
M/E/A/N/I/N/G

CONTEMPORARY ART ISSUES

AUTHORITY AND LEARNING

MIRA SCHOR

What can be taught and what can be learned? What atmosphere is necessary for art students to expand their own original attraction to whatever it was they understood to be "art," to learn about their own instincts, tastes, and personal narratives, and locate these within the complex history and practice of art? How does one help students flourish whose identities and proclivities might be marginal to whatever the mainstream might be, stylistically and in its ideal artist persona? My early interest in teaching was simultaneous with my decision to "be an artist," and with my belief, whether illusory or not, that traditional studio art instruction had taught me little about how I make my own work. My commitment to teaching was also more conventionally rooted in my desire to right what I perceived as prevalent forms of abuse in art teaching, and my desire to transmit what I had experienced as life-allowing methods for thinking about being an artist.

To teach is to place oneself and to be placed by students into a position of "*knowledge and authority*".¹ Regardless of one's age or degree of knowledge or personal authority, the role "teacher" gives power. Abuse follows. Some of the abuses of authority which I found as an art student and which I have seen and heard of being perpetuated to this day can loosely be grouped under the category of gender abuse, with a gendered imprint, as well as actual gendered narratives and players. Inasmuch as we think of hierarchy in gendered terms, existing as we do, willy-nilly, in a patriarchal system, then systems of authority in art institutions are patriarchal, even, occasionally, when women artists/educators are involved.

These abuses expand from the obvious form of actual sexual harassment, forced sex for grades or promotion — which one hopes is rare and is now more readily subject to legal recourse — to the more common story of apparently consenting sexual relationships among faculty and students, to those aspects of teaching whose gender characteristics are occulted under the false rubric of "universality." This most pervasive and persistent form of teaching abuse is marked by the lack of specification of the positionality of the speaker. When critiques of student work and advocacy of particular aesthetics are uninflected by genuine qualification of the generational aesthetic and gendered reality of the teacher, when the position of the speaker is not rendered transparent, difference and multiplicity are ignored and denied.

One of the positions that I speak from is that of a feminist artist, not just a woman artist, among several positions and allegiances I embody as a teacher of art. From this position, the issue of seduction between male teachers and female students in art schools and art departments is a disturbing one, but verifiably persistent at the anecdotal level. This may seem like an unworthy subject for

pedagogic inquiry but it raises questions which are at the heart of any investigation of authority, of gendered abuse in teaching practices.

Male (usually) teachers colonizing female art students is about as newsworthy as dogs biting men.² So what's wrong with it? Certainly ambitious women art students want power, or, as a first step, contact with power. Men still usually have the actual power and the appearance of power within the microworld of the institution (and the art world). From the other side, the temptation is great. Now that I'm — not quite so young — it is miraculously and perversely clear to me how sexual people in their late teens and early 20s are, whether they try to be or not. It is a tool they instinctively (and often unknowingly) use to get attention, since they have few other tools for power, lacking experience and political position. What is *wrong* — to use a term of morality or ethics — is that completing the drama of seduction fulfills the traditional idea that woman's main trading chip within patriarchy is her sexuality, which is temporal and temporary. The woman student does perhaps gain closeness to power but in this transaction she learns that her sexuality (or, more precisely, the newness of her sexuality) is more potent and valuable than her talent. What she wanted, what any student wants, is *attention*. If attention is paid to her *work* and to the quality of her mind instead of to her sexuality — even if she proffers the latter as a trading item — then another lesson is taught, focusing on capabilities she will have for longer than her youth — non-biological productivity and intellect.

And what of the reverse situation? Women teachers/male students? It just doesn't seem to happen as often. Fewer women faculty have as much institutional power, for one thing, so male students want contact of some kind with male faculty too. Untenured women have more at stake, their job security rests on conformity and probity. And women risk being seen as ridiculous, "cradle-robbers." The overarching gender hierarchies and conventions prevalent in society at large remain operative within a (woman) teacher/(male) student relationship. So the woman risks *loss* of whatever power she has. Surely the mechanisms are similar in homosexual teacher/student relationships. No matter what the set-up, rewarding students for using their sexuality as a principal tool rather than paying attention to their minds beyond their sexuality, is abusive. Having shifted generations, I can to a greater extent than in my early years of teaching put myself into the shoes of all the male teachers I've known who have had affairs with students and, looking into the needy face of a younger person, understand the predatory nature of the trespass, the degree to which it is a betrayal of trust.

And yet, seduction is an important, even a necessary aspect of teaching. Constance Penley, in her essay "Teaching in Your Sleep," notes "the extreme power of the transference relation, of the narcissism underlying the demands of both students and teachers, or the basically eroticized nature of learning (the constant appeal for recognition)."³ To keep the attention of a group of restless people, every acting skill is in order, and charm, humor, ardor, all help sustain focus. It is important that the teacher be alive, vibrant, and sexuality and seduction are important signs of life.

Beyond seduction, teaching techniques and philosophies commonly expressed and performed in art schools are suffused with the idea of abuse, plain and simple, as pedagogy — the kick-in-the-pants method of criticism. How many group

crits involve a girl or two dissolving in tears? One sometimes feels the (male) teachers are "counting coups," putting notches on their — paint brushes. Crit the girls and make them cry. 2 Live Crew would be right at home on this range. Those tears are as often as not caused by anger and frustration at being bullied and silenced by the louder voice, or dismissed as too disquieting. If the student changes in a manner consistent with the teacher's aesthetic, or even just fights back in what turns out to be a productive manner, then this pedagogy is deemed successful. The kick was for her/his own good. Abuse is self-perpetuating, as social research has shown, and this form of abuse is deeply self-perpetuating and ingrained in Western Culture, as it forms part of the Oedipal narrative in which the father tries to kill the son, and then the son *does* kill the father, and the mother or sister conveniently kills herself.

Another, disconcerting, difficulty in countering this pedagogy is the fact that students crave the visible exercise of authority, indeed of brutality — even as they claim to rebel. Critiques which follow different models are not credited or understood. If a teacher tells you your work is full of shit, without elaborating his or her own position, motivation, or bias, he or she may not be helping you achieve self-criticality, but it is a *noticeable* commentary. In a time of conspicuous consumption, that is important. "I was told I was full of shit," or even, perversely, "I *cried!*" That the validation of brutality in teaching is pervasive emerges from a Hasidic tale:

When Rabbi Yitzhak Meir was quite young he became a disciple of Rabbi Moshe of Koznitz, the son of the maggid of Koznitz. One day his teacher kissed him on the forehead because he had helped him solve a difficult problem with astonishing acumen. "What I need," said Yitzhak Meir to himself, "is a rabbi who rends the flesh from my bones — not one who kisses me." Soon after he left Koznitz.⁴

Clearly, rending flesh is sometimes necessary for growth. What is at issue is how to get to clean bone without brutality, and not for the sake of being destructive. How does one make it possible for someone to change "by themselves?" As a teacher I am never quite sure of what I offer as an alternative to the "this work is full of shit" approach. I suggest choices to students — extrapolating from a painting several divergent possibilities for further work. While many students may wish me to say, this is good, this is bad, do this, don't do that, instead I say, this small spot in the painting seems alive — but understand that I may respond to this little thing because of something in my own work — and you could develop to the utmost this thing which is latent in your work, or you could develop to the utmost this totally opposite thing. This approach is less determinative and predictive. I urge students down paths suggested by their work and their conversation to an endlessly deeper path of investigation, which in itself is the core of art-making/thinking. This layered form of commentary apparently differs from the traditional voice of authority.

The problem-solving approach, so important in foundation teaching, poses similar problems, since a problem-solving exercise tends to hint at *a* solution. Clearly all would pay lip service to the idea that it is just the working through any set of limitations which is useful about these exercises. Yet an art curriculum which depends heavily on problem-solving tends to be oriented towards formalism, and implies a set of correct solutions. This, in turn, is connected to the linear model of art

history, which is a gendered construct, or rather, is a construct elaborated by a discipline which has orchestrated the elimination of the feminine from its pale.

These abuses of teaching, which I am suggesting have a gendered profile, are a mountainous obstacle for any student to get past. All students, and women students are particularly affected, must push their way past obstacles to learning about their own work which have been placed in front of them not "for their own good," as might be the claim, but for the good of the institution.

Despite these obstacles, and my delusion that no one had taught me anything notwithstanding, I *did* learn about making my own work. Some of how I learned cannot be recreated or proposed as a model: my parents were artists who worked at home. In college, I was mainly taught the ABCs of visual art in art history rather than studio classes. Thus, color, composition, form, and style, all the normalizing information one must pick up somehow were taken in either subliminally, in the intimacy of family, or at the useful distance from my own creative work which art history instruction provided.

There are aspects of my schooling, however, which can perhaps serve as suggested models for teaching and learning art making.

I was a participant in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in 1971-1972, under the direction of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. The Program undertook the dual project of critiquing male authority, specifically how art education had to that point dealt with its female students (who usually form the majority of the undergraduate art student body), and of trying to formulate presumably different and fairer authority structures which would not dispirit and destroy female creativity. Like many feminist activist groups at the time, there were immediately contradictory forces apparent, between any group's need for leaders, certain individuals' desire to lead, and a movement which ideally sought to undermine leadership as presently constituted. Penley notes the "contradictory demands around authority" inherent in feminist teaching:

Ideally, she [the teacher in the feminist classroom] carries out a very deliberate self-undermining of her own authority by refusing to be an "authority" at all, or by insisting that the validation of knowledge issue not from her acquired grasp of the material but from the students' own experiences as women and through a collective working-through of the issues raised. Another demand, often just as conscious even when recognized as contradictory, conflicts with the demand that she relinquish her authority. The woman who is a feminist teacher is expected at the very least to be an exemplary feminist, if not a "role model."

Penley concludes this passage by saying that "Feminism, then, like psychoanalysis, is characterized by its willful reliance on nonauthoritative knowledge."⁵

No utopian solutions were found, within the Feminist Program. One might note that women unused to power perhaps exercised it awkwardly at times, divided within themselves by conflicting desires, and beset by a fluctuating and delicate sense of their own right to any authority (an uncertainty bred into them by their acculturation within patriarchy). Also, women students, also acculturated within the same system, held women in slightly less awe than they did men, so there were overt debates, arguments, passionate efforts to rebel against the exercise of authori-

ty within the group. Within a separate and private space, women could analyze and learn to fight over power.

The Program existed in the middle of an egalitarian educational project. The history of CalArts' early years has been reformulated by Art History, as is its wont, into the house that John (Baldessari) built, contributing in a conveniently linear pattern such postmodern artists as David Salle, Ross Bleckner, Matt Mullican, Troy Brauntuch, Eric Fischl, Barbara Bloom, as well as Ashley Bickerton and Mike Kelley. The discipline of Art History turns clover-leaves into one-way streets. In fact, CalArts, perhaps for a brief period only, was distinguished by the inability of any one group or aesthetic to dominate over any other. No one group could consider itself the elite without recognizing that another elite existed down the hall: Post Studio/Baldessari, Feminism/Schapiro & Chicago, Late Abstract-Expressionism/Brach & Hacklin, Happenings/Kaprow, Fluxus/Knowles. Each ideology provided a liberating corrective to the others. This variety of mostly avant-garde movements of different vintages and ideologies co-existed and cross-fertilized within a unified space.

The atmosphere, ideology, aesthetic, and sexuality of this era at CalArts is best expressed, not in the paintings of Salle or Bleckner, but in the colorful, silly, exuberantly gay and utterly sweet confines of *PeeWee's Playhouse* (PeeWee, a.k.a. Paul Rubens, a.k.a. Paul Rubinfeld, CalArts 1970-1974). There is no one authority figure in *PeeWee's Playhouse*, not PeeWee, not Gumby, not the King of Cartoons. The secret word is not held by a single authoritarian figure or movement, but is a signal for a group of players to yell as loud as possible, and have a lot of fun.

Sex, sexuality, and exhibitionism were rampant at CalArts at the time. The first day I arrived, a teacher was pointed out to me, "that's Ben Lifson, he took his pants off at the Board of Trustees Meeting." Traditional demarcations of authority were eroded at the outset because students and faculty were united as rebels mooning the Disney family. But sexual abuse was subject to the political awareness caused by the presence of the Feminist Program.

The faculty at CalArts made the initial assumption that every student was an artist, positing at least the pretense of some equality between faculty and students, all artists together. When I began to teach, the first thing I had to adjust to was the obvious reality that most of my students were *not* artists and would not become artists. Even in art school, not all students will go on to become professional artists, but a lot of studio teaching services computer majors, so there can be no pretense of the equality of identity assumed by CalArts. Even CalArts' graduates could not escape statistics, nevertheless its utopian and communal premise was lived up to just enough to make every student feel they had something valuable to offer the community (in some cases students in one area taught courses on subjects in which they had prior experience, such as a studio major teaching a course on economics), and just enough to destabilize the idea of centralized authority or knowledge limited to a privileged teacher.

Whether as an appropriate circumstance for this concept of knowledge and authority, or as a direct result of the basically egalitarian premise, traditional classroom teaching was overshadowed by other formats: gossip in the cafeteria; teachers disagreeing with each other publicly (undermining each other's unique claim to

"knowledge"); apprenticeship; within the Feminist Program intensive projects such as *Womanhouse* (1972) worked on by faculty and students together; and, most importantly, shared lives for hours and days on end, more a ship of fools than a school. Wacky eccentricities marked the school: one teacher sat in the library and could be checked out like a reserve book!⁷

In this atmosphere, I did *learn* about my own work, but very little was *taught* in anything resembling a linear transmission of information. It would be truer to say that I lived at CalArts for two years, than that I studied there. I could work within my own mind, undisturbed but constantly exposed to visual images and ideas, many of which challenged my assumptions not only of what art should be, but of what should *be*, period. That a group of people generally wilder than myself accepted me as an intrinsic thinker and producer made it possible for me to absorb and eventually adopt some of the dramatically opposite models of art they represented.

This permissive atmosphere also meant that seriously disturbed kids could wander the deserted building at midnight like so many drowned Ophelias without anyone noticing something wrong, but it was also an interesting antidote to the innate conservatism of young people who may have purple hair, wear nose rings, and listen to strange music but are still oppressed by pubescent fears of non-conformity and by institutionalized art teaching which itself erases most forms of marginal production while paying lip-service to unbridled creativity.

CalArts had its share of crits where girls were made to cry, but undergraduates and graduates attended the same crits, and the traditionally rigid separation between drawing, painting, and sculpture were evaporated, leaving a freedom of access and movement for unformed artists. It boggles the mind that after all definitions of each of those disciplines have changed, particularly considering the expansion of what defines sculpture, many art schools and art departments within universities still metaphorically and geographically isolate the disciplines so that painting may be located in one building, while sculpture is taught in some troglodytic cave across campus where women students have to dress like loggers, under the direction of male sculptors of the type referred to as "tuskers" in Canada.

The ABCs of art were themselves redefined, from the accumulation of skills to the emphasis on context and content. Correct solutions to problems were less important than the reasons for being an artist, the personal narrative, the area of aesthetic intervention, or the political critique.

In this atmosphere, small bits of direct technical information were, not so paradoxically, especially memorable. One such incident took place within the Feminist Program: although we did learn a lot of factual material, from construction techniques to the reexcavated *oeuvres* of women artists of the past, the Program was marked by intense psychodrama, wrenching moments of personal exposure within consciousness-raising sessions, painful lessons in every aspect of political organization. In the middle of all of that, Miriam Schapiro once said to me with a very serious expression on her face, "you know, you can put gesso on with a sponge [instead of with a brush]." Now here was something simple, not emotionally charged, a tiny practical hint at the variety of choices one had in materials and methods, a bit of the minutiae of daily life of the artist as *worker*. It was a "trivial" moment, yet one which expressed the deeper subtext of the relationship between a pro-

fessional woman artist and the young woman for whom she wished the same life.

As a teacher my desires for my students vary wildly. Sometimes I want to throw a protective and all-encompassing mantle over them like a Sieneese Madonna of Mercy. I want to act like the great old European piano teachers you sometimes read about who also have their pupils to dinner, choose their clothes, and tell them who to marry. I want them to understand that my authority, if any, comes not from an institutional position to be blindly obeyed or blindly rebelled against, but emerges from my survival of the very same obstacles they encounter and from the distance I've traveled down the paths of investigation, even though I have no power (perhaps even informed by that lack of power). And, when I feel as trapped as they do in a fluorescent-lit room, I want to cook them a giant meatball⁸ and have a party.

Humor and community, and the concerted effort to *try*, if not to ever fully succeed, to undermine traditional, gendered authority structures and to render teaching transparent, can help create a situation in which what cannot be taught — intelligence, drive, self-criticality — can be learned.

Notes

1. Constance Penley, "Teaching in Your Sleep," *The Future of an Illusion — Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 166.
2. Sometimes a teacher's assumption that such relationships are normal are so blatant as to be laughable. My intro painting teacher (in 1968), during a tutorial in his office, asked me how old I was, and when he discovered that I was under the age of consent so that, I suppose, he would be subject to the Mann Act if he took me over state lines, he shook his head, chuckled me under the chin, and chuckled that I was "too young." Too young for what?
3. Penley, p. 174.
4. Martin Buber, "The Malcontent," *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 303.
5. Penley, p. 174.
6. Many students were aware of the workings of power which made this co-existence possible: all of these people had been hired by Paul Brach, the Dean of the Art School, who by making no bones of his disagreement with most of them yet encouraging their difference, taught an important lesson in the *properties* of authority.
7. Jeremy Shapiro, 1972-73. This deftly underscored the recognition that he did have knowledge, and yet gave the students temporary command.
8. Recently two words intrude into my classrooms, where the institutions I work for impose physical and pedagogic limitations: "*Giant Meatball*." I remember that a class at CalArts baked as giant a meatball as could fit in an oven, had a party, and ate it. I tried to track down that giant meatball. I thought this might have happened in a class given by Emmett Williams, a Fluxus artist and poet, so I looked up "Food" in the elaborately cross-referenced index of the *Fluxus Codex* (Jon Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988). I found a list including "fish jello," "liquid white glue eggs," and, almost what I was searching for, "giant bread filled with sawdust," (p. 141). There was the "giant," now where was the meatball? I finally found one on the elegant frontispiece of *The Mythological Travels of a modern Sir John Mandeville, being an account of the Magic, Meatballs and other Monkey Business Peculiar to the Sojourn of Daniel Spoerri upon the Isle of Symi, together with divers speculations thereon* (Daniel Spoerri, "New York City, by the Parking Lot of the Chelsea Hotel:" Something Else Press, MCMLXX). "For lunch I made *dolmates*, which in Symi are also called *yaprakia*, a variation of *keftedes* (in Symiotic, *pitaridia*), and are meatballs wrapped in grape leaves," (pp. 200-201). The recipe follows.