over a student's head: "I don't want to suffer to be an artist. I want a family, a home. I want to go out to restaurants. If I can do that, I'll be an artist." The idea of sacrificing to do art, it's not there anymore.

MCM: We used to think in terms of "radical" or "not radical." This is an irrelevant issue now. The question is: How do you come up with something that is identifiable as yours? It's logo-ing. It's branding.

But one of the things that's interesting about art is that it doesn't necessarily follow the obvious, endless trajectory in one straight path. Some kid finds a way of refusing that is so interesting that it undermines all of this other thing.

JB: Exactly, exactly. Because there are going to be people who don't want to deal with it—they want to change it.

MCM: You know, everything at Goldsmiths was made out of a piece of paper, a bit of string, and a bit of old . . . something. And everybody made work out of whatever they could. There was no budget. There was no money. There was no interest in us. We were this dodgy art school at the end of the line. We tried to focus on the things that made us excited to be artists, and we had incredible freedom. But you can't have radical without orthodox. And if there's no orthodoxy, if there's nothing that's the status quo, what do you resist? We had plenty to resist.

JB: Our job, if you can get the kids to talk about this crazy idea in their mind, is to encourage them or say, "That's kind of tired," and see what kind of reaction you get. Or you can lay out to them the whole history of that idea that they think is so terrific, and say, "OK, if you can go somewhere with that, then do it."

I always thought of myself as a facilitator. I might point out to them that they're reinventing the wheel. And they might get to where they want to go faster if I can fill in some information for them.

At CalArts I had a teaching assistant in '70 who had a rubber stamp made that said, NICE IDEA, BUT IT'S ALREADY BEEN DONE BY, and there was a line and you just filled it in. [*Laughter.*]

MCM: You can definitely speed things up. You can bring so much to bear. It would be very difficult to find all of this out if one were out in the world on one's own. An art school is essentially a shortcut. It's a condensing of a certain kind of experience. But a school, certificate or not, cannot authorize someone to be an artist. It's not like going to law school, and the day before you weren't a lawyer, and then you get your certificate and you are.

JB: Well, I think there are some hard lessons we've learned. Certainly a school is not about real estate. It's about the faculty. It's about getting together a group of core people who might be exciting to young artists, so they might want to find out what's afoot. And then you put all that stuff in the pot and see what comes out, and you have no idea what's going to.

MCM: A lot of young people have very sensitive antennae for . . . I would call it "authenticity" in the person that they're talking to. And when they're presented with somebody who they sense has authenticity, it has a lot of impact on them.

We took a criterion that was in us about our idea about art, and we created an education that reflected the values we were seeking in our art. And other people now need to come along with other ideas, the things that are deepest in them about their art. And *they* are the ones who should form the schools of the future, not us.

JB: I don't think any potential MFAs would necessarily be interested in creating a school, but they'd like to be around some artists who were thinking about doing really great art. And if you could be in that situation, then what do you have but an art school? Or you can call it something else. But it's a bunch of people, like some older artists and some younger artists, saying, "Well, let's see. Can't we kind of fuck things up? What can we do?" [*Claps hands once.*] And there you are.