

Post-Post-Studio Art

The Next Generation of Artist-Teachers

Rebecca Sprowl

Abstract

When the concepts of dematerialization and the devaluation of the art object became foundational principles in Conceptual art, a discourse around what and how to teach artists arose. John Baldessari even proclaimed that art could not be taught and students were better off using their tuition money to rent a studio space. This shift resulted in the formation of the Post-Studio Art program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), which replaced practical skill learning and medium specialization with a focus on theory, mentorship, and group critique. While Baldessari sought to demystify the artist by exploring their thinking processes, Michael Asher sought to demystify art through logic and critical analysis. The program greatly impacted some members of what came to be known as the Pictures Generation of artists and the “CalArts Mafia,” many of whom also became university art teachers. Although the ideologies behind the Post-Studio program are tied to their time and place, and many students returned to using traditional media after leaving the school, a conceptual spirit persisted in their work. Former students from the 1970s and 1980s reflect on their time at CalArts in interviews with the author and reveal how their experiences in the Post-Studio Art program informed their philosophies on art education. Specifically, they discuss their views on the debatable necessity for skill-based instruction, their methods of group critique, and their approaches to course design.

Keywords

art pedagogy – CalArts – Post-Studio Art – Conceptual Art – group critique – course design – Barbara Bloom – Matt Mullican – James Welling – Ericka Beckman – John Miller – Stephen Prina – Meg Cranston – Sam Durant

1 Introduction

The American Conceptual art era of the late 1960s brought about a reevaluation of the art object which filtered its way into art education. The Post-Studio Art course at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) served as one of the laboratories for Conceptual art educators to explore the notion of dematerialization. Their dedication to this experiment was signified in part by John Baldessari's 1970 *Cremation Project* where he burned all his paintings made between 1953 and 1966 in the summer before the first classes began. The concept of devaluing the art object informed the use of teaching methods outside of practical skill instruction and placed a greater focus on analysis and exposure. In turn, specialization in a specific medium like painting or sculpture was generally discouraged. In Eric Fischl's book *Bad Boy: My Life On and Off the Canvas*, the former student voiced that he felt that CalArts had a narrow vision for the future of art, one that distanced itself greatly from the art and techniques of the past. As a painter, many Post-Studio students were critical of Fischl's use of such a traditional form of artmaking. He stated,

These students believed that craft-based art making, especially painting, was passé, that the idea behind an artwork is more important than its actualization, and that in some cases the idea per se—as expressed in performance or a written set of instructions—is the artwork. (Fischl & Stone, 2013, p. 55)

Baldessari founded the Post-Studio Art program at CalArts in 1970 for students who wanted to work outside of traditional media. With its strong roots in Conceptual art, the course naturally took on a non-authoritative structure that served as a think-tank for students to develop their practices and learn to be artists. Therefore, pedagogical methods like group critique, mentorship, peer learning, and experiential learning were employed. Baldessari consistently used a Socratic method of questioning to challenge students' definitions of art and activate their inner skepticism. In 1976, Michael Asher began his own Post-Studio Art course in parallel to Baldessari's. His version of the course was serious and academic with a concentration on theory and interdisciplinarity. Asher was clear on his views that education in general was overspecialized and many of his students agreed that learning should not happen in such a compartmentalized manner. Echoing the pedagogical values of Asher, former student Mike Kelley stated,

I especially disapprove of specialization in art education on the graduate level. I am not against having technical courses to learn certain skills. But I

do not think discourse should be defined by discipline. Higher education in the arts should focus on theory, history, and discourse. (Sholis, 2009, p. 312)

Many former students were influenced by their time in the CalArts Post-Studio Art course. To gauge this impact, eight research participants were interviewed who were taught and mentored by John Baldessari and/or Michael Asher at CalArts, all of whom went on to have successful careers as both professional artists and university art instructors. The artists include Barbara Bloom (CalArts student from 1970–1972), Matt Mullican (1971–1974), James Welling (1971–1974), Ericka Beckman (1974–1976), John Miller (1978–1979), Stephen Prina (1978–1980), Meg Cranston (1984–1986), and Sam Durant (1989–1991).¹ The interviews sought to reveal how their CalArts education affected their later artistic and pedagogical practices and how the institution helped to shape their outlook on art education. Some of these artists from the early years went on to infiltrate the New York City art scene, earning them the label of the “CalArts Mafia,” while others fall under the umbrella of the Pictures Generation due to their fondness for exploring and critiquing mass media imagery and popular culture. The Post-Studio Art instructors considered their students to be already artists, which helped to accelerate many of their practices. However, some former students found being thrust immediately into the role of artist challenging as they had yet to find their niche.

2 Skill-Based Learning

The 1987 exhibition titled *CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)* highlighted some common characteristics that ran through the work of early CalArts alumni. In the publication produced with the exhibition, former student Mark Stahl noted, “behind this diversity there lies an operative objective tendency. A conceptually ‘cool’ attitude is shared by these artists, and it is strong evidence of the profound influence of CalArts’ faculty” (Lord et al., 1987, p. 12). They not only shared tendencies toward the use of text and appropriation and a generally rebellious aesthetic, but many former students also returned to using traditional media like painting. In other words, they resurrected the art object destined for the gallery. Although their objects were still clearly informed by the Post-Studio philosophies, demonstrating that the students reinvested their conceptual education into their work, they were still a notable change from the ephemeral performances and video work that was common at the school. Baldessari explained,

My theory is that the ideas that were around then—borrowing freely from popular culture, documenting ideas and processes, exploring the relationships between words and images—these ideas were subsequently applied by some of my students to painting. Instead of using film or video or performance, they used the ideas and made paintings out of them. (Hertz, 2003, p. 77)

Neither Baldessari nor Asher felt it necessary to explicitly teach practical art-making skills during Post-Studio lessons. To them teaching how to make a well-crafted object was not teaching how to make art.

Although countless alumni went on to have successful art careers, some initially left CalArts feeling uncertain about how to move forward. Stephen Prina recalled only being given the opportunity to teach art history for the first few years of his career because he was considered a Conceptual artist and therefore thought to have no discernible skills to share with art students. Similarly, James Welling discovered that it was difficult to make a living as a Conceptual artist because it was not popular with most galleries and found that to break through the confines of his art school experience he had to make an “effort to unlearn the lessons of Conceptual art” (Spira, 2013, p. 33). He began by working with watercolors before committing himself to photography and views his time at CalArts as a preparatory phase in his work, which challenges the “already artists” position taken by the Post-Studio instructors.

Like many others, James Welling primarily used video as his medium at CalArts. However, he expressed that several former students from the early 1970s later realized that areas like painting “have a currency and a history” unlike video which had only been used in art for about a decade at that time.² Welling feels that working with more traditional media allows for a level of humility and understanding that newer media does not. John Miller was also invested in video art making during his time at CalArts as it was considered a liberating and revolutionary medium in the 1970s. He soon discovered that quality standards for video picture, sound, and editing in the 1980s quickly accelerated, becoming costly and arduous. Therefore, he too, returned to painting and sculpture. However, Matt Mullican, who now uses an extensive assortment of different media in his work—everything from performance to oil sticks on canvas—explained that Post-Studio Art was “not so much about the method but really about what that method means” and “what it means to be an artist independent of any particular way of making art”.

Michael Asher separated technical art skills from knowledge, viewing them as independent entities. He proclaimed that he did not “believe a skills education requires a program since it doesn’t require an intellectual dialogue with

the social and political, but rather a one-way understanding of the application of materials with a goal towards technical expertise" (Peltomäki, 2019, p. 203). Meg Cranston disagrees with Asher that knowledge and skill learning are at odds with one another, as she believes experimenting and playing with materials is also a form of intellectual inquiry. Cranston finds it odd that the Post-Studio instructors were both formally trained in fine art but were not interested in transmitting their practical skill knowledge in their teaching. She never fully embraced the "no information in advance of need" mantra put forth by the Post-Studio faculty and refers to their approach as the "Modernist God model" where the artist-teacher is the "vessel of knowledge". This model was derived in part from Baldessari's philosophy that art was unteachable. Cranston left CalArts needing to self-learn practical skills and when she began teaching decided this was not the best approach to art education. Matt Mullican, on the other hand, fully applied the "artist as the vessel of knowledge" model in his teaching. Although Mullican was never given practical art lessons beyond high school he does not fully dismiss the benefits they can provide, which are to allow art students to see what is possible and acquire a sense of what they enjoy.

Before attending CalArts, Barbara Bloom was already familiar with Conceptual art. She had read some texts by Sol LeWitt and therefore knew from an early age that she did not need to make objects to be an artist. She has never been a painter or sculptor but instead makes works that do not necessitate specific skills. She has noted, "I'm a writer, and probably a novelist, but I found myself standing in the wrong line in some way and inadvertently signed up to be an artist". She also finds inspiration in close readings of films and literature. Conversely, John Miller attended the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) before coming to CalArts which focused heavily on traditional techniques. In the *Skeptical Belief(s)* exhibition catalog, he recalls first-year RISD art students being required to take courses like Lettering for the purpose of training their hand-eye coordination. He stated, "That kind of blinkered imperialism typified the curriculum, its flip side being an ethereal faith in art" (Lord et al., 1987, p. 10). His comment exemplifies the conflict between disdain and simultaneous admiration that an artist of his generation can feel toward Modernist era art education methods.

Erika Beckman was also formally trained as an artist in her undergraduate years in Saint Louis prior to attending CalArts and found it vital to her later artistic and teaching practices. Many of her professors during that time were products of the Institute of Design in Chicago, formerly known as The New Bauhaus, and had absorbed the teachings of László Moholy-Nagy. Beckman found the structured Bauhaus-style instruction she received in drawing, painting, and design to be incredibly important to her work even though she went

on to work in the medium of film. She recalls having to complete every activity in Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color* book on color theory. Color has always been and remains a central factor in Beckman's films, often using it to create contrast against a black-box-theater style background and to augment the game-like atmosphere common in her work. As a teacher, Beckman has used her expertise in color to teach courses that explore the relationship between color theory and film, while using techniques like hand processing, film manipulation, and light filtering.

Baldessari's reasoning for not explicitly teaching practical skills was simpler than Asher's; he personally knew many successful artists who could not draw and therefore saw no reason to include it in his teaching. However, former students like Meg Cranston feel that the act of drawing teaches essential abilities like patience, observation, and tolerance of frustration. Likewise, Ericka Beckman views drawing as an internal thinking process, connecting the mind and hand, and it is an integral step in structuring her artistic process. James Welling feels the act of drawing or taking a photograph is a means to gaining "an understanding of how the physical body relates to the three-dimensional world". He believes "students should grapple with the problem of medium very early in their education" as "any entry point into visual experience is important". Welling had a similar experience to Cranston in having to self-learn technical skills after CalArts, feeling that it set back his photography career by several years. Regardless, in his teaching, Welling advocates for a self-led point of entry where students pursue their interests instead of beginning with specific techniques. Similarly, Stephen Prina avoids prematurely predicting what foundational skills students may need because he wants them to be making art on day one and therefore aligns with CalArts's system of obtaining skills as needed. However, he explains,

I always talk about the importance of developing skills and developing one's familiarity with materials. I've never seen an idea, I've always seen ideas manifested through certain kinds of materials, whether it be text on a page or a block of stone. So, I do not diminish the importance of developing technical skills.

3 Group Critique

In the absence of direct practical instruction at CalArts, the act of group critique rose to fill the void. Therefore, technique lessons and object-making were

replaced with dialogue and debate, resulting in art education at CalArts becoming more about social exchange and idea incubation. Asher, like John Dewey and Marcel Duchamp,² believed that works of art were not complete until they reached the viewer. Therefore, for Asher, both art and art education were social activities, and the educational institution was the provider of the necessary peer group. During critiques Asher expected his students to not only explain their intentions for the work but to also account for the intended viewer reception. He believed that works of art should contain a rational logic that viewers can read and understand, and that self-expressive works are undemocratic because they become removed from culture and placed back in the hands of the artist (Peltomäki, 2019, p. 234). John Miller also strongly believes that art is a social process and the viewer's experience of the work is just as important as the artist's. He thinks the meaning of the work is not created in the studio but when it enters the social sphere. Due to the significance of audience reception, Miller sees group critiques as invaluable to art education as they serve as a way to view art through the eyes of others.

Asher's Post-Studio critiques were not concerned with opinions or the personal motivations behind the work but focused on any area of knowledge that could be relevant to the intention, display, or physical materials of the work; a model likely inspired by the creative process of Conceptual artists. Although he spoke infrequently during them, Asher's approach to group critiques was interrogative and competitive, and while some former students found these aspects generative, others found them disparaging. Sam Durant employs a similar student-centered model of critique with his students but removes all elements of aggressiveness as he feels the same outcome can be achieved without being destructive. He allows the presenting student to choose their method of critique from either the Asher model of being rigorously questioned by peers or the Mary Kelly model of collaboratively reading the signifiers in the work without any prior information from the artist. Either way, Durant wants students to set aside all assumptions and look at the work as if it were the first artwork they have ever seen.

Stephen Prina chooses to not even use the word "critique" because of its negative connotations with "beating an opponent into submission" and instead simply uses the term "discussions". Diminishing classroom hierarchy as much as possible, Prina positions himself in the room "like any other spectator" because he wants to view the work "from a non-expertise viewpoint". He detests the practice of the teacher interrupting a critique to pass judgment or to attempt to fix the work, stating that this "is a bankrupt, still current model in arts education and maybe all education" (Kaiser & Végh, 2021, p. 310). In his classes, he trains the artists to vet criticism and develop

confidence in their principles, and he trains viewers to avoid contributing comments that simply make the work more normative for them. Instead, the group analyzes how the work operates and pinpoints its deviation from convention which is where the work often truly exists according to Prina. Likewise, Ericka Beckman also takes a more positive approach in her critiques where she simply searches for what is original in the work and attempts to read the subtext.

James Welling developed his own unique approach to critiques which employs a word association exercise. Each member of the group formulates one word that applies to the work presented and then describes their reasoning behind their selection, which serves as a starting point for discussion. As an additional challenge, at times Welling stipulates that the words they generate need to begin with a specific letter of the alphabet. He explains, "It's sort of a didactic tool to encapsulate a thought about the work and then expound upon it". When a question arises during the critique about something like color choice, Welling inverts it, making the asker analyze why the question is even pertinent in the first place. Akin to the Mary Kelly method, Welling prefers the group to read and discuss the work prior to the artist speaking to avoid predisposition in the analysis.

4 Course Design

John Baldessari's version of Post-Studio Art not only rejected many traditional studio practices in favor of critical and conceptual ones but at times removed the studio altogether. It eliminated the dependence on making art in a specified place and encouraged the idea that art could be made anywhere at any time. Baldessari regularly took students to random locations that had seemingly little to do with art. He had a practice of having students throw a dart at a map of Los Angeles and then taking them to the location where the dart landed. Students would then explore the space using still or video cameras and would sometimes make art on-site. On one random trip to a farmer's market, Baldessari recalled one student photographing a dead chicken being pulled around by a string (Christie's, 2014, 0:04:10). Baldessari simply wanted to expose students to new experiences and situations, and as he put it "introduce them to culture, let's say in the broadest sense" (Knight, 1992, p. 27). Matt Mullican recalls going to locations like Forest Lawn Memorial Park in the Hollywood Hills which is the burial place of some of the most famous actors and artists, and to the Movieland Wax Museum and Palace of Living Art which had kitschy life-size dioramas of scenes from movies and

famous art. These adventures challenged the traditional definition of an educational field trip.

Some Post-Studio alumni similarly created courses based on exposing students to new experiences. When invited back to CalArts by Baldessari to be a visiting professor in 1981, Barbara Bloom taught a course titled *On Location*. The classes were held anywhere but an art studio, taking place in a sushi bar/bowling alley, on an airport landing strip, and at a restaurant up the Pacific Coast Highway that flaunted blue glass windows. Similarly, Stephen Prina conducted a class at Harvard University titled *Loitering*. He developed the seminar in response to the intensely driven study culture at the school. One of the tasks was to find a place on a greater Boston map that the student had never visited, go there, and give a presentation to the class upon return. Without being provided success criteria or specific assignments on what to make, Prina intentionally made students uneasy. Encouraging them to leave campus, be present around culture, and respond to their environment without any pressure to make art. Prina explains,

Especially in art, I think it's very important to understand how to loiter, you don't even know what you're looking for, and you may simply stumble across something. You have to maintain the position of being in tune with your surroundings, or you may totally overlook a gift that is being presented to you on a silver platter that you didn't even anticipate.

He even replaces the word "art" in his classroom vocabulary with "cultural work" in order to place the focus on reacting and responding instead of creating and inventing. Prina credits Baldessari with influencing his position on seeing the world as a studio and not confining artmaking to a designated site.

Aside from location-based courses, Bloom and Prina designed other highly conceptual courses. When Bloom taught in Columbia University's sculpture department, she created a course based on the concept of gift-giving. She would discuss with her students the similarities and differences between art-making and gift-giving to develop a deeper understanding of the multitude of reasons for making objects. Some of her assignments were to: make a gift for someone in the class without revealing who, make a gift for a famous person, make a gift from a famous person to you, and make a gift that is incredibly meaningful to you but no one else would understand why. The notion of gift-giving is also prevalent in Bloom's artwork, reminiscent of the overlap visible in Baldessari's dual practices as an artist-teacher, where one informed the other. Bloom investigates concepts like generosity, concealment, rituals of exchange, and

the relationships between giver and receiver, object and owner in her work. Comparably, early in Ericka Beckman's teaching career, she ran experimental film courses that combined conceptual practices with the medium of performance that were reflective of her work. The way she framed her ideas as an artist informed how she constructed experimental situations for her students. At times she would simply give students a set of materials and see what they could create from them and at other times would design specific tasks that embraced the inherent autonomy of Conceptual art. Her courses often dealt with the relationships between sound and image, and she created collaborative assignments like: "make your own film instrument, make a film that plays itself, make a film that performs itself, make a film that makes music, and make music using a thing that you record on film".

Stephen Prina invented a course called Lay of the Land which intensely focused on exploring the concept of "the horizontal." Part of Prina's reasoning for developing the course was that "it plays against the tendency in Western art to verticalize our experience". The course exposed students to a range of cultural phenomena that counteract the vertical tradition to help broaden their interests. Topics included Jackson Pollock's method of working on the floor, Mike Kelley's floor blankets, and a chapter on horizontality in the book *Formless: A User's Guide*. Another element of the course had been to visit the impressive map collection held by the Harvard University Library. Students were challenged to come up with unusual categorical requests for the librarian. For example, they had asked for the most disheveled map, the smallest map, maps with sea monsters, maps that contain undertones of racism, and maps that embody love or hope. The librarian then had to interpret their abnormal requests, and the students explored the relationship between cartography and "the horizontal." Lay of the Land also included the films *The Draughtsman's Contract*, a British period drama-murder mystery from 1982, where an artist is commissioned to do a series of landscape drawings, and *La Région Centrale*, a Canadian experimental film from 1971, shot on an uninhabited mountaintop using a robotic camera arm.

Prina's affinity for incorporating films into art education may have stemmed from his CalArts experience, as exposure to avant-garde film had consistently been an important component in both Baldessari's and Asher's pedagogy. Prina even caught the attention of *The New Yorker* in 1994 when he ran a full semester course dedicated to the early films of Keanu Reeves. The concept for the course was inspired by a passage written by French theorist Ronald Barthes, where he proposed concentrating on a proper name instead of a historical situation. Prina connected Reeves's works with sociological and philosophical references, explaining "For instance, one week you not only have to watch 'My

Own Private Idaho' but have to read 'The Idea of Decadence' from 'Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism'" (Orlean, 1994, para. 1). The focus was not on the quality of the actor's work but the diversity and scope of the films he starred in that embody specific styles and could be examined against other areas of culture.

In conclusion, although many Post-Studio Art alumni later reevaluated their relationship with the art object, the philosophies of Conceptual art endured both within their artistic practices and their teaching. Some alumni may now reject the "no information in advance of need" approach to art education after reflecting on their experiences as students, but they also still refrain from basing the foundations of their teaching on practical skill learning. They have found new and inventive ways to help their students develop their interests and intellects, and the practice of group critique and the idea of exposing students to culture in a broad sense remain integral. Overall, former Post-Studio Art students continue to reexamine the artistic process and the complex relationship between artmaking and teaching.

Acknowledgement

This chapter draws on research conducted for the author's doctoral dissertation, *Art, Life, and Education: The Avant-Garde Artist in the Classroom* (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2022).

Notes

- 1 All interviews with research participants were conducted via Zoom: James Welling on December 8, 2020, John Miller on January 6, 2021, Sam Durant on January 8, 2021, Matt Mullican on January 14, 2021, Barbara Bloom on February 4, 2021, Meg Cranston on February 11, 2021, Stephen Prina on March 1, 2021, and Ericka Beckman on November 19, 2021.
- 2 All quotes attributed to former CalArts students without a parenthetical citation come from interviews conducted by the author.
- 3 The essential role of the beholder or spectator is described throughout Dewey's classic 1934 book *Art as Experience* and in Duchamp's notable April 1957, American Federation of the Arts talk in Houston, Texas titled "The Creative Act."

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