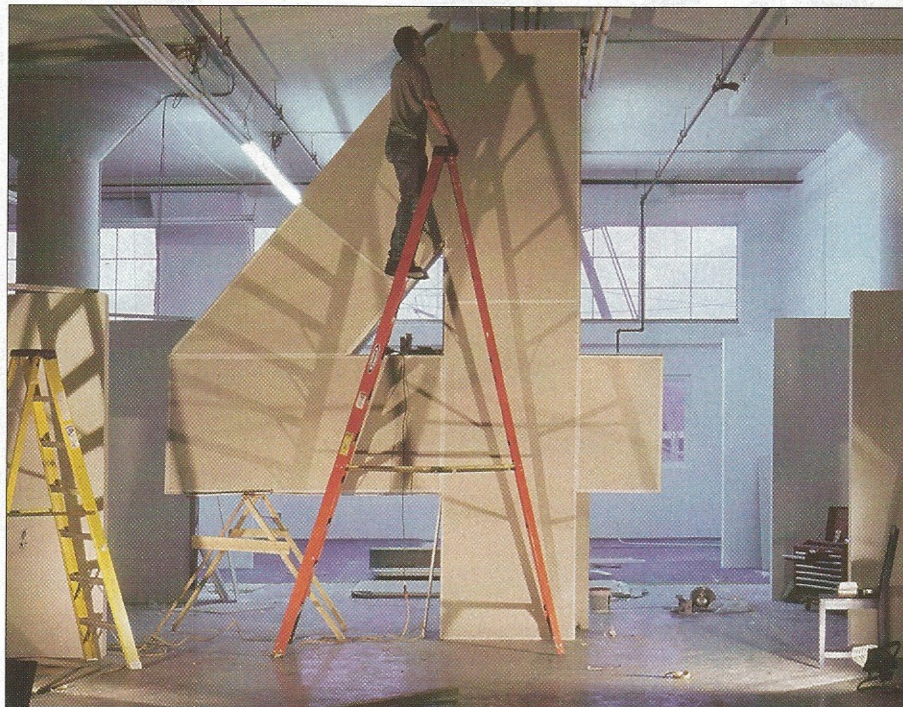
What Are They Teaching Art Students These Days?

Seventy years after the first degrees in art appeared, schools are wondering how to fit it all in: new technology, theory, marketing savvy, and a growing list of emerging forms BY GAIL GREGG

Searching for relevance in an increasingly pluralistic art scene, art faculties are pushing their students to think large these days, to get out of the ivory tower, away from the easel, and out into the world. One student at New York's School of Visual Arts (SVA) took this creative license to an extreme last term and ended up hobbling the city's subway system and landing in jail on a charge of reckless endangerment.

"What an idiotic project," seethed *New York Times* chief art critic Michael Kimmelman when freshman Clinton Boisvert's "fear" project was revealed to have been a sculpture assignment rather than a terrorist attack. "As the saying goes, art this bad ought to be a crime," he added. Apparently inspired by Keith Haring, the 25-year-old had placed three dozen black boxes in a highly trafficked subway station, each with the word "Fear" scrawled across it. His attempt to make that emotion tangible succeeded, though not exactly in the way he had anticipated.



COURTESY SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE

Graduate student Jason Mortara working on his installation, *The Building of Big No. 4*, in the San Francisco Art Institute's new Center for Graduate Programs.

Gone is the time when a foundation sculpture class would have seen Boisvert and his classmates modeling the figure or making plaster casts. Instead, video, installation, site-specific, earth, conceptual, and performance art have been grafted onto the sculpture syllabi of some of the most prestigious art programs in the nation. A number of schools have even eradicated departmental divisions—an acknowledgment of the increasingly heterogeneous, fluid career paths of many visual artists. (Is Matthew Barney a performance artist, for instance, or a sculptor, an installation artist, a video artist?)

It's not easy sorting out how best to use the short time allotted to arts degrees; an undergraduate fine-arts major often spends only one of his four years in art classes—hardly enough time to learn the traditional skills of drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography, let alone today's laundry list of new forms. Even a two-year master of fine arts (M.F.A.) program doesn't provide much time for training, compared with the decades-long master-apprentice system of earlier centuries.

Countless other challenges have art-school faculties reexamining their missions and values. The proliferation of programs and students; the embrace of diverse art forms and content; the professionalization of art practice; the rise of cultural theory; whether (and how) to teach the new technologies that have sprouted in the last decade; whether (and how) to teach specific artisanal skills; and even the very definition of art have inspired many a debate in art-school conference rooms around the nation. "Art has always been volatile and changeable," says Richard Benson, dean of Yale's School of Art. "A good faculty is always considering that."

The last half-century has seen a revolution in the way art is taught in this country. The first Bachelor's in Fine Arts (B.F.A.) degrees weren't offered until the 1930s, and most were in art history rather than studio practice. Artists were trained in trade schools, private studios, or nondegree institutions such as the Art Students League or the National Academy of Design School of Fine Arts. But enough university programs were in place by 1948 that an advocacy group, the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), was founded, with 22 members. NASAD's current institutional membership is 239, and those institutions enroll approximately 100,000 art majors and 8,000 graduate students each year. The College Art Association (CAA) claims 2,000 university art and art-history departments, museums, and li-

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braries as members, in addition to 13,000 artists, art historians, scholars, curators, and educators. And *U.S. News & World Report* now includes in its rankings art programs as well as those in math, economics, and English literature. (In the most recent ranking of M.F.A. programs, compiled in 1997, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago led the list, followed closely by Yale Art School and the Rhode Island School of Design, known as RISD.)

COURTESY RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

An undergraduate at the Rhode Island School of Design perfects her metalworking technique.

All those programs, schools, and departments have created an appetite for M.F.A.-trained professors, and newly minted art graduates understand that they need the degree to teach in colleges or universities—the "day job" desired by so many artists seeking security and collegiality in an otherwise financially precarious, hermetic profession. As Chris Waterman, acting dean of UCLA's School of Art and Architecture, wryly notes, "Even artists need dental insurance."

The earliest M.F.A.s were encouraged to use the programs as laboratories where they could experiment with new ideas before graduating to day jobs doing house painting or magazine pasteup art. Today's students—who are younger than ever, according to graduate administrators—expect (and need) their degree "investments" to pay off with successful careers in the fine arts or related fields. An M.F.A. at a top school now can cost more than $50,000 for tuition alone, and the balance on sizable student loans awaits most graduates.

Students increasingly see their M.F.A. programs as "finishing schools," in the words of one faculty member, where they can "get their act together in a slick enough way that they're launched." The schools advertise themselves with long lists of art stars who are their graduates, and dealers regularly visit the most prestigious schools. In the top programs, students no longer compete for grade-point averages but for the privilege of being signed by a Chelsea or Santa Monica gallery before graduation. Painter Dana Schutz, for example, exhibited in a two-person show at New York's LFL Gallery while still in Columbia's M.F.A. program and had her first solo exhibition there immediately after getting her degree.

But student work is by nature experimental, heavily influenced by the myriad new ideas introduced in the academy, and it is likely to change again and again. "When that work is accepted by a very hungry art world, it can cause problems for young artists," says Yale Art School painting professor Rochelle Feinstein. "Artists and their work need time to develop." Corcoran Gallery director David Levy, who was executive dean of Parsons for 20 years, agrees. "The gallery world is relatively irresponsible. They'll exploit anything they can get their hands on."

Jamie Bennett, chair of the art department at the State University of New York (SUNY) New Paltz, identifies another problem stemming from the encroachment of market forces into academia. "The distance between the academy and art practice is much, much closer than it used to be," he says. "The laboratory is in the classroom—it's not in Greenwich Village." The closing of that distance, Bennett notes, puts a new kind of pressure on art-school faculties, as the ideas they instill in students can have an immediate impact in the art market. Or as RISD academic affairs provost Joe Dale puts it, "An art school shouldn't assume the responsibility of creating new art. Our mission is an educational mission. You can't predict the cutting edge."

Developing the conceptual skill set of would-be artists is another newish concern of art schools; today's graduates have to be able to talk the talk, to relate their work to the contemporary world and the historical canon. "Artists today require so much more world knowledge, cultural knowledge than we've ever seen before," says Tony Jones, dean of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and chair of the American Institute of Colleges of Art and Design (AICAD). "That becomes a greater and greater challenge."

In many schools over the past decade, art history has been dropped as a requirement and been replaced by courses in cultural theory or in other departments, such as history or anthropology. "Kids are reading the same books in art schools as they are in other disciplines. There is more experimentation intellectually," says the School of the Art Institute's vice president for academic affairs, Carol Becker. Faculties spend more time today helping students explain their work and place it in a contemporary context. At Connecticut College, for instance, seniors now are required to submit artist's statements about the work they each produce that year. Most M.F.A. programs require at least one writing course for graduation, and all provide frequent opportunities for cross-disciplinary critique.

The skies are crisscrossed thousands of times each year by cultural theorists and artists-in-residence who are flown in by art schools to bring the latest ideas and practices to their students. At SUNY New Paltz, for instance, last September's "Arts Now" conference introduced students to lecturers on "Art, Artists and Conflict in Northern Ireland," "Performativity and Violence," and "Bosnian Rape Camps and Serb Cultural Memory." "They have to be aware of the world and what the art they're making relates to," says John Terry, dean of fine arts at RISD. Ella King Torrey, who headed the San Francisco Art Institute until last year, believes that the very definition of "artist" has changed in the past few decades, away from stereotypes of an esthete in "the ivory tower" and "the marginalized, crazed, hard-drinking brute"

to being a full participant in contemporary culture.

Other educators worry, though, that this new inclusiveness in art education can have unforeseen consequences. One is the proliferation of "artspeak," the particular language of critical theory that has become pervasive in academia, as papers delivered at a recent College Art Association convention suggest. Among the titles were "The Spectacle of the Mediatization: Experiencing Events Otherwise" or "The Effort of Imagination: Empathy in Postminimalism." "We're finally going to kill art," says one professor at a state university in the South. "We're going to talk it to death." Notes Yale's Benson: "We're a studio school. But over the years, courses have crept in that are about the thinking and talking about art, not the making of it." Finding an approach that allows graduates to participate in the "contemporary conversation," as one teacher described it, while at the same time equipping them with hands-on training, appears to be on every educator's mind today.

A graduate painting student in her studio in Yale's new art school building, New Haven's former Jewish Community Center, which was redone by architect Deborah Berke.

The use of new media—as a means of creating art and as a medium itself—presents another critical challenge for art faculties. Artists now employ the latest technological innovations in thousands of ways—from editing photos and video footage, to weaving, glass blowing, three-dimensional design, and music composition. At the frontier of the deployment of technology in the visual arts are those for whom it *is* the message, such as Eduardo Kac, who used altered genetic material from a jellyfish to come up with a glow-in-the-dark rabbit. "There is hardly any area of the school that technology hasn't reached," says RISD's Terry.

Terry and his counterparts worry about how to select and pay for staff, how to maintain the right equipment, and how to educate older, tenured professors to use tools new to them but familiar to their young students. Even finding enough teachers is a problem. "Art schools aren't turning out enough people to provide faculty," says Bryan Rogers, chair of the University of Michigan's School of Art and Design. Technology envy is another real problem at many schools. As "new technology" centers are established on campus after campus, professors of more traditional disciplines worry that they may one day become the underfunded stepchildren of the new order. "People always see a new department as competition for scarce resources," Terry notes.

RISD, Connecticut College, and many other schools have adopted an interdepartmental strategy for staffing their new centers for that very reason. By populating the new departments with faculty from other disciplines, they are able not only to defuse such concerns but to feed technology back into established departments. At UCLA, for instance, experimental technology artist Victoria Vesna chairs the design/media arts department, where art majors or graduate students can take classes in "Creative Use of the Internet" or "Design for Interactive Media" taught by artists, architects, and film theorists alike.

And then there is the question of what technologies, exactly, to teach. "You pick some; you cannot deploy them all," says Rogers. So many new software and imaging techniques arrive each year, only to be updated or outdated the next, that a school could devise curricula around them alone—and some do, such as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Electronic Arts M.F.A. For the moment, though, no one is throwing the baby out with the stop bath; they're retaining traditional processes such as chemical photo development or bronze castings. "We'd be mad to close our darkrooms down," Chicago's Jones says. "You've got to be able to offer the historic range of expression as well as the technology." But some concede that they foresee a time when darkroom technique is taught as a special course rather than a foundation requirement.

At the heart of this kind of change lies a debate about whether visual-art curricula should reach deep or spread wide. Like many schools, Michigan recently knocked down the walls among its 13 "concentrations" and replaced them with "core studio modules" that introduce all students to a wide variety of materials and processes, tools, the digital media, and contemporary concepts. Students at UCLA's School of Art can take courses in three separate art departments—visual arts, world arts and cultures, and design/media arts—in their search for cross-disciplinary creative fodder. "We ask, what is art, what do people use to accomplish it, and how does the world get shaped by what people do?" explains UCLA's Waterman. "A lot of this stuff doesn't fit very neatly into the traditional categories."

Yet many schools fervently defend their departmental divisions. "We believe that if a student engages deeply in one medium, something different happens," maintains Yale's Benson. "Our school is conservative; we still have departments! We believe in departments!" RISD's Dale seconds the emphasis on departmental boundaries. Within a single discipline, he says, "what they learn is really *how* to learn. Studying a discipline doesn't mean they're necessarily channeled into that disci-

pline." And as Vassar College visual-arts professor Harry Roseman notes, teaching skills doesn't need to be separate from teaching ideas. "I try to promote a dialectic between the idea and the process . . . to get that thinking process going from the beginning. It's not like doing scales for four years."

While lecturing at art departments across the country, New York painter John Alexander has noticed a new appetite for technical learning. "Art is the only profession I know where you don't seem to need even the basic, rudimentary skills to be involved. It would be absolutely bizarre to give someone a saxophone and then say, 'Forget everything that's ever been done in music—the chords, the notes, the tones. Just go in there and start blowing it.'" In a recent presentation to a group of graduate students, Alexander mentioned "some of the most rudimentary things about making something look three-dimensional. These kids had no knowledge of that—and they were so excited to learn it." Nondegree schools such as the National Academy of Design fine-arts school report an increase in "remedial" students, who have graduated from art programs but who want to refine their painting or drawing skills. "There are a fair number of students who feel they haven't gotten as much as they could out of other art schools," says director Nancy Little.

And at the ultratraditional New York Academy of Figurative Art, where painting and sculpture are taught much as they would have been in Renaissance Europe, director Steven Farthing reports a corollary problem: the difficulty of finding faculty with traditional skills. He often resorts to hiring his own graduates as professors, "though a geneticist would tell you that's not desirable for the gene pool." Another artist and teacher observes, "There are professors all over the country who are one page ahead of their students in the drawing textbook." The Corcoran's Levy attributes this paucity of technical skills to the generation of artist-teachers taught by the Abstract Expressionists. "The original generation of Abstract Expressionists were among the best-trained artists in the world. They always had the resources to do whatever they chose to do." Their successors, however, "had a vested interest in convincing everyone around them that skill wasn't important."

Nayland Blake, who is charged with creating the International Center of Photography's (ICP) new joint M.F.A. with Bard College, cites a double bind inherent in art education: that it is expected to function much as a trade school but often offers little of the actual training that would allow a student to practice his trade. An installation artist himself, Blake is reviving the centuries-old master-apprentice model for his new program. This fall's first class of ten students will work as a group with visiting artists on particular projects. And they'll each be required to participate in a 15-hour-a-week internship each semester—one year with a professional photographer, the next at an institution. It's an approach that wins Levy's approval. "I think that the 19th-century atelier experience is critical," he comments. "Things happen in that environment that will never happen on their own."

In the end, art school is as much about that community as about anything else. "Everybody talks and thinks about art all the time," says Chicago's Becker. "What they learn is how to be a creative person and how to really believe in that." The widely celebrated (and decried) Young British Artists (YBAs) met at Goldsmith's, the trendiest art academy of their day. Or think of the Yale M.F.A. classes of the early 1960s that sent Richard Serra, Robert Mangold, Chuck Close, Nancy Graves, and Brice Marden (with Sylvia Plimack Mangold receiving her B.F.A. in 1961) out into the art scene. Their collective influence on art in the early 1970s was echoed a generation later by the young photography M.F.A.s emerging from Yale in the late 1990s, such as Anna Gaskell, Dana Hoey, Justine Kurland, and Katy Grannan. At Columbia University, M.F.A. students are selected as much for their fit in an "intimate" class of 24 as for technical abilities, according to visual-art professor Gregory Amenoff. "We put a lot of value on the contact among the students," he says. In an art market where who you know can help win introductions to dealers, collectors, and museums, these friendships can prove critical to a career.

COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN

University of Michigan School of Art & Design students dabble in paint as they create a performance piece within one of the new curriculum's studio courses called "Concept, Form and Context: Perception."

Still, many art-school alumni end up earning a living as illustrators or gallery assistants—or leave the fine arts altogether for jobs with regular paychecks and benefits. David Shirey, who founded SVA's M.F.A. program 20 years ago, likes to provoke newly enrolled graduate students with the question "Why do you want to get a degree that will perpetuate your poverty?"

But in spite of the price tag, students continue to flock to the academy to help them launch a life of making art. "I'm always amazed—and somewhat bewildered—at the sacrifices they've made," Shirey says. "And I'm astounded that so many of them continue to pursue it when they get out." ■