

[*Note to readers: this is an excerpt from Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students. More information [here](#).*]

Chapter 3 Theories

So far, everything that I have said has to do with specific problems—with the history of art instruction and the issues students and teachers tend to discuss. I have tried to set out the different sides of each problem, even though my own position has usually been pessimistic or skeptical.

In the first chapter, I mentioned the intellectual isolation of medieval workshops, the artificial quantitative rigidity of Baroque academies, and the unreasoned way that the Bauhaus claimed to be giving more fundamental, universal instruction. The second chapter was pessimistic about many aspects of contemporary art schools: I suggested that academism is still with us, that most art is mediocre and therefore not well served by the habit of teaching masters and masterpieces, and that our hope of expressing our society might be ill-founded. Rhetorically speaking, my strategy has been to set out issues as clearly as possible, and then see how well they stand up to criticism. In most cases I've been tending toward the conclusion that what we do does not make sense.

So I think this may be a good place to address the central problem, the one around which these smaller problems circle: Is it incoherent to say that art can be taught? And if we think so, how do we describe what we're doing? I'm going to argue two points. First, we do not know how we teach art, and so we cannot claim to teach it or to know what teaching it might be like. This may sound odd—I'll be defending and explaining it later in the chapter—but it's my experience that studio instruction teachers and students often accept some informal version of it. The teacher's lack of control becomes a cliché, and the idea that there is no method for teaching art becomes a truism. Instead studio departments advertise their ability to teach technical preparation, critical standards, models of knowledge offered by other disciplines, operative principles, irreducible elements of perception and visual experience, the ability to manipulate formal language, or the history of questions and responses developed in the medium over time. Art departments are said to offer a "supportive critical atmosphere," "dialogue," "access to large public collections" and to the artworld, and the "commitment" and "passion" of their faculty.

(That's from an art department flier, addressed to prospective students.) These are all sensible things, and many of them are possible. Later in this chapter I will try to divide the different claims into more clearly articulated categories, but for the moment I just want to list them to suggest how much art departments teach that is not directly art. The problem—and this will be my second claim—is that teachers continue to behave as if they were performing something more than priving “atmosphere,” “dialogue,” or “passion.” Art schools would be very different places if teachers and students did not continue to hold onto the idea that there is such a thing as teaching art, even when they don't believe in it securely or analyze it directly. That puts art departments and art schools in a self-contradictory position. It may seem normal, but it is pervasive, and I think it has an inimical effect on the coherence of art instruction.

What is Teaching?

Before I can ask whether art can be taught, I need a working definition of teaching. (I don't think we need an equivalent definition of art, since “art” is whatever we end up talking about in art school. Its definition is fluid, and changes along with our interests.) Though I think teaching can be many things, I also think there is an indispensable component to anything that could be called teaching, and that is intentionality. The teacher must *mean* to impart something at a certain moment, and must *intend* it for a certain audience. It doesn't matter whether the teacher is right or wrong, well-informed or misguided about what she may intend: what matters is that she intends to teach and does not teach by mistake, or randomly.

An example of intentional teaching is when an instructor tells a student to look at a certain artist. “Your work is similar to Ryder's,” the instructor might say, meaning the comment to apply to that student at that moment. It would not be teaching in this sense if the same instructor happened to mention Ryder in the course of a long conversation about other subjects. Even if the result was the same (say, the student went and looked up Ryder), in the first example the teacher meant the student to benefit and in the second the teacher would have been surprised that the student picked up on that one part of the conversation.

Why insist on the single criterion of intentionality when there is so much else to teaching? Because no matter what else teaching is, it is not a comprehensible activity unless the teacher sets out to teach. Any number of things can go wrong, and I think most of the time whatever the teacher thinks is a good idea probably isn't. A teacher's opinion might be entirely wrong, or irrelevant, or misguided, and as we will see, there is no easy way to tell. There is also the problem of intentionality itself, because as psychoanalysis has taught us, the teacher who thinks she intends to mention Ryder because his works are dark and mysterious might really be mentioning him because he is associated with snakes, or storms, or Wagner, or with something that happened in the teacher's past. But all of that is permissible provided the teacher intends to

teach. To put it more accurately, I might say that teaching requires the fiction of intentionality: the teacher has to work with the fiction that she knows what she intends, that she can say what she intends, and that she knows what she means by what she intends. Since Freud and Wittgenstein, those things aren't so simple—but the simpler way of putting it can stand for the deeper difficulties. Teaching isn't teaching unless the teacher *intends* to teach at any particular moment.

It may seem that this definition of teaching is too narrow, since it excludes a great deal of what happens in art schools and in teaching generally. Very often, for example, a successful teacher is one who has enthusiasm and inventiveness, no matter how much she claims to understand about what she is doing. Especially in the visual arts, it seems appropriate to teach without words. We sometimes say that art teaching is not amenable to rational analysis since it is fundamentally a matter of inspiration. Some teachers can produce astonishing, creative monologues, spiced with all kinds of odd insights, and students can pick and choose what they like as if they were looking through a treasure chest. But to see why I would not consider that to be teaching, imagine what would happen if a physics teacher were to do the same thing. Say for example that a university physics professor likes to give lectures by improvising a kind of stream of consciousness monologue, moving freely among loosely associated topics, mixing material from Freshman and graduate-level courses, adding personal reminiscences, fables, mottos, digressions, repetitions, and poetic appreciations. Then a first-year physics student would need to listen very carefully: she would understand a few equations, but some would be over her head, others would be irrelevant, and a few would be too simple. She would probably misinterpret some equations, thinking that she could understand them. The poems and fables would be hard to integrate with the stricter mathematics. Such a professor would take limited responsibility for trying to understand what the student might need. Instead she would simply be emptying the contents of her conscious mind like pouring water out of a bucket. I think that basic physics could not be learned that way, though it is possible that graduate- and professional-level instruction might benefit from inspired monologues. There have been well-known lecturers in various fields who worked that way, and managed to inspire generations of students. (In the humanities, the preeminent example is the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.) Enthusiasm, inspiration, and motivation are infectious, and it may also be true that they can only be taught by example: an enthusiastic teacher may be necessary to instill enthusiasm in a student. But subjects other than enthusiasm, inspiration, and motivation generally require focused accounts that are tailored to the audience. I don't think that the hypothetical physics student could learn physics from such a professor unless she already knew a great deal—in which case she would be more like a teacher than a student.

It follows that little teaching takes place in most large classrooms. Some large lectures can be excellent places to learn, because the majority of the audience is looking to learn the same material, and the teacher is tailoring the lectures to the class's common interest. But in art instruction it is not at all clear that any given roomfull of people will need the same kind of information. In a large art lecture course, such as the standard freshman art history survey, the idea is sometimes to show the students as many images as possible in order to give them a general grounding and at least a passing familiarity with the range of societies that have made art. If an instructor shows ten thousand slides in the course of a year (which is not an impossible number), a given student might find five or ten of them to be of lasting interest. Of those, perhaps two will turn out to be central images for the student's work. Those numbers are generous on both ends: most teachers show more like six thousand slides in a year-long survey, and most students I've talked to say that one or two slides proved to be of importance to their work. This is not a reason to cancel the standard survey (there are other problems with the survey that are not related to this), but it does mean that the survey is not taught, except in a very loose sense of "teaching."

There is also a wider reason why I concentrate on the rational side of things when so much else happens in teaching. Even aside from the question of the abstract nature of teaching, my analyses in this book are attempts to find the rational content of subjects that are not usually analyzed. At the beginning of the previous chapter, I noted that our sense of what we do as teachers or as students is dependent on not pushing rational analysis too far. (Our informal ways of talking, I wrote, are ways of *not* coming to terms with a number of fundamental difficulties.) When rational analysis is pressed too far the result can seem a little outlandish or misguided. The benefit of exaggerating the rational component in art instruction is that it helps highlight the way we're used to talking by contrasting it with a more purely rational position. My insistence on the intentional quality of teaching is an example of that strategy: trying to understand what happens in studio art classes by focussing on the only part of it that can be analyzed. Enthusiasm, commitment, passion, dedication, responsiveness, and sympathy are also parts of teaching, and in my experience the best teachers have them (when I am teaching I can feel my own enthusiasm at work, pushing my rationality to one side)—but I think it is essential to bear in mind that if we are going to make sense of what happens in the studio it is necessary to look hard at the few moments that are susceptible to analysis. No matter how small a role intentionality plays in teaching, it is the only part we can hope to understand. It is necessary to say that teaching is intentional: otherwise we relinquish any control or understanding over what we do.

This definition of teaching also applies to learning. From the student's point of view learning can be as mysterious as teaching, and the moments when learning happens best are moments of high energy, unusual awareness, or good concentration, rather than some formula

that can be repeated on demand. Learning can be like absorption or osmosis. Who knows what makes a student receptive? Some students (and this is something teachers know better than students) can be entirely unreceptive, blocked off so strongly from new ideas that they are not even aware that they are resisting. Unreceptive students are just as mysterious as receptive students. Again I would insist on the importance of intentionality. Unless a student believes that she can learn intentionally—that she can learn when she wants to—then it doesn't make sense to say that art can be learned. Intentionality is an essential part of teaching and of learning.

Can Art Be Taught?

There have long been doubts about whether art can be taught. They go back at least to Plato's concept of inspiration, *mania*, and Aristotle's concepts of genius and poetic rapture (the *ecstaticos*). If art is made with the help of *mania*, then certainly ordinary teaching can have little effect—and if it is inspired teaching, then it isn't teaching in the sense I mean it here, but something more like infection. I may give someone the flu, but I am hardly ever sure when or how I did it. Teaching *mania* by being ecstatic and inspirational is like being infected, and spreading disease: you can't really control it. Plato and Aristotle are everyone's historical heritage, to the extent that virtually all art instruction in the world today is influenced by Western norms, and I think most people would be happy to say that art depends somehow on *mania* and therefore can't be taught. Yet historically, the voices of doubt have been overwhelmed by the institutions that claim to teach art.

After Plato and Aristotle, there have been two main times and places where people claimed inspiration is central and so art cannot be taught. The first was the Romantic art schools, and the second the Bauhaus. (I mentioned both in chapter 1.) The Romantics thought that each artist is an individual so no kind of group instruction could ever succeed in teaching art. The Bauhaus was founded on the idea that craft is fundamental, and that art instruction should be consecrated to teaching whatever is susceptible to basic rules and procedures. As the historian Carl Goldstein says, "proclamations regularly issued from the Bauhaus to the effect that art cannot be taught." Neither the Bauhaus nor the Romantic reason for saying art cannot be taught is quite the reason I am claiming it here, but all such claims, including mine, descend ultimately from Plato's and Aristotle's notions of artistic inspiration.

Some contemporary art instructors freely admit that art cannot be taught, and admitting it put them in a fundamental logical bind: they say art cannot be taught, and yet they go on teaching students who believe they are learning art. I think most teachers would say that they don't claim to teach art directly; but on an institutional level, the schools and departments where they work continue to act as if art teaching might be taking place. The two positions—for an against the possibility of teaching art—are incompatible. Studio classes could be advertised as

places where students learn techniques, or the vagaries of the art world, and that would be consistent with the ordinary teacher's claim not to know how to teach art directly. Somewhere along the chain of command and publicity, from the ordinary studio art instructor up to the chairman, the dean, the public-relations department, and the trustees, the day-to-day skepticism about teaching art gets lost, and institutions typically end up making claims that their instructors really do teach art.

It seems to me that this indecision or unclarity or disinterest in exactly what we do is not at all a bad position to be in. There is no need to teach without self-contradiction, or without letting students in on our indecision or incoherence. The fact that it is so hard to know what it might mean to teach art tends to keep teachers going: it spurs them to teach in many different ways. In that sense, teaching physics or television repair is much less engrossing, because there is no need to continually question the enterprise itself. So in that sense there is nothing wrong with our inability to say exactly what we're doing. But it is also important not to forget that it *is*, after all, a logical contradiction, and that art instructors work right at the center of the contradiction.

The contradiction is complicated, I would like to tease it apart a little by sketching some specific answers to the question of whether or not art can be taught. As in chapter 2, the purpose is to illuminate the kinds of contradictions that students and teachers tolerate—or that they need—in order to go on doing what they do. Perhaps you can find your own position somewhere in this list.

1. *Art can be taught, but nobody knows quite how.* A typical piece of evidence here is the track record of art schools—the fact that famous artists have graduated from them. School catalogues typically list their graduates who went on to become famous. Instructors praise the work of famous students as if they helped guide them to their success. Still, there is very little evidence that art schools have control over the production of really interesting art. It may be nothing more than chance. If an art school is around long enough, there are likely to be famous people who studied there. Sooner or later, a student will find an instructor, or a curriculum, or an environment that is just right, and that might then propel them to do work many people find interesting. But do teachers have the slightest control over this interaction, or the vaguest idea of how it works? How do we know that the art school was anything more than a neutral backdrop, a place that didn't *stop* the artist from developing? How do we know that another environment—say, a steel factory—might not have been better? The problem with this first theory is that it isn't a theory. It proposes a correlation without proving a cause and effect relation. In that respect, it is like the many studies linking cancer to various foods: there might be a correlation between drinking coffee and getting cancer, but that does not prove there is a causal link.

2. *Art can be taught, but it seems as if it can't be since so few students become outstanding artists.* I haven't encountered this view very often, and I think it might be an older view. It is consonant with what the Bauhaus claimed—that real art is rare, even though it can happen in a school environment. The difficulty with this view is that those few “outstanding” artists could well have been “outstanding” before they got to school, so the art instructors did not make them that way. If teachers could create artists, then they would, and it would not be so rare to witness art being taught. This view is close to another view that is much more common:

3. *Art cannot be taught, but it can be fostered or helped along.* In this way of looking at things, art teachers do not teach art directly, but they nourish it and provoke it. In my experience most people hold some version of this theory. There are various ways of putting it. Perhaps teaching is like dreaming, where you don't really know what you're doing, or perhaps teaching is like gestation. The school nourishes the student and helps her grow, sheltering her from the outside world like a fetus in the womb. Few people would argue that students need a special atmosphere in which to grow, and the womb is the most special of all protected places. I think this is perfectly reasonable, and it applies to many other disciplines beside art. But it is not teaching in any comprehensible sense. A pregnant woman has very little control over the health or looks of her child. She can stop smoking and eat well, but that just ups the chances of a healthy baby, it doesn't control the outcome. The art teacher cares about the idea of nurturing, but she can't make a baby (that is, an artist) by thinking about it—indeed, thinking doesn't help. A real mother has no theories about how to form her baby's hands or head, and without the help of a doctor, she has no idea if the head is even being formed correctly. In similar fashion an art teacher can hope that she is providing the right atmosphere, but she can't control what happens in the atmosphere she's created.

I don't want to call this the “pregnancy theory” of art instruction, because the student is neither entirely passive, nor entirely unaware of the outside world. A better name might be the “catalyst theory” of art instruction, since it is also said that teachers can speed up the natural course of a student's development. The art classroom is a nurturing environment, a place where all kinds of friendships and opportunities exist that might never develop in the outside world. My favorite simile is that the art school is like agar-agar, and the students are like bacteria or fungi. They grow better on the controlled medium than they would in the real world. They are healthier, less at risk from disease, and they grow faster than they would with a less nutritious substrate. Artists' “colonies” (like bacteria “colonies”) can spring up rapidly, and the “culture” of the art world can be fairly dense. Like the pregnancy image, this has a great deal of truth and good sense to it, but it is open to the same kind of objection that the teacher doesn't control the growth itself.

If teachers and the studio department in general is like agar-agar, then there is no teaching in the sense that I have proposed. The agar-agar does not know that it is nurturing the

bacteria: it simply exists, and the bacteria feed off it without its doing anything. If we want to say that art instruction works that way, then we have to say not only that art isn't being taught, but that when teachers help students along—or nourish them, or catalyze their work—they do not know what they are doing or how they are doing it.

Ultimately, the best image for this theory is infection, since it stems from Plato's original definition of *mania*. Inspiration is infectious. If you are around someone who is enthusiastic, you are at high risk: you may catch the passions that animate that person, even if they may not be good for you. Teachers who have infectious enthusiasm are also teachers who are not in control of *when* they are teaching. They know *what* they are saying, but they don't know *when* it will connect, or whether it will do any good for the student. To some people, this is not a bad way to work, given that art is such a personal and intuitive thing. But it still means that art is not taught—teachers nourish their students like embryos, or feed them like bacteria, or infect them like Typhoid Mary. Sometimes the students turn out well: they are “born” into the world, or form “colonies,” or—in the infection metaphor—develop resistance to dangers, or go on to infect other people. But it is essential to bear in mind that in order *not* to see this as a problem, teachers and students have to be content to teach and learn without knowing what is happening to them.

4. *Art cannot be taught or even nourished, but it is possible to teach right up to the beginnings of art, so that students are ready to make art the moment they graduate.* Howard Conant, an educator who wrote widely about art education, says flatly: “Art cannot, of course, be ‘taught,’ nor can artists be ‘educated.’” Conant does not account for what happens in art schools—he does not have a theory of the exact content of studio instruction—but he says good teachers can bring students to the “threshold” from which they can “leap” or “journey” into art itself. Conant's position is a common one, and it has been put in many ways. It is also said that art itself is ineffable, and people teach “around” it or “up to” it. Oscar Wilde says the same thing, a bit less ponderously: “Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.” The difficulty with this theory is knowing what it is that *does* get taught, if it is everything right up to art. Before I try to answer that, I want to round out the list of theories by adding two more that beg the same question.

5. *Great art cannot be taught, but more run-of-the-mill art can be.* This theory divides art into two classes: something “great” that's worth buying and selling and studying, and something not-so-great that is only worth paying tuition for. If you look at the statistics, and compare the number of art students to the number of “great artists” who came out of academies and art schools, it is clear that most art instruction does not produce “great art,” not to mention interesting or successful art. In this theory, art classes produce a special kind of low-grade art. It seems reasonable and sober-minded to say as much: as I argued in chapter 2, most art students are necessarily mediocre. But then it is not clear why students enroll in art classes: what is this run-

of-the-mill art that is still worth the price of tuition? Can it be transformed into “great art,” or is it a different species, more primitive and less interesting?

6. *Art cannot be taught, but neither can anything else.* Conant also says this: “Like art, literature cannot be ‘taught,’ nor can history, philosophy, or science.” (I wonder about Conant’s quotation marks. Without them his sentence would be harsher, but perhaps more honest.) According to this theory teaching is impossible, and art is basically not different from science or any other subject. Luckily the claim is easy to argue against: if art is not different from science, it would be hard to explain why four-year undergraduate curricula in physics do not have group critiques instead of standard exams. Why do physicists measure accomplishment by giving tests? Certainly scientists work on an individual level in laboratories, and doing science is more complicated than simply applying information. But if there is no important difference between an art degree and a science degree, why don’t science teachers abandon tests (which are such a bother to write and grade) and settle for critiques? And why aren’t art instructors content to stop staging critiques, and just give their students multiple-choice tests?

I think that people who espouse this sixth theory do not usually mean that science is the same as art, or that *all* teaching is impossible, but that what is important or essential about any subject cannot be taught. You can learn the fundamentals of your discipline from many people, but no one can show you to become first rate at anything. There is a strong and a weak way of looking at this. In the weak view, the only reason the highest accomplishments can’t be taught is that there is no one higher to teach them. People who have high IQ’s are tested for admission to various societies, and the people who make the tests have to be at least as smart as those they mean to judge. Mensa is the largest high IQ society. Above Mensa is Intertel, and above that Triple Nine, and then Prometheus, and then Mega, and at the top is Savant, named after the one person who has qualified. With some overlaps, each society prepares tests for those below it. By the same analogy, people at the tops of their professions tend to lack constructive criticism, and the fact that they can no longer be taught may be simply a matter of the absence of people to teach them. This is the weak view of the claim that no teaching can impart anything but rudimentary or lower-level information. In the strong view, nothing important can be taught, regardless of who is doing the teaching. Both the strong and the weak view may be involved when someone claims that “ultimately,” no subject can be taught. My own stance is that there is a great deal of truth to the weak view, and that education sometimes stops too soon, and sets people free to meditate on their own when they would still benefit from straightforward instruction. This is certainly true in academia, and I assume it is in public life as well. It may be connected to the same Romantic idea of the importance of the individual that influenced history of art schools. But that is not my subject here: instead I am interested in the strong view (that

nothing important can ever be taught), because it is typical of what people mean when they are talking about art instruction.

If Art Cannot be Taught, What Can be Taught?

In relation to the last three proposals—numbers 4, 5, and 6—the question still remains: what things *can* be taught? Since many people believe in some version of these last three theories, it becomes particularly important to say what it is that we actually hope to teach, or learn, in studio classes. In a rough count there are at least these four things that people claim to know how to teach, even though they may not claim to be teaching art itself:

1. Perhaps studio instructors teach knowledge of contemporary criticism and art theory. Students who intend to be a part of the art world need to understand theoretical writing, and often they want to make full use of the ideas of postmodernism, postcolonial theory, and related cultural critiques. According to this view students would go to studio classes in part to learn critical terms (the gaze, the simulacrum, the native informant, the *objet petit a*, the rhizome, the punctum, *différance*, and so on *ad infinitum*), together with relevant philosophies of art and vision, and theories such as psychoanalysis, multicultural theory, and gender critiques.

2. It is also said that studio teachers show students how to get along in the contemporary art world: how to talk like critics, how to successfully enter a juried competition, and how to present their works to galleries. In the words I quoted at the beginning of the chapter, this would involve “dialogue” about the art scene and “access to large public collections.” There is a crass side to this, and some art departments try to keep away from giving too much commercial advice. The majority of art departments I have visited take a moderate view, giving students the opportunity to make connections with gallerists and critics, and introducing them to their local art community so they can work within it to get where they want to be.

3. Perhaps what is taught is visual acuity, as in the Bauhaus. In the beginning of the chapter, when I was listing things art departments advertise, I also mentioned “operative principles,” “irreducible” elements of perception and visual experience, and the “ability to manipulate formal language.” Those are Bauhaus concerns. Art students sometimes speak of learning how to see, and I would describe part of my MFA experience that way. I became more sensitive, more alert to visual cues and subtle phenomena.

4. But certainly the most widely voiced answer to the question, What can be taught? is that studio classes teach technique. Here again I agree: the majority of art classes I have experienced teach techniques alongside theory, commerce, and visual acuity.

Each of these four answers to the question of what art classes teach is partly right, but none is a good definition of what happens in college-level art instruction. Teachers don’t usually sit down and tell students about art criticism or theory (there are often specialized courses for

those subjects), and most of teachers would not be happy to be told that the central function of an art department is to teach students how to become commercial successes. The problem with saying that art classes instill visual acuity or technique is that teachers and students do not behave as if those were their principal goals. If someone took a survey of a typical upper-level or graduate art classes, it would show that technique is hardly a central concern, and visual acuity is virtually unmentioned. Teaching at the graduate level is directed toward complicated questions of expression, control, self-knowledge, and meaning—subjects that have little to do with technique or sensitivity or even visual theory, and everything to do with the reasons we value art.

I am not denying that art classes can teach these four things, nor am I saying that they aren't reasonable goals. But their marginal positions reveal how deeply we must believe that we are doing *something else*, whether or not we can say what it is. That other goal is nebulous, and it has to remain that way: otherwise teachers and students would be impelled to think about the contradiction between their claim that we can't teach art, and the reality that we behave as if we might be trying to do just that.

The art department flier I quoted at the beginning of the chapter also mentions a few things that are not among the four subjects I have just surveyed: it also promises the “support,” “commitment” and “passion” of the faculty. These are things that every faculty would like to provide, regardless of what they teach, so they are not specific to the question of teaching art. But it matters that they're vague, because it is a sign that the *real* interest of the department—teaching actual fine art—cannot be mentioned.

As the historian Paul Kristeller said, art teachers are “involved in the curious endeavor to teach the unteachable.” Art department fliers like the one I quoted also usually list the famous artists who graduated from their department of school. (Where I teach, we list Georgia O'Keeffe, Thomas Hart Benton, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Estes, and Joan Mitchell, though most of them dropped out.) It might be more honest and thought-provoking to go ahead and list the famous graduates in the college brochure, but to preface the list with a disclaimer—something like this:

Although these artists did study at our school, we deny any responsibility for their success. We have no idea what they learned while they were here, what they thought was important and what wan't, or whether they would have been better off in jail. We consider it luck that these artists were at our school.

In general we disclaim the ability to teach art at this level. We offer knowledge of the art community, the facilities to teach a variety of techniques, and faculty who can teach many ways of talking about art. But any relation between what we teach and truly interesting art is purely coincidental.

And such a flier might add, in the interests of full disclosure:

We will not discuss this disclaimer on school time, because our courses are set up on the assumption that it is false.

An Excursus on Fine Art and Mere Technique

Art teachers and students are in a bind. They do not teach art, but they also cannot talk too much about the fact that they do not teach art. The conundrum comes in large measure from the historical development of the modern concept of art. In Greek philosophy there was a distinction between subjects that could be taught and subjects that could not. Whatever could be taught had a theory, or a body of information, a set of methods, or something that could be written down and handed on to students. Such subjects were called *techne*, and for the Greeks they included arts, crafts, and sciences. Other subjects could not be taught. Instead they had to be absorbed, or learned by example. Aristotle called them *empeiria*.

What we think of as art is more like *empeiria*: it does not depend on rules so much as on nonverbal learning, things that can't be put into words. To Aristotle art was *techne*, essentially a matter of rules. Since the Renaissance the concept of *techne* has shrunk so that it means basically "technique," and we have demoted "technique" to a level below fine art. One way to address the problem of teaching art, therefore, is to rethink the role of *techne*, technique, in studio art.

When people say that technique can be taught, but art cannot, they are assuming that technique is separate from art. This is one of those wonderful ideas that is so simple it almost seems transparent—as if we could change what we assume just by thinking about it. But the fact is that modernism—really, art since the Renaissance—is predicated on the idea that technique is ultimately separate from art. Contemporary initiatives that privilege design or multimedia are steps in the other direction—they imply that technique is woven into artmaking, and that there is no distinction between *techne* and *empeiria*—but so far those are just experiments. Verbal instruction still seems menial, and nonverbal instruction both valuable and impossible.

Another Excursus, on Art Education

Before I conclude, I want to pause over another related issue: teaching people to appreciate art, as opposed to teaching people to make art. Technically, this is “aesthetic education.” Art appreciation sounds elementary, and it tends to be thought of as an introductory or remedial subject—but it is universal in liberal arts colleges and research universities, and it suffuses even the most advanced teaching and criticism. Not many art schools or large university art departments offer the kind of art appreciation courses that are common in small liberal arts colleges, but they do carry on aesthetic education in other ways. Whenever a studio instructor gives advice, whenever an art historian shows a slide, they are trying to get students to appreciate something they think is worthwhile. The simple act of showing a slide is riddled with problems. How does the teacher recognize good art? How does she know it’s good for the students she is addressing? How does she know it’s better for them than, say, playing chess (as Duchamp did)? One aesthetician who has wondered about these ideas asks why there is driver education but no driver appreciation. (He thinks there is a parallel to policemen waiting in speed traps, “appreciating” drivers. Perhaps art appreciation has something in common with surveillance.) Art appreciation is a problem that belongs in this book, because teaching people how to make art inevitably involves teaching them to appreciate art.

There is a surprising amount of literature on the subject of teaching art appreciation. Most of it is put out by educational theorists under the auspices of large corporations and trusts, and it is virtually unread outside the circles of professional educators. The Getty Foundation’s program, called DBAE (“Discipline-Based Arts Education”), emphasizes four disciplines that are thought to be elemental: art production, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. Much of the literature is encumbered by theories of learning that do not correspond to the disciplines that they borrow from: a typical DBAE account of art criticism has little to do with the way actual writing is done. This is not an *a priori* objection to the conceptual schemata of art education: but it is a serious difficulty that needs to be taken into account in any larger account of the ways that bit institutionally-supported theories like the Getty’s interact with practice. The DBAE is a philosophy of art education with its own history that runs parallel to the history of art academies we explored in the opening chapter. It can be applied to college-level courses, though most research has been on elementary and High School education.

Aesthetic education has always had its albatrosses. Its history is connected with dubious social and political values, including Germanic notions of *Kultur* and *Bildung* (formative education, enculturation), so it is not certain whether the systematic inculcation of art is desirable at all. Do you really want your children (or your students) to appreciate the same people you appreciate? Is there really a connection between mastering a certain knowledge of fine art, and being a good citizen or a good person? And which art is to be appreciated? How is an art-

education specialist guided when she chooses pieces of aesthetics, art history, art practice, and art criticism?

From my point of view aesthetic education is no more or less problematic than the other questions I have been considering. Studio art teachers routinely send their students to go look at various artworks. There is no essential difference between that and art educators telling high school students what is so wonderful about Monet, or parents buying their children books like *Janson's History of Art for Children*. In both cases the teachers are trying to instill a sense of value, and to promote the artists they find most important. Even at the highest levels, studio art instruction *is* art education. Studio instructors want to help their students make art, and high school teachers (or parents) only want to help their students (or children) to appreciate the same kinds of art they appreciate. But there is only a fine line between them. Maybe the most responsible studio art teacher will only mention artists she *dislikes*, in order to avoid making art a matter of aesthetic education.

Back to the Subject: The Book's First Three Claims

In books of analytic philosophy, individual claims are sometimes numbered and set apart from the text like mathematical formulas, so the reader can refer to them more easily as the argument proceeds. I am going to follow that tradition here, in order to make it clear where I stand on the question of teaching art. The first claim I made in this chapter could be put this way:

1. The idea of teaching art is irreparably irrational. We do not teach because we do not know when or how we teach.

Even if teaching art is an incoherent enterprise, the *idea* of teaching art remains vitally important to the existence of art classes. At the same time that instructors teach technique, critical thinking, the values of the art world, and other subjects, they continue to think of our activity as something that is greater than the sum of those parts. A second claim follows from this:

2. The project of teaching art is confused because we behave as if we were doing something more than teaching technique.

This is using the word “technique” to encompass all the things that art schools impart aside from the possibility that they may also teach art itself. It would be more honest to give art schools names like the Technical Art Institute, the Department of Supportive Critical Atmosphere, or

The Center for Artworld Networking, but to do so would be to change art instruction at the deepest level. Teachers and students need to sense the presence of art, even if few people would be so brash as to claim that they actually understand or teach art itself. Without the sense that art is hovering somewhere around the classroom, I think everything that happens in art teaching, even the driest technical workshops, would look entirely different.

These two claims, together with the doubts and reservations I have had about other subjects, might imply that I intend to propose some new configuration for teaching art. I have made a few suggestions already—I think it might be interesting to address mediocre art directly, to talk about the sexual meaning of live models, or to experiment in historical ways of teaching art. There are more proposals in the second half of this book. But in a wider sense, I am not advocating any changes in the ways art is taught. Because I teach in an art school, I am constantly involved in discussions about how to change the curriculum. But in the end I am not really interested in tinkering with classes and departments. What art schools and art departments really need, I think, is to understand what they are already doing. There are several reasons why I am skeptical of trying to change the *way* art is taught.

First, we know very little about what we do. Most of what happens in the studio is entirely unknown to us: it is uncognized, unanalyzed, unthought. Mediocre art is a typical example: even though I can raise it as a subject of discussion, it remains almost entirely beyond our understanding. What is the psychology of timidity? What artistic choices are related to timidity? How do people respond to artworks that are not engrossing? How does a teacher know when to encourage a mediocre student to follow great models? There are so many questions that I would say the topic is still barely visible, like the proverbial iceberg that is nine-tenths submerged. And if teaching art is something we know virtually nothing about, then it does not make sense to jump in and change it.

There is another reason why I will not be advocating any new program in this book, and that is that any fundamental change in teaching habits will also change our concept of art. Teaching, learning, and making are indissoluble. An easy way to see this is to imagine an extreme case, in which art critiques are replaced by rational analyses, in the manner of French Baroque practice. Instead of getting together and talking about a student's work, say the instructors were to grade the work according to "*préceptes positifs*," the way Roger de Piles did (see p. xx). A sculpture would get 10 points for invention, 8 for form, 2 for political value, and so forth. That kind of teaching would eventually produce an entirely different kind of art. The altered teaching would produce altered goals and ideals, a new critical language, and a different mind-set. In many less obvious ways, changes in teaching involve changes in the concept of art.

Sometimes it is important to try to change the idea of art, and major curricular changes, from the Renaissance academies through the Bauhaus, incited and reflected changes in art. But

that goal would not make sense for a book like this one. I have no way to connect the concerns I have about some contemporary art with the problems I see in the ways art is taught. Say for example I were a conservative Republican, lamenting the absence of truly moral art. I still could not say that ethical instruction in the studio would promote ethical works. It might do the opposite—it might provoke immoral art—or it might have some other, unpredictable effect.

These considerations prompt my third claim:

3. It does not make sense to propose fundamental curricular changes in the ways art is taught.

I say “fundamental curricular changes” to distinguish them from the kinds of experiments that I have in mind in this text. My suggestions—about mediocre art and so forth—are designed to *observe* what we are already doing. Fundamental curricular changes are designed to *replace* current practices. Art teaching is irrational, and attempts to reform it are therefore also attempts to stop teaching art as it is currently understood and begin doing something else. To hope for an improved kind of art teaching is also to hope for an impoverished art, one that depends more on rational, speculative, and philosophic discourse and less on imagination, intuition, and all manner of uncognized and inadvertent discoveries. It is always possible that fundamental changes in art teaching might produce a more interesting (and equally irrational) art practice: but curricular decisions are always made on rational bases, and our ideas about art aren’t rational. It’s the certainty of the value of rational criticism that I doubt. You can’t fix something irrational by trying to rationalize it.

Skepticism and Pessimism

My position here is close to the classical kind of skepticism known as Pyrrhonism. Greek skeptics believed that we can know very little about the world, and that we should therefore make no judgments on one side or the other of any issue. They had various catchphrases for that idea: *isostheneia* is the balance of arguments on both sides of an issue, and *aphasia* is the refusal to make judgments. Both of those are ideas that are at work in this book. *Isostheneia* and *aphasia* lead to a state of inaction: they make the skeptic unable to prescribe any course of action, because any act is the result of a decision, and any decision is the result of a judgment on one side or the other of an issue. Hence when I say that art teaching is irrational and largely unknown, and I conclude that there is no clear course of action, I am exemplifying the Pyrrhonist *aphasia*.

I mention Pyrrhonism because the Greeks also knew how to argue against it. In this case the argument would have gone something like this: everyone makes uninformed judgments, and

in many spheres of human activity the only kind of judgments are uninformed, and the only available kinds of actions are ill-based. The natural human way of getting along in the world is to act on things according to the way you happen to understand them at the moment. By that argument, what I should be doing is prescribing new ways to teach art based on whatever I can find out about what we already do. Even though we don't understand art teaching, we know what it *seems* to be, and we can adjust our practice based on that. My answer to that, and my defense of Pyrrhonist inaction, is that we should not have confidence even in the little we know about art teaching. What we can discern about the way art is taught is unpersuasive, self-contradictory, and limited, and therefore not a good basis for action of any sort, even the conventional, ill-informed kind.

At the risk of making this too academic, I would add that I'm also pessimistic about the outcome of any "fundamental curricular change." Pessimism, unlike skepticism, is a modern doctrine, and it essentially has two meanings: in everyday use, it denotes a belief that most things will come out badly, and in philosophy, it signifies the conviction that the world is essentially evil. As I see it, art teaching is already a mess, and any attempt to change it is very likely to change it for the worse. I'm fond of pessimism, but there are also some grounds for optimism here because there is always the challenge of finding out more, and the possibility that the parts of art teaching that *can* be understood will be of some use. But that's not much in the way of optimism, and in the final chapter I will have an even more pessimistic answer to those few optimistic ideas.

I turn next to the central theme of this book, art critiques. I have given them a separate chapter since they are the most complicated aspect of art instruction. Critiques epitomize the problems of teaching art, and they condense the issues I have been exploring into an agglomeration of nearly intractable difficulty.

Notes to Chapter 3

[Notes, continued]

These phrases are taken from a xeroxed flier mailed to prospective graduate students by the Midway Studios, University of Chicago, 1991.

I am happy to go along with nearly any of the definitions offered in *Theories of Art Today*, edited by Noël Carroll (Madison, Wisconsin, 2000); see my review in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, forthcoming.

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1455a. For *mania* in Greek art see Eva Keuls, *Plato and Greek Painting* (Leiden, 1978), 134-35.

Goldstein, *Teaching Art*, 5, and see 262 for a description of the Bauhaus manifesto which was introduced by a print by Lionel Feininger. Goldstein reports Albers was initially confused by the pamphlet, wondering where the art—like Feininger's—would find its way into the curriculum.

The dreaming metaphor is pursued in my *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts*, 255-97.

Conant, "On the Education of Artists," *Art Journal* 24 nr. 3 (spring 1965): 241.

Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Intentions* (1891), reprinted in *The Artist as Critic*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago, 1982 [1968]), 349.

Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," 498.

Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric* I.i. The distinction is elaborated in my *Our Beautiful Dry, and Distant Texts*, 49.

See Jerry Jordan Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism, History, and Terminology* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1974), 14, on Polyklitus's *Canon*.

For the term and its use, see Efland, *A History of Art Education*, 240.

I am abbreviating. For the full argument, see T. J. Diffey, "Aesthetics and Aesthetic Education (and Maybe Morals Too)," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 20 nr. 4 (1986): 43-44.

B. A. Brueske, *An Annotated Bibliography Dealing with Discipline-Based Art Education* (South Bend: Indiana University, 1988).

Arthur Efland, "Curricular Fictions and the Discipline Orientation in Art Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 24 nr. 3 (1990): 67; Efland, "History of Art Education as Criticism: On the Use of the Past," in *The History of Art Education: Proceedings of the Second Penn State Conference, 1989*, ed. Patricia Amburgy et al. (Reston, Virginia, 1992), 1-11 with further bibliography.

Early education movements headed by Pestalozzi and others are the antecedents of DBAE. Arthur Efland, "Curriculum Antecedents of Discipline-Based Art Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 nr. 2 (1987): 57-94; C. G. Wieder, "Essentialist Roots of the DBAE Approach to Curriculum: A Critique," *Visual Art Research* 16 (fall 1990): 26. Wieder points to

Elliot Eisner, *Educating Artistic Vision* (New York, 1972), as an essentialist position that influenced DBAE. A seminal early paper is M. Barkan, "Curriculum Problems in Art Education," *A Seminar in Art Education for Research and Curriculum Development*, ed. Edward Mattil (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1966).

C. Stroh, "University Art Programs and the Discipline-Based Art Education Movement: What Prospects?" *Design for Arts in Education* 91 nr. 2 (1989): 38-47.

For a selection of pertinent essays see *History of Art Education*, especially Mary Ann Stankiewicz, "Time, Antimodernism, and holiday Art," in *History of Art Education*, 209-14; also Foster Wygant, *School Art in American Culture 1820-1970* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1993).

Efland, "Curricular Fictions," 67.

The primary text is Empiricus Sextus, *Pyrroneioi hypotyposesis*, trans. as *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Benson Mates (New York, 1996).

Philippe de Lacy, "Skepticism in Antiquity," in P. P. Wiener, editor, *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973), vol. 4, p. 237b.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1008b 26.

The skeptic Carneades's three criteria of "probability" (*pithane*, the persuasiveness of an appearance, *aperispastos*, the lack of contradictory neighboring appearances, and *periodeumene*, the presence of a full complement of neighboring appearances) are not present in the unpersuasive, contradictory, limited knowledge we have of art instruction. (Philippe de Lacy, "Skepticism in Antiquity," 239a, citing Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* 7. 166-184.)

The principal authors of "philosophical skepticism" are Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann. See von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (Eschborn, Germany, 1995 [1860]), translated as *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, trans. William Chatterton Coupland (London, 1884), 3 vols. For Schopenhauer see for example *The Pessimist's Handbook: A Collection of Popular Essays*, trans. T. Bailey Saunders (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964). Writers and poets who were at one time or another pessimists in this sense include Byron, Heine, and Leopardi.