

What Makes an Art School a Good Art School? (2016)

This text was delivered as the keynote speech at Art School Critique 2.0, a symposium at Teachers College, Columbia University, in November 2016. It was originally titled "What Makes an Art School a Good Art School Today?" but, given that my position hasn't changed substantially in six decades (and is unlikely to in the future), it seemed apt to remove the qualifier and thus to conclude this anthology.

What makes an art school a good art school? The question might be translated into, (1) what school would you like to accept you as a student?, and (2) how would the school like you to be in order to accept you? You probably would choose a school that has stars in the art market as faculty, so that the institution is prestigious and the school produces graduates who are successful in that market. The school, on the other hand, will be looking for somebody in whom they see the potential to become a star, so that they can feed into the artist elite. This is achieved by having selection filters that are constantly being perfected.

Both interests, yours and the schools, coincide. The student applies to become a member of the elite circle the school is trying to build—a circle that serves as an increasingly strict filter. Education in all of this is only an accessory. The system is based on bets that use the push and pull of admissions. With this increasing competition, those accepted are probably students who don't need schooling and who would be successful on their own. Meanwhile, those who are rejected are the ones who really need the education. Without caring about individual needs, the educational structure is built to satisfy institutional prestige, market demands, the building of a meritocracy, and often also to nourish the

country's international standing. Therefore it matters to select the best instead of having a policy that betters individuals.

It doesn't matter what social impact one attributes (or doesn't attribute) to art schools. They exist and they are accepted as a fermenting broth in which everybody has to simmer for four or five years before being accepted as an artist. Today most practicing artists are university products, and while you don't need an MFA to exhibit in a gallery, you need it in case you don't make it and have to teach other people who want to go through the process.

This doesn't mean that time in art school is a waste. With the right mentoring, students have the chance to think and imagine freely, to explore unconventionality, and to seek a balance between the personal and the collective. What makes this a remarkable opportunity is that, although they should be, these conditions are not available in other disciplines. Yet since these conditions are not enough on their own to claim academic credibility, art schools have to justify themselves with other trappings to look professional. They had craft training as the original organizing spine, and more recently have become undefined trade schools where one learns the lay of the land and how to move in it.

Within this mixture of making and justifying, we have critique as a tool whose importance has grown to the point of becoming institutionalized and therefore also problematic. Critique is too complex and varied a tool to have a simple discussion about it. The first thing we have to differentiate is public tutoring critique from private tutoring critique.

The public critique is useful inasmuch as it forces students to articulate what they are doing rather than hide under words like "intuition" and other lightproof blankets. The input coming from a

group may open perspectives not visited during the development of the work, and therefore enrich subsequent work. On the negative side, there are things that might not be discussed in public, either because the comments might be humiliating, or because they might infringe on the student's privacy. Other comments might be unrelated to the work, patronizing, and made to show off the critic's superior intelligence.

The private, individual tutoring critique can take two forms: vertical or horizontal. In the first case it is distortive because of an authoritarian relation between student and teacher. In many countries they offer art clinics, a term taken from sports in which the master artist "cures" the deficiencies of the work. But in the horizontal version it becomes a critical dialogue, one in which empathy with the work and the student become the point of departure. Here the interests and the art of the teacher are totally absent from the conversation.

In either case, public or personal, a good critique is dialogical and embedded in any good pedagogy. A good pedagogy is concerned with autodidacticism and the dispensability of the teacher. With this aim in mind, critique should not become a ritual, but a natural dialogue that satisfies the needs of a sane educational process. What becomes important, then, is what questions are being used as a reference or context for this dialogue.

Some of the questions that were meaningful until the middle of twentieth century were: Are references present in the works of art itself or do they have to be discovered somewhere else? The conditions for creation: Do they emerge from the work of art, or do they come about from organizing what one sees, feels, dreams, or from what one expects to land on something we will call a "work of art"? The possibilities emerging from these questions took

turns in producing the stylistic salad that we identify as art history's various isms.

These ingredients contributed to the history of art as we know it, and to our understanding of how art was taught or should have been taught. The linear narrative imposed on art history gave the illusion that there is a certain rational process in its development. One ism seemed to be the consequence of a preceding one and, for a short moment, we were supposed to believe that there was an *intention* of progress. And while there may be some truth in that, since art often refers to art, the idea of progress was nothing more than a burden. It was baggage left over from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and thinking conditioned by science and capitalism. Progress in art doesn't exist: there are only attempts at rupture and changes of points of view, and both the concept of progress and the description of rupture are something very Western and culture-specific. By now, the originality entailed by those ways of thinking is a form of competitive branding rather than a contribution to knowledge.

For us, the more important part of this is that in that period, art dialogue finished in the object. It defined the artist as the producer of acquirable objects. There is nothing wrong with that, but it has consequences that at least should be examined. If we define art within the conditions accepted at that time, we inevitably end up being sellers. This means that our work has to be recognizable as something different from the work of other artists. Those other artists are automatically our competitors. We have to establish a brand for our products and for ourselves as authors: we not only have to be part of the meritocracy, but we have to excel in it. The emphasis on production, status, and sales leads us to want to prove that our intelligence, skills, and

talent are beyond our competitors', and with that we may justify our prices and our egos. That will also make us into the stars that our school wanted, and in that way we'll prove its merits as an institution. But it also will take us to the culturally negative part of believing and making believe that, once we are recognized as artists, everything we do is art. And further, it puts us in an authoritarian position that affects our ways of educating.

At present, in art, we are in the midst of an information boom that has changed paradigms. Though the antecedents may be Duchamp and Magritte, this really started in the 1960s and had already then started to change the relation of artist-work-public. One talks of art as "practice" and the public as a body more active than an audience. Today, social practice is considered a subcategory of art.

Thanks to this change, art started to be accepted as a cognitive process, and the creative process became part of the formulation of problems. Works of art became solutions or answers to problems. Quality control shifted from evaluating the finish to determining the interest of the problem proposed and its possible contributions, to the evaluation of the elegance of the solution in terms of its administration of information, and to the perfection of the relation between the solutions and the conditions that generated it.

Until then, knowledge had been divided into "discursive" and "non-discursive." Artists were reduced to emitting monologues that could be heard or seen. By evading any possibility of deep description, the generalized declaration that art couldn't be systematized to the point at which it could be taught made some sense. However, once the borderline between discourse and non-discourse was blurred, the notions of systematization had to be revised.

Maybe art now *could* be taught: if it couldn't, neither could anything else. Terms like "painting," "sculpture," or "drawing" became restrictions. They were categories insufficient to describe what was becoming a transdisciplinary activity. "What" and "why" took priority over "how," and "for whom" demanded certain respect.

Art as manufacture is clearly also guided by context. In the expressive phase of nineteenth-century Romanticism, it was the subjective context that generated the work and served as a resonance chamber. There is, however, a resistance to accept this, and it comes from the persistent idea that artists are basically "craftspeople plus." The craft can be taught, and the "plus" part is the responsibility of the individual. The acceptance of art as transdisciplinary, and as a cognitive/cultural intervention between problem and solution, seems to be beyond the reach of most schools. That is why there still is an overproduction of painters and other medium-dependent workers. With luck, some of them will produce art. Critique is there to increase the chance, acting during or after the fact and without taking responsibility for helping the beginning.

It's here that I believe that working through the medium *first* may obstruct a student's development. It would be better if art schools educated artists only to use specific media as a last resource: when there is no other option than despair. That is the moment in which one assumes the responsibility of producing a perfect piece by using the indispensable technique. It's only here that the idea of perfection starts making sense. The choice of medium is not decided before the fact, but only when the complete integration of technique, problem, communication, and the context that justifies it are combined. Technical virtuosity in itself is meaningless.

If we consider communication to be an important factor, it becomes clear that we have to be open to as many branches of knowledge as possible. Context cannot be a consequence of ego, but must instead determine the work's resonance once it reaches the public and have a transformational effect on culture, rather than on the market.

In traditional education we tend to consider knowledge as a discrete and closed system that may be endlessly subdivided into units. Ignorance on a basic level corresponds to the absence of known units. Ignorance on a higher level is based on the absence of unknown yet predictable units. This is the rational construct based on scientific and rational thinking. Creativity within this construct is reduced to ingenuity. The results of any of these points may be exhausted through explanation.

When we try to make art, we go a step further. Taking all this into account, we apply creativity to the unpredictable parts of the unknown. It's a limitless, ungraspable, and intoxicating activity. It needs the platform of the known, not to dominate its territory, but to be able to jump over its borders. One may call this area "mystery," but it has nothing to do with obscurantism. Since it's unknown, it obviously cannot be taught. It's similar to the process of discovery. You cannot teach what is to be discovered.

This, however, does not mean that either art or discovery should remain untouched by education. On the contrary, education in art should enable the process of discovery and creation. Therefore the question is not whether art can be taught, since it distracts us from our task. The real question is whether a person can be taught to be an artist. And when it's put this way, the answer is yes, just as it would be for a chemist or a physicist. When asked if it is possible to teach someone to be a chemist,

nobody understands this to mean: "Can somebody be taught to earn a Nobel Prize in chemistry?" Yet when asked if it is possible to teach someone to be an artist, the answer carries the embedded expectation that the artist emerging from that education will create work that enters museum collections. As a consequence, the process of selecting art practitioners—from primary school onward—has been to identify a few candidates with promise and then give them a monopoly over the activity. It's like deciding that only those who dream well should be allowed to dream.

I studied art during the 1950s, in a school modelled after the nineteenth-century French academy. I was accepted because I had some skill with clay, and during my five years there I was never given any other reason. Firstly, I learned to copy Roman busts. The idea was well intentioned. I would probably come to understand how volumes worked, how there are no ruled surfaces in a face, and how its intersections are non-Euclidean and complex. Unfortunately, nobody told me that. The only requirement was that I render faithfully. Then I copied real heads, and finally I was allowed to make nude figures. Progress was measured by precision and increasing scale. My reaction, and that of my classmates, was frustration. We became interested in alternative curricula, particularly those inspired by the foundation courses of the Bauhaus. We got involved in pedagogy, curricular design, and education in general. We reformed the school, although the changes weren't too successful. We overlooked critiques. Today, six decades later, the school cannot claim success, but I wouldn't blame it on the lack of systematic critiques. I am, by now, skeptical about curricular reforms and about teaching in general. Curricula try to protect students from bad teaching.

Teaching is contingent on what the teacher knows, and not on the student's ability to learn. Teaching is static and authoritarian.

So I ask myself what I would like from an art school, if I were to apply today. Given my age, my needs are probably outdated, but it's a good exercise anyway.

1. Rather than be trained as an erudite person, I would like to learn how to access information and organize it in a fluid way so that it always adapts to my needs.
2. Since information is infinite, I would like to be able to manage configurations and dissimilar orders, coding, and decoding, so that I may communicate better whatever I want to communicate.
3. I would like to face disorienting dilemmas rather than situations with one solution. I want to be able to make unpredictable decisions in a continual process of learning.
4. I want to formulate problems with rigor and precision rather than be presented with problems that have already been solved.
5. I would like to learn what forces and interests determine a canon and how to challenge it in order to create my own system of quality control.
6. I want to use art as a way of looking at the world and not as a way of looking at art. I will need sociological and anthropological perspectives to understand the context in which I move.

7. I want to be precise in the transition from discovery (or from work I do without knowing what I'm doing) to the utilization of that discovery for communication.
8. I should learn manipulation: how I'm being manipulated and how to manipulate others. I will need to know advertising techniques.
9. I will need psychology to know how to organize my information and stimuli in order to reach my public.
10. I will have to explore ambiguity and how to avoid misunderstandings.
11. I would like to study the history of art, but starting from the present and working backwards. I want to be conscious of my projections onto works of art. I want to understand the conditions that made the works unavoidable and indispensable, and I want to be able to decide which are and which are not relevant for us today.
12. I want to learn techniques in relation to the problems I'm exploring. They may exist or I may have to invent them. I want to be able to do the work myself, or to delegate and supervise it in an informed way. I don't want existing techniques to limit me or to act as my enemies.
13. I want to work in and with art as a form of higher thinking that allows me to formulate and solve problems.
14. I want to be a competent craftsman only when it's needed.

15. I want to be ecologically sensitive, meaning not only in terms of physical and chemical pollution, but also in terms of the ethical consequences of my work. I will only keep those works that I consider indispensable, and destroy the others.

And yes, I would want to do this learning within a true and congenial community that gives me honest feedback and hones my skills in learning, listening, and articulating. If somebody wants to call this part "critique," so be it.