

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 4, 2007

Can/should art be taught?

Filed under: education — alecsothblog @ 9:28 pm

I recently dipped my toes into the art education industry. After several waves of exhilaration and despair, I'm happy to find myself back on the relative terra firma of this blog. But I'm struggling to bring any coherence to my impressions. With only two weeks spent at the San Francisco Art Institute, I'm not qualified to offer much on the topic of arts education. But something is nagging at me. Something seems wrong.

In a recent article in *Art in America* entitled 'Art schools: A Group Crit,' my unease is validated by a couple of educators with a lot more experience than me:

Cocteau said that poetry is a machine for the manufacture of love and that all of its other properties were lost on him. The acknowledgment of art's powers of intimacy is too dicey for the business of college.

Art occurs in a state of grace. This can be patiently explained and somehow understood—there are enough artists to verify it—but then you are asked to teach. This can be exhausting. So it is more convenient to have an educational methodology. However, the result of this compromise is a lowering of expectations.

Archie Rand

Dave Hickey made the boldest comments. I don't agree with everything he says, but his comments are worth quoting in full:

1. In the present moment, artists are better off training themselves at home and acquiring the benefit of a good liberal arts or art historical education. This, because the model for graduate art education, established in the early '70s by John Baldessari and others (myself included), is 40 years old and virtually obsolete.
2. Art schools are unhappy, ugly places. They tend to inculcate philistine, institutional habits of mind and to teach young artists more about teaching than about art. Since teaching art has been destructive to the practice of every artist I know who teaches, I try never to forget that the few good, serious teachers of art pay a price that's way too high for the privilege of doing it.
3. Teaching art, in my experience, is a genuine privilege that comes with its own oath to "do no harm." It also breaks your heart.
4. Art is a cosmopolitan practice best taught in cities near the water. Teaching art in a provincial cultural environment that does not celebrate and embrace change is totally self-defeating. It transforms art into a

compensatory discourse that can help a stranded student maintain his or her sanity for few years in the boonies. It cannot, however, help people who teach under these conditions maintain their sanity. These people are doomed....

5. Teachers of art practice have one overriding obligation to their students: to be intimately familiar with the contemporary standards of art practice, discourse, trade and exhibition against which their students' work will be measured—so their students will know the unspoken rules they are choosing to break or not to break. The art market itself should be dealt with evenhandedly and explained in detail. It is a fact and an option from which students should not be cloistered. Demonizing the art marketplace does more damage to students than exposing them to collectors and dealers who are irrevocably a part of the art world.

6. Art school must be free or cheap. It is virtually impossible for a young artist to establish a mature, courageous practice with a six-figure educational debt.

7. Art students should not be placed under the authority of older practicing artists whose work they are mandated to render obsolete. This guarantees bad advice and destructive criticism.

8. Any teacher of art who conceives his or her job to be "teaching young artists to think critically" should be fired immediately for intellectual dishonesty.

9. All group crits with faculty and students in attendance should be abolished immediately. These crucibles privilege the verbal over the visual and allow faculty members to poison and manipulate peer relations among their students.

10. Nurturing attention paid to an art student should never be confused with attention paid to nurturing art.

11. Unfinished work should be presumed not to exist.

12. Art in the context of an art school always looks bad, especially when it's very good.

13. Regular supervision and oversight of young artists' practice should be suppressed. My rule: "If you're not sick, don't call the doctor."

14. If art students want to study Continental theory, they should learn German and French and study it in a philosophy department. Because (1) art schools are incapable of distinguishing properly between theory and practice; (2) art school classes in these subjects are little more than uncritical "slow pitch" indoctrinations taught by advocates rather than scholarly adepts; (3) all of the American translations of this work are poisoned by the moment of their making; (4) this entire discourse is now "historical"—a dated, conservative, academic field of study and no longer live talk.

15. Only saints can nurture real talent. I am a writer, not even an artist, and even I can't avoid feeling a twinge of resentment when a pimple-faced twerp with a skateboard under his arm shows me a mature and persuasive work of art. I can see, much more clearly than the twerp, the road opening before him, the obstacles falling away, and it's all I can do not to stick out my foot and trip him. If I were an artist, with a stake in the game, I would probably trip him, and tell myself that it's for his own good. It wouldn't be. Better to buy the damned art and take your profit on the back end.

The longest 'Art Schools Group Crit' was made by Robert Storr. But Storr's solution for creating a good program seems quite simple: "You can't go wrong hiring John Baldessari."

Baldessari's secret to teaching also seems pretty simple. In the current issue of *Modern Painters*, he says to Michael Craig-Martin, "You can't teach art; that's my premise."

Craig-Martin, formerly of Goldsmith's College in London, agrees:

I sometimes said to students, "I could tell you everything I know, everything I could think of saying to you in a day or two. But it wouldn't make any difference, because you'd understand all the words, you'd write it all down, it would all make sense, and it would be absolutely useless to you. The thing you have to do is you have to act it out."

Bill Jay said something similar while reflecting on his twenty-five years of teaching (pdf):

In my own experience, the only learning which has been meaningful has been self-motivated, self-taught, self-appropriated, self-discovered. As the old saying goes, "When the student is ready, the master will appear."

How can the needs of the student be better served? I wish I knew. All I do know is that the biggest single factor inhibiting education is the educational system. The problem is that as soon as alternatives are suggested, these alternatives become ossified into a different, but equally rigid, system – and I am well aware that criticism alone is not very constructive. Ideally, I would eliminate all examinations, the credit system, grades, and the declaration of majors. I would even dispense with degrees.

My recent teaching experience had wonderful moments. Some encounters with students were so good that I was ready to quit my day job. But this exhilaration was more than matched by some serious angst. It is dangerous, and for me devastating, to share my greatest passion in an atmosphere of wasteful apathy. Like a small drop of fixer spilled into the developer bath, this apathy threatens to spoil the whole creative process.

At the end of the two weeks I found myself asking the same questions that Robert Adams asked in his essay on teaching: Can Photography Be taught? Ought it to be taught? If so, am I the one to teach it?:

Can Photography Be taught? If this means the history and techniques of the medium, I think it can. The latter, particularly, are straightforward. If, however, teaching photography means bringing students to find their own individual photographic visions, I think it is impossible. We would be pretending to offer the students, in William Stafford's phrase, "a wilderness with a map." We can give beginners directions about how to use a compass, we can tell them stories about our exploration of different but possibly analogous geographies, and we can bless them with our caring, but we cannot know the unknown and thus make sure a path to real discovery.

Ought photography to be taught? If at the beginning of my own photography I had taken a course in the mechanics, it would have saved time. Learning the history of the medium might also have been done more systematically in a class, but it was fun and easy to do on my own. As for the studio courses in "seeing" – which usually place student work up for evaluation by both classmates and teachers – I was never tempted to take one, and so am not attracted to teaching one. Arrogantly I believed right from the start that I could see. That was the compulsion, to make a record of what I saw. And so listening to most other people speak didn't seem helpful. Even now I don't like to discuss work that isn't finished, because until it is revised over the span of a year or several years there are crucial parts that are present only in my mind's eye, pieces intended but not yet realized. If I were forced to pay attention, as one would be in a class, to a dozen different understandings and assessments of what I was putting together it would amount to an intolerable distraction, however well mean. Architect Luis Barragan was right, I think: "Art is made by the alone for the alone."

Am I one to teach photography? When I consider the possibility I can't help remembering a question put to me by an affectionate and funny uncle when I told him I might become a minister – "Do you have to?" Experience later as an English teacher brought up the same issue. Teachers must, I discovered, have a gift to teach and the compulsion to use it. And faith. Anything less won't carry you through.

When I ask art students what they want to do after graduation, 9 out of 10 respond with some variation of "teach, I guess." Forgetting that there will never be enough teaching positions to support all of these graduates, I'm skeptical. Along with teaching creative thinking, art schools should encourage creative ways of making a living. If students are interested in art education, they should approach it creatively and critically. It is certainly worthwhile to ask a variation of Adams' three questions:

Can art be taught? Should art be taught? Who should teach it?

1. I've been teaching "art" for a good 7 year or so stretch so I'd say you can teach the tech side f stops, dodge and burn etc... but when it comes to making an interesting photograph at best you can do is be a guide, the student has to really want and be interested in making good work, if they aren't they never will. I think there is some really great value to being there as a guide for students who are interested in making good work, often times if left to there own devices they end up making technically perfect copies of someone they admire (you should see all the young alec's hanging the hallways) but if someone is there to guide them and expose them to things they may not run across on there own they are more likely to start exploring work that is really in them. All in all the best thing for any art student if they actually want to make a living as an artist would be a copy of "how to make friends and influence people" it can be really hard to get some even fairly driven students to get out to openings and other events where they can meet people who can really help them out in spite of free drinks and a marketing minor.

Comment by doug mcgoldrick — September 4, 2007 @ 10:01 pm

2. by chance, at the cottage this week, I picked up one of the many books that belonged to my wife's artist mother from one of the bookshelves there

It was a 1950's copy Ben Shahn's "The Shape of Content" (previously most know to me from his friendship with Walker Evans).

"The artist Shahn was invited to be the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University in 1956.⁵⁷ His Norton Lectures published in this collection gives an overview of Shahn's ideas and opinions on such topics as the education of artists, the creative process, the nonconformity of artists, and appraisals of various modern art movements and artists."

I'm still reading it, but he enthusiastically tackles some of the questions you raise

(and still in print and available at Amazon I see...) It's worth getting for the small sketches alone, interspersed among the text

Comment by Tim Atherton — September 4, 2007 @ 10:33 pm

3. I've been teaching photography for over 30 years. I think art can be taught and should be taught. I have taught in classrooms, online, workshops, adult ed. I have found it to be fun. My students find it to be fun. I don't care if they become photographers and I don't think many of them care. My focus in my classes is on content more than technical photography. I think I am enhancing there lives and I am sure they are enhancing mine. The quotes you have interesting but don't reflect my experience as a photography teacher.

Comment by Paul Light — September 4, 2007 @ 10:37 pm

4. I recently read that whole piece in Art in America, and identified a single underlying flaw in everyone's reasoning: all of these people first and foremost assume that EVERY LAST STUDENT CAN BE SAVED. Like in any other field out there, there is a few winners and a whole host of losers. It is unhealthy for the sanity of the professors to desire otherwise.

Art school is rather fresh in my mind, I got my BFA in May from a relatively dinky art department at a state university. I had a host of different professors, some purely technical, aggressive towards conceptualism and poetry, others highly confused, other still with their shit together, others comfortable being really big, complacent fish in a really small pond. I had Socratically-minded teachers who asked questions, and I had loud obnoxious artisans who demanded answers.

I can honestly say that I wouldn't want to trade this education for anything, I don't think they've wasted my time. They've managed to teach me to THINK, primarily and most importantly. Honestly, I was disappointed with elementary, middle and high school and figured college wouldn't be much different. But I was pleasantly surprised. Now note, I am not saying they taught me how

to engage in bullshit artspeak and bury my technical insecurities in diluted, tepid conceptualism while looking for some sort of upcoming art movement to adopt and ride the wave of. Rather, they thought me not to be cynical. They beat the highschool punk who wanted to draw whimsical one-liners out of me, and opened a door to a more comprehensive (and more discriminating) appreciation of art.

As for the critiques, at the beginning they were interesting and enlightening– then they became annoying as I came to realize no one would actually say anything substantial– then interesting again as a group of students proceeded to ignore the proper decorum of castrated discourse and actually dissect work on its merits– when it became obvious that this course of action was utterly lost on the people it was supposed to benefit, these loudmouths shut up– and finally, for the last year and a half, the critiques felt more like support groups for those left behind (the good few unfortunates of no abstract faculty or desire, and no real technical or intuitive drive besides) than constructive passage of time for those who’ve actually bothered to grow during their seclusion in the university...

It is these lost souls that I recognized in the laments of the interviewees. They are all freaking out that these kids are being broken. These kids have been coasting on their belief in talent and their own specialness, utterly sheltered all their lives from any real experiences and thoughts. They are flimsy, not sensitive. They are self-obsessed, not introspective. They are deluded, not romantic. They are philistines, not iconoclasts. It is a weird Pygmalion-like undertaking on the part of the professors and it is futile. With every million weaklings that are minced through the higher art education to become McDonalds managers, a few break through to something.

That is all we really need.

BTW, this is one of the best art blogs out there, I love it.

Comment by S. Zivadinovic — September 4, 2007 @ 11:32 pm

5. I admire teachers, but I think ultimately the people who should be teaching (whether art or any other subject) are the ones who are as passionate about teaching as you are, Alec, about photography.

In photography, as in teaching, so much of it is about going through the process and having faith (or at least hoping) that you’ll get something good—but still, going through the process anyway, without knowing for sure.

Comment by Liz — September 5, 2007 @ 12:43 am

6. [...] Contact the Webmaster Can/should art be taught? » This Summary is from an article posted at alec soth – blog on Tuesday, September 04, 2007 I recently dipped my toes into the art education industry. After several waves of exhilaration and despair, I’m happy to find myself back on the relative terra firma of this blog. But I’m struggling to bring any coherence to my impressions. With only two weeks spent at the San Francisco Art Institute, Summary Provided by Technorati.com View Original Article at alec soth – blog » 10 Most Recent News Articles About White House [...]

Pingback by University Update - White House - Can/should art be taught? — September 5, 2007 @ 12:45 am

7. “Art is made by the alone for the alone.” luis barragan

Comment by robert — September 5, 2007 @ 4:07 am

8. If I were to start from scratch today as an 18 year old, I don’t think I’d bother to go to art college. To end up 3 years later with a 5 figure debt, very little to show for it, and no way of earning the

most basic living seems incredible. Far better to learn a trade that allows you to work freelance part-time, giving you time and space to think and work.

In my limited art education I met one or two gifted, brilliant and committed teachers who seemed bowed down by the stress of trying to maintain their faith in what they were doing in the face of overwhelming bureaucratic pressures. I met others who were openly pursuing their own empire-building agendas, to whom students were just disposable cash-cows.

David Hickey's points seem to hit the mark very accurately to me.

Comment by guybatey — September 5, 2007 @ 5:11 am

9. Alec.....Can you offer a tutorial on writing The Artist's Statement?

Comment by wayne — September 5, 2007 @ 6:24 am

10. Although my experience in art school is not nearly as fresh as S. Zivadivonic's described above, it was a very similar experience. Ultimately, it's up to the student to get as much out of an education as possible.

I would add though, that the most important couple of classes I took were basic drawing and figure drawing in freshman year. Perhaps you can't teach "seeing", but you sure can hone it in a good drawing class. I continued to take drawing classes from time to time. It's like exercise for the eyes.

Art schools would do well to keep the critiques to minimum, and the hands on studio classes to a maximum, and add a few classes in "what the hell to do after art school...".

And the best teachers, I found were the ones as passionate about teaching as they were about making art.

Comment by Suzanne — September 5, 2007 @ 7:08 am

11. [...] alec soth – blog » Blog Archive » Can/should art be taught? The Soth takes up the topic of art education, reminding me that I never wrote my follow-up MFA post and perhaps obviating the need for it. (She says hopefully...) (tags: art education photography) Digg This Save to Del.icio.us [...]

Pingback by Personism » Blog Archive » links for 2007-09-05 — September 5, 2007 @ 8:18 am

12. Well my two cents here.. Art education in itself has tremendous value. Learning about the history, sharing ideas and knowledge, is always a good thing. There is a difference in learning that occurs when you learn about an event from someone who actually experienced it, rather than reading about the history second hand, for example.

The problem is something we know but don't acknowledge, that art education is still a thing of privilege in this country, for a great number of reasons. Fundamentally we don't value creativity and art in our culture, we underfund the arts at every level, and direction for actually making a living as an artist rarely comes out of the higher education experience. Art school today functions as a place to make connections, to vie for the limited teaching jobs and gallery representation that is out there.

Dave Hickey's point number 4 is an example of the kind of thinking that props this cycle up –

I was talking with a young MFA student recently and made the comment that I was very happy she was studying art, that we need more artists. Her response was being in the MFA program made her feel like there were too many artists already! Something is wrong with our system, but I don't think education in arts is a bad idea in and of itself –

Comment by Kay — September 5, 2007 @ 8:30 am

13. thanks for that.

i love bill jay, he says so much in a clear and concise manner,

Comment by einars o — September 5, 2007 @ 8:53 am

14. A friend once said to me that the most difficult time of an artists career might be that first year out of school. This comment points to a great deal that is problematic with art education in my eyes – We all need to become lost in order to find our own way, and I suspect not very many institutions or teachers allow for this. Can art be taught – I would agree with Baldessari and say no – yet if we examine any variety of religious mystical traditions they would say the same thing, and yet teaching and learning (if you can call it that) does happen. I do not believe we can do this in a total vacuum – teaching in the arts has after all been around for hundreds upon hundreds of years.

Comment by Mathew Pokoik — September 5, 2007 @ 9:18 am

15. It's interesting to me that you are struggling with the very same questions that I grappled with while teaching freshman composition in grad school. It does have tinges in the business world too, though. Can leadership be taught? Can entrepreneurial spirit be taught?

Comment by Shawn Lea — September 5, 2007 @ 9:50 am

16. great post.

I think in terms of teaching the most important aspect is to create the right environment for a student to recognize his or her own passion. After passion is anchored, nothing can stop that person from fulfilling, extending and innovating as an artist.

Comment by mark — September 5, 2007 @ 10:18 am

17. This question is really one of the emporer's new clothes. Who will say out loud that art education might be pointless (beside's Alec)? Certainly not those employed in the system, or those shelling out obscene amounts of thir own or their parents' money. I've done teaching in fits and spurts (as Alec has). I've had the same mix of unease and delight about it. First, I believe a career teaching art is ALMOST certain to conflict with or crush a career making art. I have tremndous admiration for my friends and colleagues who excel at doing both- they are rare and to be treasured. I've had wonderful experiences in classroom crits where the growth and excitment is palpable in EVERYONE- crit subject, classmates, and intructor. But in the end my feeling is that the great students will become great artists anyway, with or without art school. The less stellar ones can be nurtured along to be better artists but no amount of education will turn them into great artists. I'm writing this as an artist without an MFA, so I admit to a certain amount of smugness about higher education. If I had gone to grad school I would probably be a different sort of artist- certainly with a better background in critical theory and probably a different network of professional contacts. I would probably be making different work, but I dout I would be better off for it.

Comment by Paul Shambroom — September 5, 2007 @ 10:26 am

18. As a current participant in an MFA program I have my own doubts about the art education system. To look at it with the most cynical eye, MFAs in particular are merely a way for schools to create another revenue stream. The same institutions that are offering MFAs are the ones that require them to teach. Granted there are those cases where an established artist will be teaching without an MFA, but one could argue that being a great artist doesn't necessarily make you a great teacher. In fact, I would guess that the combination was quite rare. How many people have successfully combined the selfishness of art and the selflessness of teaching?

I also agree with the general consensus that the cost of art education (and education in general) is ridiculous. How can you feel free to do the exploration and thinking crucial to art while being saddled with crushing debt?

On the positive side, the most rewarding experiences for me have been the exposure to other artists' work and I completely agree with Kay's comment that reading about it and having it presented by the artist are two completely different things. So, for me, art education is about access. Access to artist and other people in the art world that I might not meet otherwise. Access to ways of doing things or thought that I hadn't known or considered before. The best thing a teacher can do is to make themselves available to students. To share not only what they know, but the things that they think about, with the understanding that the same things are not going to resonate with every student. In this way Alec, I think you are a great teacher and I appreciate how you put yourself out there, both on you blog and in the SFAI class. I definitely got something out of it.

Comment by Michael Silva — September 5, 2007 @ 10:37 am

19. I agree with Paul here, art school will not turn anyone into a great artist. Recently I've had this topic on my mind to the point where I can't sleep well anymore. As my experience through art school gave me a inside view of what goes on in "art school" I came out realizing that art was taught but how to be yourself and create your art, is all dependent on yourself. There are many ways that our world has embraced arts in everyday culture which has offered more positions, ex. designers, which can be taught how to.....design I guess. Isn't everyone a designer these days? But of course does that mean that the designs are magnificent and or creating genius? NO. The cost of being educated to understand art and it's power is absurd. I never quite understood how art can be limited to those that want/can pay to "get" it. But once again that depends on the individual, which reflects an upbringing, which further reflects on our American culture! The whole discussion about teaching is interesting because if I remember correctly there are a large amount of artists out there that do have a MFA and there are many that don't. So who it that is judging what a great artist is??? I think that's the real question. Maybe collectors and gallerists should be teaching art.

Comment by karolina — September 5, 2007 @ 11:04 am

20. Maybe money is the issue. I appreciate Michael Silva's kind words. But Michael is an interesting case. He is a fantastic artist, art-enthusiast and all around good fella. I felt like I (and the rest of the class) should be paying him.

Another issue is age. Michael is a bit older. It seems like the older students are always committed. It isn't that the younger students are 'bad.' In a lot of cases they are just in the wrong field. This is why I'm a little skeptical of art schools. If students are in a liberal arts setting and they are clearly not artists, you can steer them down a different path. In art school you are stuck with the major and the debt.

Whatever the case, the thing I want to stress is that Michael Silva needs to start a blog. Now. (I'll pay you).

Comment by Alec Soth — September 5, 2007 @ 11:20 am

21. Yes, Michael—I am happy to hear that you are now in an MFA program (and one that seems like a good match).

Please do start a blog!

Comment by jennifer — September 5, 2007 @ 11:42 am

22. good stuff. enjoyed michael silva's comments as well.

i didn't learn much in college until i became fascinated with a particular artist. I started to read about him and learned about all the writers that he admired. This led me to other artists which led me to more artists and more ideas. This hasn't stopped for ten years.

As long as you have the passion and curiosity to explore you're set in my mind. The rest of the debate is about MONEY. can i get paid? can i make a living? can i afford the materials?

the thing that always bugs me about art is that so much of it revolves around having access to the materials. I'd love to paint, but damn, it's really expensive. Same with much of photography, insanely expensive. making a movie? forget about it. Expensive.

But the beauty of the current technological revolution is that the materials and tools are becoming cheaper which allows more people access. Think about digital cameras and the whole Youtube generation. I think we're seeing an explosion in creativity because curious, passionate people are finally gaining access to the tools. I think what we need now more than ever are passionate editors who can decipher the interesting from the mundane...but even that has some inherent flaws.

can art be taught? i don't know for sure, but i think any relationship between teacher and pupil it should be an open collaboration and dialog between people who are passionate about what they're doing.

As long as i'm alive i'll always have a desire to seek out new knowledge and wisdom from whomever may cross my path.

One of my favorite quotes on this subject is from William Blake....

"I must create a system, or be enslav'd by another man's; I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to create."

peace, and thanks for the interesting topic alec.

Comment by bryanF — September 5, 2007 @ 12:31 pm

23. Being someone currently looking at various art colleges to attend this post was eye-opening and brought up some questions of my own.

Can't going somewhere cheap just to stay out of debt lead to a suffocating environment for someone with passion and drive? I bring up that point because one of the criticisms of Art Schools which I have noticed is that they don't teach anything regarding when the student moves on to the "real-world." Going to a liberal arts state school could leave you in exactly the same spot (not knowing how to function as an artist in a competitive environment.)

Finally, are there any art colleges at which people here think there is good teaching and work being done?

This is a very interesting topic and I'm glad to see such varying opinions on the matter.

Comment by Jonathan A. — September 5, 2007 @ 1:01 pm

24. When I was an undergrad I was fortunate to have 2 professors, Bill Jay and Tamarra Kaida, who told me NOT to get an MFA. One told me to go to europe and one told me just to go away. (and i graduated top of my class) This felt very very strange at the time. I felt I had spent 4 years preparing my entrance application for graduate school, I mean what else do you do with a BFA in photography other than go on to get an MFA and then a teaching job somewhere? I absolutely treasure what I got from these 2 people, but should have just hung out with them more often after class. Bill Jay, if you read this, I am one of those lame students who got so much and gave close to nothing and never kept in touch (thanks for the chance alec). Every time I see a "Guy

Who Looks Like You" I swear I think of you and wonder if you still wear a point-n-shoot camera on your belt.

I have also, over the last 10 years, dabbled in teaching photography but feel absolutely drained at the end of a semester. I am grateful that some great artists can produce great work (both theory and practical) also teach and pass that energy on. I guess that's the biggest thing I got from my art studies; a tireless work ethic which I strive (struggle) to keep.

my top 5 of people i have been lucky enough to study under who are brilliant artists/theorists:

Tamarra Kiada, Bill Jay, Thomas J. Cooper, Van Deren Coke, (yes Im that old) and Bill Jenkins. Thanks

For the record, I did apply to Grad school, three years after the BFA, and I didnt get in. I was crushed, so I bought a new Hasselblad and a ton of film with the money, and never looked back.

Comment by Andrew Phelps — September 5, 2007 @ 1:36 pm

25. This discourse boggles the mind.

Aren't great artists born and all the rest merely an anointing from well-heeled connections?

Comment by rgarcia-brondo — September 5, 2007 @ 2:34 pm

26. teaching is the most important service that you can give to mankind.

in order for it to be done effectively you need an effective system, and you need to lower yourself to the level of the student in order to bring them up.

there are things that the student must learn for him/her self, the structure of the system should prepare this.

i have had the privilege to work with one or two exceptional printers, when i asked them "what is the difference between a grade one printer and yourself" the answer was always "personal taste".

ps, the truly great photographers, atget, frank, evans, ... , guess who taught them?

Comment by adrian tyler — September 5, 2007 @ 2:37 pm

27. I don't think there is something called Art... I agree with HCB on this. Of course there are technical bits that need to be taught to learn any medium but I think the key term here is creativity (not ART) and IMO we all have a capacity to be creative. True, some of us have more capacity than others but there are plenty of surprises down this road in my experience. And of course some people are just mindbogglingly creative with an intensity that most can't match. The important thing though is that the joy of creating is self-rewarding regardless of a student's ultimate ability, and I believe that's true for people of all ages.

IMO most schools drain the spirit of creativity out of their students regardless of subject. Although teachers usually "love their subject" and want to "share" that with their students they don't have a clue on how to set up activities which foster or even demand creativity. And teachers and their bosses quickly get nervous about "moving along in the syllabus and "moving along" is not the way creativity works. In my experience if students are continually put in situations which require creativity and if the teacher has an infectious energy then the students will learn to be more creative. I guess I'd sum up that if you want to foster creativity in students you have to foster it in your teaching too.

Comment by Eric — September 5, 2007 @ 2:57 pm

28. I'm not prejudging any academic program or teacher, especially after teaching 17 years in the "inner city." But if you want to be a "pro" photographer, you take a few intro classes for those things technical, then be ready to hustle your ass as an assistant or freelance. If your passion lies in the art, study every monograph, every website, every gallery show that is relevant to your interests.

I attended art school for one year and was contemplating quitting. One day my art history professor (whose class consisted of monotone ramblings concerning badly reproduced slides), walked into the elevator with me- recently I had been showing up for the last ten minutes of her 2 hr class and saying "present" when my name was called. She asked my major and when I replied "photography," she told me that she had just seen a wonderful photo exhibit about celebrities. I replied that the inherent problem with such an exhibit was that sometimes you didn't know if you were reacting to the image of said celebrity, or the photograph itself. "Wow" she said, "I never thought of that." Wow, I thought, and I'm paying you.

Comment by Stan B. — September 5, 2007 @ 3:30 pm

29. Hello

I do not think there is a good or perfect answer for the questions you have posed. The process at becoming good at what you do is different for everyone. Some can become inspired in isolation or by reading. Others require peer interaction or confirmation (for those of us with low self esteem this can be beneficial or sincerely damaging to the work we make).

Personal, I look at art school as a way to give myself time and space to make work and to hopefully garner a more clear understanding of photography.

Alec, you didn't need to go to school for an MFA which is wonderful but I think that I and few other people do.

Comment by catharine — September 5, 2007 @ 3:50 pm

30. art school seems like it could be a nice place to meet lots of new people and make some new friends with similar interests and all that, and i imagine that art history classes could be lots of fun, but otherwise...nah. just do what you are naturally interested in doing, all of the time, and you will get art smart.

Comment by kevin — September 5, 2007 @ 3:57 pm

31. I just got out of school for photography (Southern Illinois University Carbondale). So far I've been working as a photo assistant, which is really where you learn as much or more than you do in school. I've heard a lot that you don't need to go to school for photography to work in photography, which is true I think.

HOWEVER! Even though the techniques I learned could have been taught to me in a year or two, the real benefit of school for me was spending 4 years just making work. After every production class I took, I honestly felt that I was a better photographer. Having to live up to the standards of my peers as well as my instructors refined my vision and my aesthetic.

As far as being taught to be an ARTIST goes. I think we spend too much time classifying, qualifying, and defining art. What makes a good artist? Personal experience and vision! What makes it art? I don't know, but it moves me when I see it.

Comment by Mark Sperry — September 5, 2007 @ 5:40 pm

32. It's been my experience that being in a creative environment, surrounded by creative people, and striving to achieve creative expectations — against all common sense — is actually a pretty mediocre environment for creating art.

Great art is often created under great constraints, and I wonder if art school actually grants too much room/time/resources/expectation for creativity. There's not much to fight.

Comment by James — September 5, 2007 @ 5:55 pm

33. Sid Grossman and the Photo League; Harry Callahan; Siskind; Lisette Model; Bernd and Hilla Becher; the Entire Yale Faculty (let's face it)(including Mr. Papageorge); some teacher named Joel Sternfeld (I think you know him); Larry Sultan; Jim Goldberg; the list of influential photography teachers could go on forever...

Without these and so many of those unnamed photography as we know might just be a much less interesting place. Not just without their work but also the many students they fostered. It certainly can be argued that certain things must be developed internally but being in the community of ideas and simply someone asking to step up and make pictures seems to be the bigger importance.

Comment by Brian Ulrich — September 5, 2007 @ 6:14 pm

34. Recently I was in the company of several faculty members who stated that their undergraduate classes wouldn't miss them if they were gone for a week of classes, and that they could just get their stand in to show a movie or something. I had just dropped one of their classes and I was doubly glad, because I want to take classes that deliver more than PBS. If I had gotten the "jump the sandwich" assignment in class I might have accidentally crapped my pants with excitement, instead of dropping my plans for an art minor just two classes shy.

Whether it is a good and worthwhile class doesn't depend on the genre, it depends on the teacher and the student. I have taken computer science classes with lectures so difficult that they left me feeling dizzy and sick. I took a digital photography class from the rhetoric department where the instructor put so much Barthes into his slides that he was nervous about lawsuits when distributing copies to the students. Those were good matches for me, and if my art classes had had the same vigor and drive I would still be taking them.

There are things to be taught and learned in an art class. Technical skills can be self-taught, but there's no shame in needing lessons. In a post-secondary environment, one would expect students to teach themselves quite a lot anyway — the coursework would teach a breadth and depth of material that would leave a student to perfect details and learn new techniques more easily. If you learn about histograms it can affect your darkroom printing. If you learn darkroom printing it can affect your digital imaging. Exposure to dozens of past and current masters can shift your world view and inform the images that you capture in the first place. I would expect good art classes to end with students sprinting to the lab or sitting down with glazed ideas muttering "oh wow, that really makes you think."

You can't really teach creativity, but you can teach the tools to use it and demonstrate sets of criteria with which to measure an idea. You can teach what's been done before and give students chances to work — not to Make Work — but to flex their muscles by moving rocks around inside their own heads. Test their technical abilities, make them talk coherently about other people's work and their own, and help them understand the art world. The rest, including their advancement at McDonald's after they graduate, is their own deal.

Comment by Jesse Mullan — September 5, 2007 @ 7:00 pm

35. I don't actually agree with the position that great teachers can't be great artists. Those were Hickey's words, not mine. And let me be clear, I am pro-teacher. When I was in high school, I was doomed to be a second-rate banker until an art teacher woke me up. And in college this new enthusiasm was nurtured by a tremendous artist and role model.

These two teachers has such a profound impact on my life that I always thought I was going to be a teacher. But perhaps this is my problem. I want too much.

In the Bill Jay article quoted above, he writes:

"I have to admit it: I am only interested in changing lives, not providing information for its own sake. It sounds impertinent and I make the statement with some embarrassment. I do not know why such admissions are awkward but they are, like conducting to virtue, or advocating Beauty and Goodness, or even Truth, or urging on the artist as spiritual seeker. Such notions, nowadays, tend to prompt the gagging reflex. But I cannot imagine the purpose of education if such concepts are not at issue. And centrally so."

This kind of ambition is bound to lead to confusion and disappointment. I doubt that great teachers try so hard. Like great artists, I'm sure the best develop a quality of effortlessness. I'm just not sure I could ever reach that point.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 5, 2007 @ 9:04 pm

36. Can / Should art be taught? – my opinion from a personal educational experience is a resounding yes. I come from an architectural education background – not an MFA. I'm not a teacher in the academic sense, but I have an opportunity to be a mentor in a practice sense to others in my office. Architecture was (and still is) a unique blend of the arts and science. I think photography shares some aspects of this blend. I think school (MFA) is really only a first step. You don't really learn how to make a great building in school... I suspect you don't really learn how to make a great picture in school either... you might learn the qualities of what makes a great building, or a great picture, but you don't actually do it, unless by accident...I think it is more likely something that happens in practice and over time.

Architecture is a wonderfully complex situation where learning about the history and the process is really what school is all about. An architectural education doesn't necessarily produce an architect (or an artist) and I think that is OK. But at the very least it should provide the opportunity to the tools of a critical thinker and problem solver. To me that's what an MFA student should endeavor to develop – critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is a life-long skill that can be applied to any endeavor. Apprenticeships, internships, or "studio assistant" – a better term – mentor-ship – is where you learn to take steps towards applying critical thinking to take action in the "real world". This happens over time and practise with more experienced architects. I suspect this might be a similar path of experience in the world of photography.

The school experience offered me an opportunity to become aware of and to develop / nurture a process which is in essence a scaffold for creativity to come forward. So to me the teachers – the mentors – really needed in the MFA world are those that able to enlighten students from a critical thinking and process – point of view, not necessarily endeavoring to produce artists. Becoming an artist to me seems better left up to the individual to determine over the course of a lifetime of investigation.

I have to second James notion above that the school environment is perhaps a little too easy of an environment -to few restraints – understanding and operating under real world constraints is where the sparks of creativity can really begin to fly.

Comment by Matt Niebuhr — September 5, 2007 @ 11:05 pm

37. Besides "art school" potentially promoting a uniform way of thinking about photography is it possible that the process of looking at other photographs could be detrimental to creativity as well? I'm not saying that it is not a great pleasure to look at other photos but could that very exposure promote a way of thinking and photographing that has already been explored? If you have a varied and diverse range of images you look at I would guess that all those mix into something "new" but I feel that seeing a photo I like almost limits me and makes me subtly want to take the same image. I guess I am thinking about the "idea" of having the subject of a portrait look pensive and dead-pan. This is cool but I feel that it has been copied and reproduced without thinking about what it actually means anymore, potentially just because Alec Soth does it.

Comment by Nate Shepard — September 5, 2007 @ 11:52 pm

38. Yes and Yes.

Visual art is a language. Some speak it like their birth language, but even so need to expand their vocabulary. For the rest of us fluency can be a struggle, but worth it.

However, teaching can go awry when instead of supporting and encouraging artists to find their own voice, teachers merely graduate clones of themselves.

Comment by don brice — September 6, 2007 @ 12:06 am

39. My best and only teacher was a fellow student.

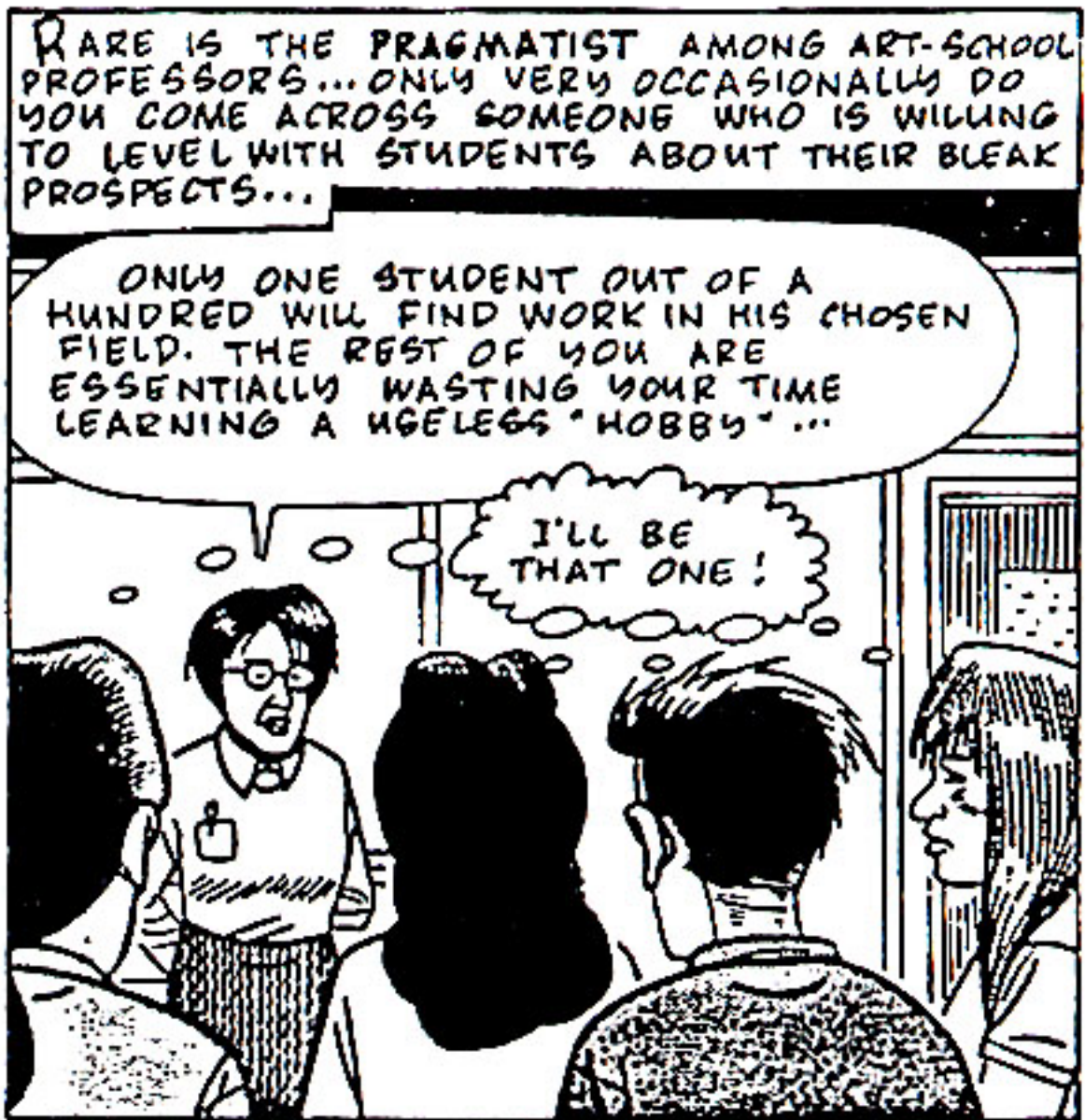
He showed me the photographic world I was interested in, when I didn't know what I was looking for, and asked me the right questions.

You can't teach art, because there is no recipe for doing art. Art should be by definition a highly individual and subjective thing.

But you can support students with information, and with your love of the subject. The most important point for me is: in a dialog with the students you can help them to find out what they are interested in, and how they can express that. As a teacher I say: "I'll be your mirror."

Comment by Zoltán — September 6, 2007 @ 12:35 am

40. Without wishing to trivialise this discussion, I couldn't help but recall Eightball's 'Art School Confidential' comic strip:



Enjoy.

Comment by iain — September 6, 2007 @ 1:30 am

41. 8. Any teacher of art who conceives his or her job to be "teaching young artists to think critically" should be fired immediately for intellectual dishonesty.

I failed an interview because the tutor reasoned that because i had a local accent, i would never understand words in the interview like: "postmodern cognitive space" – i think he's still dressing in black, walking around like some sort of photo-ninja, ready for the moment a carrier bag in an abandoned house comes along.

9. All group crits with faculty and students in attendance should be abolished immediately. These crucibles privilege the verbal over the visual and allow faculty members to poison and manipulate peer relations among their students.

and there was me thinking i was just being paranoid :)

I'm familiar with the ways another fine art, acting are taught , uta hagen being an example – these seem more suited to photography than placing it in the context of painting etc – most actors are trained to hit that 'state of grace' on a daily basis.

What seems to be the teaching method of minor white appears to be the one i would most find useful – the artists way book has always been a help to me also.

As well as some of the teachers, it should be said that many of of the students are also fraudsters, living out some dysfunctional identification with the false picture of the artist as an agent of chaos, the banger of supermodels – i could go on but won't – some people are just stamp collectors writ large.

Comment by steven — September 6, 2007 @ 5:32 am

42.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 6, 2007 @ 6:50 am

43. Here is a quote from an excellent article about the Bechers

<http://www.signandsight.com/features/338.html>

>>>>

".....the best part was asking Bernd Becher at the end of this long afternoon how it felt, on top of everything else, to go down in art history as the most influential teacher since Baroque days. There is an embarrassed silence at the kitchen table in Dusseldorf. Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer or Thomas Struth – almost all of them German photographers, critics' darlings and auction recordbreakers – Becher taught them all at the Dusseldorf Art Academy between travels.....doesn't he have one sentence at least to explain the collective success of his proteges – just a little one for the road?

Bernd Becher makes a small dismissive hand gesture, as if it was all so simple. "There was all sorts of talent there", he says. "The rest was coincidence. All we did was to turn back the time to a photography of precision which is superior to the human eye. Other art schools used to put the fear of God into their students by asking them 'Can you make a living out of that?' We wanted just the opposite and simply told them to make stuff first and then we'd go on from there. They could see how we'd made our way. Showing by doing, maybe that was it. What d'you say, Hilla?"

"Yes perhaps it really is that simple. When someone discovers something in their lives that really interests them, then they should be content with doing that – without having to go and lie on a beach once a year."

Comment by Robert Phillips — September 6, 2007 @ 7:02 am

44. Just stopped to read this as I head off to my History of Photography class. After taking photos for nearly 20 years and also using that time to take a short break from school I recently started classes again. So far I find not that the pictures are always better but the new knowledge in making them has definitely made me a bit more creative in using the tools..Oh and I also feel really old while I'm there.

Comment by rick — September 6, 2007 @ 7:08 am

45. [...] + Some light reading: Jacob Rubin On the Overuse of Exclamation Points, Alec Soth on whether art can/should be taught, and Matt Mendelsohn on why he's glad to spend the happiest moments of peoples lives with them despite wedding photographers getting little respect. [...]

Pingback by » Blog Archive » N.B. Random Thursday Edition — September 6, 2007 @ 7:12 am

46. Alec, I haven't read the full Bill Jay piece, but I think there's another way to understand what he says. When I read the quote ("I have to admit it: I am only interested in changing lives, not

providing information for its own sake. [...]”) the first thing that came to my mind was that there was someone who was immensely driven, someone who had a very strong interest in stirring whatever it is that you have to stir in students to get them to be productive. What I did not read, however (and this is quite important), is how Bill does that.

I have no idea what kind of teacher Bill is, so it is quite possible that he indeed is a terrible teacher who tries too hard. But he could also be a great teacher who knows how to teach. I don't know. But regardless of how he teaches, I think what he tried to convey was his basic motivation that provides the basis for his work as a teacher; and – thinking back to the teachers I had back in high school and at the university – those teachers who were genuinely interested in teaching and in helping students to get somewhere were the teachers who inspired me the most (regardless of subject matter).

And I think that quality is what differentiates a good teacher from... well... someone who teaches because it's his job. For students to thrive – regardless of whether it's in art or astrophysics – you need teachers who have their hearts invested in the teaching and who provide the fertile ground for the students.

Of course, the fundamental confusion then arises from the idea that each and every student will (or even has to) automatically excel or from the idea that if a student fails it's the teachers fault. It's easier to see (and understand) why that doesn't work in astrophysics than in art, even though I'd be happy to argue that – again – the difference in the subject matter is actually not very relevant.

Comment by JM Colberg – September 6, 2007 @ 9:29 am

47. *don brice Says:*

Visual art is a language. Some speak it like their birth language, but even so need to expand their vocabulary. For the rest of us fluency can be a struggle, but worth it.

the great challenge of teaching photography is that unlike every other visual art before it photography essentially presents a message without a code. Photography provides information without a language, unlike all the visual arts that preceded it.

While that may be a particular challenge for many art departments, it is of course what makes it so exciting as well...

Comment by Tim Atherton – September 6, 2007 @ 10:05 am

48. Since so many of your readers are fans and so few had the opportunity to study with Bill Jay, I feel like it's my duty to share my experience as his student.... Like Andrew, I was fortunate enough to have studied with Bill Jay, who is an amazing teacher. In addition to his classes, which were both information and entertaining, Bill's door was always open for a cup of very strong coffee and a chat. Beyond the classroom, he routinely invited students to come to his house for meals with visiting friends, amongst them David Hurn, Koudelka, various curators, writers, and others whose names I can no longer recall. By giving his students the opportunity to meet with such professionals during their studies, Bill opened the world of photography in ways that most classrooms lack. As far as art ideas, well... you were on your own. His interest was not in the critique or looking at work. However when it came to teaching photo history and showing students what life could be like after art school, he was the best. He is honest, direct, giving, and a great teacher who I hope will read this!

Comment by Rebecca Blume Rothman – September 6, 2007 @ 10:09 am

49. Having been a student of one of the more seminal attempts to teach photography as art, I thought I'd offer something of at least anecdotal interest. I had the good fortune to be enrolled at Columbia College during the first year that they offered photography classes. During my first semester there, I was enrolled in 'intro to everything', and it was all quite fun. The 'darkroom'

consisted of a converted janitorial closet with a few hand-me-down enlargers and an Ektamatic processor. It was quite an evolutionary leap the next year when we had a darkroom with actual sinks and trays and running water!

Midway through my second semester, I stumbled upon a subject that literally consumed my attention. I'd not been looking for a subject to photograph, but I found myself in a situation where all I could do was to take pictures in this place, and nothing else mattered. I mortgaged the car to buy supplies, slept on four crates behind the gallery, learned from some friends how to break into the darkroom through the freight elevator so we could work off-hours. And I just stopped attending any of my other classes.

The faculty and administrative response to this was to allow me to drop all my other classes without penalty, and to grant me my full twelve hours credit for this single project. The feedback from my instructors had more to do with technical issues than anything else, beyond which I was just encouraged to go with the passion that had hit me.

Were they "teaching art"? Yes, I think they were. But they were not accredited at the time, and they could afford to do so.

And where, 35 years hence, has this got me? As my wife said when looking at "Careers in Photography", "Hey, you're number four!"

Bob

Comment by Bob — September 6, 2007 @ 6:10 pm

50. Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for the New Yorker, born in North Dakota, grew up in Minnesota. Check out one terrific essay about his experience teaching an art seminar at Harvard, "Why Artists Make the Worst Students." Well worth your consideration: <http://www.parshift.com/Speakers/Speak013.htm>

Comment by Polonia — September 6, 2007 @ 7:27 pm

51. http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/09/02/art_for_our_sake/

Comment by Paul Light — September 7, 2007 @ 2:55 pm

52. Paul, I appreciate you alerting us to this article. But I think you and I might be talking about different things. I'm a huge advocate of the arts in high school. As I said above, my high school teacher change my life. I also believe in having arts classes in college. My concern is related more to the professionalizing of art. Being a creative person means carving your own path. So why must we shuttle all of these people through MFA's like they are getting MBA's. And god forbid Americans start doing Phd's in studio art like they do in England.

I loved Bob's story about his non-accredited art school. Our generation needs a Black Mountain.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 7, 2007 @ 3:32 pm

53. Read THIS.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 9, 2007 @ 3:44 pm

54. I keep getting pulled back into teaching because I love it — I enjoy the energy of the classroom, the collaboration. Yes, teaching can be tough on art making, but not because of teaching itself, rather it is the bureaucracy of the institutions that can cripple the teacher, not the students, and not the conversation of the classroom. Part of the MFA problem is that too many students go after an MFA in order to teach, but have no

idea what that means, nor a passion for it and they glut the market. That's a societal issue because there is no real support system for artists in this country (see Michael Fallon's great piece on MNartists.org <http://www.mnartists.org/article.do?rid=146617>) — one thing artists can do is teach... yes, schools need to do a better job at helping young artists to find all sorts of ways to pay back their student loans. (of course everyone's fav teacher at SFAI — Ray Mondini — once said absentmindedly during lecture: "you should never ever pay back your student loans, you are entitled to an education." Fine words.)

MFA programs suck up these students with the promise of a teaching career. My first advisor at SAIC, Frank Barsotti, told me point blank at our first meeting that I shouldn't hope for a teaching career — probably, but I did fall head over heels for teaching... Franco was right, though, you should go to grad school to have an uninterrupted time to work on your art and the facilities to do so. If you go to a good school, it's a crucible of art making — not a silver bullet and schools should be upfront about that. Unfortunately, it's a market now, the end goal most often seeming to be bucks, not ideas. Well, everything undulates...

Comment by Suz Szucs — September 10, 2007 @ 12:25 pm

55. Art is about seeing and has been since the beginning. Teaching or guiding others through the processes of seeing was essential to the Shammen that passed on the pathways in the stars, or shapes of mountains and even the congregation of herds painted on cave walls in a vast oral and pictorial tradition. This education begins much earlier however. Probably at the age of six or seven when the seeds of curiosity and invention are planted.

The college art experience can be wonderful and benifical but probably has less to do with art than most imagine. However I would not discourage any that follow these paths in any fashion. In a culture that often appears to have lost it's way the ability to see may be tantamount.

Comment by Thomas — September 10, 2007 @ 12:57 pm

56. [...] Art school has been a popular subject around the blog world this past week, so I want to get my two cents in as well. My opinion is that art cannot be taught. At all. Ever. You can learn techniques, and you can learn theory, and you can learn about the politics and the drama and all that comes with that thing called the "art world", but no way can you ever be taught how to express yourself. There are certain tools and advice that can be leaned from others, like how to mix paints or dilute developer or blow glass, but making art is a deeply personal experience. As cheesy and cliché as it sounds, I think it comes from somewhere deep inside you and fights its way out until you find it and release it. There's just no way to teach something like that. Or even explain it well. My favorite post on the subject is from Alec Soth, who quotes from an article in *Art in America*, which I agree with whole-heartedly, though Mr. Soth has some reservations. [...]

Pingback by Back to business. « Katherine Lindquist — September 10, 2007 @ 12:58 pm

57. Art is about seeing and has been since the beginning. Teaching or guiding others through the processes of seeing was essential to the Shammen that passed on the pathways in the stars, or shapes of mountains and even the congregation of herds painted on cave walls in a vast oral and pictorial tradition. This education begins much earlier however. Probably at the age of six or seven when the seeds of curiosity and invention are planted. Other artistic traditions understood this.

The college art experience can be wonderful and benifical but probably has less to do with art than most imagine. However I would not discourage any that follow these paths in any fashion. In a culture that often appears to have lost it's way the ability to see may be tantamount.

Comment by Thomas — September 10, 2007 @ 12:59 pm

58. [...] One such wave led me to Alex Soth and his blog, where I found a post on whether or not art should be taught. He quoted a retired photography teacher, Bill Jay, whose site has a truly compelling set of essays and articles on photography (many on 19th and 20th century photographers and aspects of the art), and who had this to say: In my own experience, the only

learning which has been meaningful has been self-motivated, self-taught, self-appropriated, self-discovered. As the old saying goes, "When the student is ready, the master will appear." [...]

Pingback by Of the inevitable « Lepomel — September 10, 2007 @ 7:50 pm

59. When I do an occasional show-and-tell at an art school, I tell them to perfect a day job that takes less than 30 hours a week and will allow them to loose twenty thousand dollars a year, after living expenses, every year, indefinitely, on their art.

Comment by Warren Padula — September 11, 2007 @ 3:14 pm

60. [...] Teaching has been a current topic on Alec Soth's blog here, here, and especially here, and then there was a thoughtful follow up piece by Mike Johnston over on The Online Photographer. Ironically, the reason I'm writing less is that in addition to my day job at Pictopia.com, I'm teaching Photoshop for Photographers at the Academy of Art in San Francisco. Unlike the ponderings of those teaching MFA courses, this course is a practical, career oriented, skill building affair. [...]

Pingback by Joe Reifer - Words » Blog Archive » Teaching — September 12, 2007 @ 12:24 am

61. (Can photography be taught?) Can seeing be taught? Drawing? I doubt that any of the musings above ever entered Verocchio's head as he took Leonardo da Vinci as his apprentice, at the age of 15 or so, into his Firenze workshop. With one glance at da Vinci's drawings, he recognized a great talent. He put Leonardo to work mixing colours, making paints, casts, all the labours of his bustling shop. Did he teach Leonardo to draw and paint? Certainly. The young Leonardo copied the drawings of the masters in Verocchio's collection, standard practice at the time. Verocchio would have corrected his errors. He taught Leonardo what would today be called "colour theory". He taught Leonardo perspective. Cast-making for bronze. Carving in wood and stone. God knows what else. He taught some half-dozen or more apprentices, all in the flow of practical, daily commercial work in the studio. All in a three-to-four year period. Can photography be taught? Pshaw, of course it can — if the student is interested, has imagination and can draw reasonably well. The four years of a degree is a very long time to devote to just one picture-making discipline. Verocchio would have taught drawing, painting, sculpture in half and full relief and a smattering of architecture in that time.

Comment by Videbaek — September 12, 2007 @ 12:04 pm

62. I recently completed my liberal arts degree, with a concentration in Visual Arts. For my last class, I wrote a research paper on Jazz & Photography. Both art forms came into their own in the early to mid- 20th century and both were greatly influenced by artists who were self-taught or who apprenticed with other artists. Neither Atget or Louis Armstrong had formal art training. There is something to be said for the innovation that comes from working outside of the mainstream art consciousness. When you are not told what is right, you are free to fail and to discover. I would not be where I am if I had not had the guidance of two fantastic artists and teachers, but they focused on helping me believe in myself and refine my own ideas. If you go to a program which has a defined idea of "Art", you are more likely to develop work that is in the of a program. There is quite a bit of derivative and uninspired work in galleries, and I think that is a symptom of the MFAing of the art community. Having mentorship and community is a valuable part of an artist's development, and I think that should be the goal of art education.

Comment by Cara Phillips — September 12, 2007 @ 3:22 pm

63. I recently re-discovered this website and am enjoying the reading and work posted quite a bit. I was admitted into the SFAI summer MFA program and was to be in your class this summer. My decision to not go came down to cost. I couldn't imagine paying off that kind of debt and creating work afterwards unless I worked on Wall Street or my work was being sold to Wall Street types. I didn't want to put that kind of pressure on myself considering it's already difficult enough to make ends meet. The cost of grad school is, in my opinion, a bit exorbitant and will continue to rise along with all education. That is a shame and in this sense it can be viewed as a scam. In some

ways, my near-grad-school experience felt like I was trying to buy an expensive designer handbag I couldn't really afford. The salesperson tried to convince me to buy it -realizing that if I didn't, someone else would come along.

I have read that attendance rates of MFA programs are at an all time high so I suppose there is no need to lower costs. I myself teach at public schools (not art) and I believe in the value of an education. I don't necessarily have a problem with universities and schools as a whole, nor do I make generalizations about art teachers or art students – teaching and learning are experiences that are as varied as the individuals involved. They are personal. I really agree with all of Michael Silva's comments. I also think the challenge as an individual is to be honest with ourselves and understand our motives for doing things- both as a teacher and a student. If one finds value in art school, then the price of it is well justified. Who knows, if I were better off I might have walked off with the expensive handbag and not thought anything of it! Maybe a handbag is a bad metaphor for a graduate degree,maybe not.....

On that note, I also agree that you are doing a great service with the blog in providing a forum for ideas and exchange. Even though we are not in "school", you are providing us with some valuable ideas to ponder. For this, I thank you!

Comment by Kathya Landeros – September 14, 2007 @ 12:02 pm

64. [...] Leo Babauta wrote an interesting post today!.Here's a quick excerptArt is a cosmopolitan practice best taught in cities near the water. Teaching art in a provincial cultural environment that does not celebrate and embrace change is totally self-defeating. It transforms art into a compensatory discourse ... [...]

Pingback by ThemePassion - Best stuff about design! » Can/should art be taught? – September 19, 2007 @ 6:29 pm

65. I'm late on this discussion but feel the need to throw in my two cents. I'm a senior in a BFA photo program at major state university. I'm 32, which I guess classifies me as a non-traditional student. I have always been into art—I have always drawn/painted whatever since I was little, I remember being obsessed with artists like Georgia O'Keeffe when I was in 5th grade. I think college art programs are as good as what you put into them. I really relate to Zivadinovic's view, I see the same thing in school here. I see kids that think they're great that draw like a 6th grader that shouldn't, and I see really talented artists that ride their talent too much and don't do the work...I'm always amazed at the cross section of people in these classes. I think critiques are essential and all, but how many critiques do we have to endure with kids making art using NFL logos? Yes, students thinking it would be great to do their drawing assignment about the Jacksonville Jaguars or some other team...Where's the uniqueness in that? I don't know if high school art programs are pushing this **** or something, but it's scary. I've seen this now from my old university and now the new (and much larger) program I've transferred into (since my husband's job transfer.) I seriously felt bad for the prof, because where do you begin to teach someone like that? How do you even critique something like that—hey, nice football helmet? They don't see it. (or maybe I don't? lol)

Let me just share my first class experience on campus. Color theory: (my old school didn't offer it, so here I sit on a freshman block class)

By far, I'm the oldest person in class, and that includes the prof.

As we do the typical "first day introductions," we are asked to share who are favorite artists are. No joke, half the class didn't have ONE. How can you be in a university level art program, and not have ONE artist who inspired you to get there?

(C'mon people!)

I rattled off a couple, and now imagine that sound of crickets... I don't think anyone knew who they were.

After explaining a little more about the assignments ahead, the prof asked how many people have painted before, and a measly 4 people (out of 21) raised their hands (including me)

I don't know if the education now lacks any exposure to art, or people's perceptions about art make them think it's easy....

I've had a small group of professors that I've learned so much from. They obviously cared about what they did, and they were/are successful artists themselves and knew what they were talking about...Most of all, they were challenging. My favorite profs are the ones that make me really think about my work and challenged my ideas, went after me about how I could improve it...I never remember much about the easy classes where they were pushovers on grading and assignments. The education I've received so far has been wonderful and essential for me and I don't regret a thing. I feel my work has grown, matured, focused, polished...

I think that's all we can hope for. I do wish there were more classes offered on the business side of art. I think we could all use a little more savvy in that department before we're kicked back out the door into the real world.

PS. I really enjoy Bill Jay too, and I wish he was still teaching at ASU, that's where I'm at now —I enjoy LensWork so much and missed his era here.

Comment by Sarah — September 21, 2007 @ 2:45 am

66. [...] One of the most interesting threads in there is one that tackles the age old question, "Can Art Be Taught?" [...]

Pingback by Timmy's Blog » Blog Archive » 38 Days - Photography, discourse amongst giants — September 24, 2007 @ 10:55 pm

67. [...] I just discovered that photographer, Alec Soth has a blog. And it is suprisingly well-written with many thoughtful posts about the very nature of photography. One of the most interesting threads in there is one that tackles the age old question, "Can Art Be Taught?" I found it doubly interesting today having just come off a in-depth discussion with one of my co-workers on whether truly great programmers can be taught. Many of the points and rationales that are brought up in Alec's post could be seamlessly lifted up from his blog and placed into the context of an article that ponders the question of whether programming can be taught, and there would be very little out of place. One of the strongest statements in the entire post is found in the comments section, where a commenter states: But in the end my feeling is that the great students will become great artists anyway, with or without art school. The less stellar ones can be nurtured along to be better artists but no amount of education will turn them into great artists. [...]

Pingback by Timmy's Blog | 38 Days - Photography, discourse amongst giants — September 29, 2007 @ 12:29 pm

68. Well, I must be nts then, because I am 43 and after a 10 year break I am starting my MFA in photography at NYU

Comment by John Kobeck — September 30, 2007 @ 1:28 am

69. I am currently in an "art" school. Technique can be taught, history can be taught, themes can be taught. Vision only comes from within.... It can be guided but then comes the problem of subjective vs. objective. How do you grade an assignment objectively? How do you critique objectively? The subjective is overwhelmingly present in every class I attend; intentional or not, it is there. I am guided by the subjective critiques of both my peers and my instructors to who knows what end. Am I to only create what is acceptable to them? Or am I to follow my inner vision with the techniques learned in school? Or am I to follow my inner vision with the techniques I myself have developed? Art for me is a reflection of the inner vision, and to be told what my inner vision is, is an extreme insult to who I am.

Stick to teaching skills, not inner vision or talent.

Comment by Gibbs — October 15, 2007 @ 4:19 am

70. [...] I look at the week this week and I think: blah, so I am dedicating this week's edition instead to genteel misbehavior... the Surrealist in me wants one of these... "One sent a funeral wreath when she told him she didn't love him." That's clever.... Let's all "dwell in our own enchantment," to paraphrase Ben Okri, and have another go next Monday... In the meantime, I'm instituting the first Smart Set poll: do you agree with Cocteau that "poetry is a machine for the manufacture of love"? (via) [...]

Pingback by Maud Newton: Blog — October 29, 2007 @ 11:33 am

71. Absolutely, I agree with Cocteau I think that any words that set out to describe love can only serve as manipulation to the person reading those words as love can never be understood, it lives on a mystery its a feeling, there are no words.
Is the original question ..can art be taught ?
I just opened my dream of my life time...an art school...this artical and all these the coments are a treasure for me!!! I had to print it out so I can read it more carefully and fully during the day tomorrow when Im wide awake...what a treat...thanks

E.G.

Comment by elizabeth — November 1, 2007 @ 10:08 pm

72. [...] Alec Soth added an interesting post today on Can/should art be taught?Here's a small reading [...]

Pingback by Media Districts Entertainment Blog » Can/should art be taught? — November 15, 2007 @ 9:37 pm

73. Whoa! As I prep to talk to an MFA seminar on Barthes, (emphasis on bliss, not logical conclusions) I come to this blog. I've been teaching for 15 years and although I get good student evaluations, and am professionally active, I am frequently a fraud, a liar, an idiot and worst of all, destructive. And I think even less of my colleagues because they would never consider these thoughts. I know there are excellent art teachers out there, although, I've never known one personally.

Decent people, passionate artists get lured in by the sheer luck of landing a job that "will allow time to make art" and make a positive difference to our students. But as the years roll by and we are fully convinced this is all a crock of sh*t we have made so many small conciliations (or conversly built such petty empires) it is too late.

Go ahead a take some art classes, but a BFA or MFA is just enough of time poisonously boost your expectations into being the next Dana Schutz. The previous post was correct. Art is a \$20,000 a year addiction. Even if you sell decently, you keep only 30% at best. This means you need to sell \$200,000 per year to make as much as a retail manager. As a 70 year old video artist proudly told me, I've never worked a regular job in my life. I am an artist, I am creative, I am creative in both getting money AND learning how to live with less.

Comment by Alex — November 27, 2007 @ 1:07 am

74. I'm sitting here trying to figure out whether to FINISH my BFA program. And I'm contemplating the same issues raised here. A point no one seems to have raised, though, is the question of how to make it as an artist without a BFA or MFA. Don't galleries and grant-givers take a quick scan of your resume and throw it in the trash without a degree? Or is that just a myth?

I am blessed to be going to a school with really great teachers, whose instruction I feel is worthwhile. The community and mentorship has been wonderful. But I guess I'm a bit of a socialist or something because I don't see why that stuff can't be a whole lot cheaper. Couldn't we all just quit art school and start a revolution? Where we all just hung out and cafes and shot the sh*t with other artists like Paris in the 20's? And as for mentors, couldn't we just apprentice (or intern as its called now)? I'd love to start a revolution, but I don't know who'd join me, because

everyone else is buying into some romantic mythology about being a celebrity artist or making a decent living in the academic world (equally absurd mythologies). Or they don't really care because their parents are footing the bill.

But, though it is clearly no guarantee that I will "make it" (whatever that even means) with art school, aren't I kind of shut out of the process completely without it? But all this money I'm paying and all the hype they're trying to feed us (like "MFA is the new MBA", etc.), and the way we have to have our imaginations cross-examined is making me so sick. I'm in a thesis process now, unusual for a BFA program. Most of my fellow students (who are younger than me. I'm 29) seem extremely unprepared to go through it, and I'm not sure it will do anything for them. It's just this emotional roller-coaster where you're critiqued to death, then in the end you usually come out OK, but then what? You're back to your minimum wage job, and there's a few galleries in town, and they have more than enough artists already. The average wage for a college graduate is going down in general, so what does that say for a fine art major? Frankly, I'm not sure that this recession won't turn into some 30's-like depression, so what the hell am I doing?

But if I don't finish this, is it like not taking the full course of antibiotics? I'm already in debt and with just a little bit more, I'll be done and can brag about my coveted BFA from a private art institution that thinks a lot of itself, and is trying, with some success, to get the world to think the same.

Comment by EmilyB — April 5, 2008 @ 3:03 pm