

Sabina Ott: Keynote Talk for the 1st Annual Teaching Artists Summit

Presented by Chicago Artists Coalition & Hyde Park Art Center

April 2, 2016

Hello! Thank you so much, Jen Tremblay and Penny Duff, for asking me to speak a bit today at the first Teaching Artists Summit. I want to thank the Hyde Park Art Center for all the support the Center has given me—firstly, for trusting me to make the installation, “who cares for the sky,” and, secondly, for allowing me to be part of the Jackman Goldwasser Residency program.

“One can’t teach architecture, one can only inspire,” said Zaha Hadid, a great artist who died yesterday at 65. She changed the field of architecture and art and influenced so many, including myself.

I am going to talk briefly about my life as an artist who also teaches, how that came to be, and what being a teaching artist means to me now. I am moved to say that all art teaches, because looking at an artwork provides exposure to new experiences, and so perhaps all artists are teachers. I have learned, over the last 30 years, that the key to effective teaching is to provide to students—to be a conduit for exposure to new experiences and ideas. It’s as simple as that, really. If all artists teach by virtue of what they make, is teaching an art in and of itself? Is it a skill? A calling? An occupation or a vocation? I pose these questions not because I intend to answer them, but those are the questions that hover around me as I walk into a classroom or meet privately with a student, and they are the same questions that hover around me as I work in my studio.

I came to teaching by accident. I shared a studio with a wonderful artist in Los Angeles, Jill Gigeriech. She was everything I wanted to be: well known, making work almost full time, showing all over the world. She was very generous. One day, she told me that she was too busy and did I want to take over her class at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena? I said yes, of course! I had never taught before, but I acted as if I had. I asked her what to do for the class and she told me just to tell the students what I did in the studio and that was fine. That suited me. I had an old school art education anyway—teachers who were huge personalities and they all shared their huge personalities with us. Of course, they were mostly men, so I wanted to do the same, but knew that because I was female it would be inherently different. For instance, I wouldn’t be making passes at the students, that’s for sure, which is what happened to me on a daily basis when I was a student. In my first class, an upper-level seminar, I brought in a bullwhip that someone brought back for me from Mexico and chased the students around the room, snapping it, until they took it from me and went to find other faculty to torment. In a painting class, instead of plein air painting during the day, I made my class meet at 2AM and paint the nighttime moon. In another class, we spent the entire time seeing and analyzing the Glendale Forest Lawn Cemetery: home of the world’s largest painting and the world’s largest stained glass interpretation of the Last Supper.

I wanted to break the conventions of teaching art—not that I really understood what they were—but I decided to teach the way I wish I had been taught. I like to think that my personal dysfunction fit the Art Center’s institutional dysfunction and I taught there for the next ten years, mostly in the graduate program. I was never asked to write a syllabus. I don’t think I had ever seen one—not in my education nor in my teaching, and I appreciated the trust the college had in teachers like me—teaching artists. Well, to be honest, I didn’t appreciate it until I experienced otherwise. My colleagues were artists like Mike Kelley, Steve Prina, Liz Larner, Lita Albuquerque, and filmmaker Patty Podesta—other working artists each completely different in their practice. We shared what we did in the studio, what we thought about, what kinds of material we went to for knowledge and inspiration. It was an interdisciplinary program created by the visionary educator Dr. Richard Hertz and based on the notion that a great graduate program consisted of a strong visiting artist lecture series (exposure), great faculty (teaching artists), and strong critical theory (education for education’s sake). Pretty simple. It helped that Richard was a Buddhist. No students ever talked about getting a job or expected that would be the result of their education, nor did we teach how to do that because we were not taught how to do that. In the language of today, that would be considered the result of privilege, and it was, but it was also a belief that art-making was not necessarily attached to a financial end.

The idea was to create an environment that supported each individual student’s focus via exposure to the most interesting artists and their various methodologies.

I spent those ten years meeting some of the most amazing students that have since become friends. Diana Thater, Jorge Pardo, Shirley Tse, Catherine Sullivan, and Sharon Lockhart are but a few. All of who have gone on to impact education as well as change the field of art. Diana is the Chair of the Graduate Program at the Art Center now, Jorge started Mountain—a free graduate school run out of his bar in Los Angeles’ Chinatown, Shirley was Chair of Fine Arts at Cal Arts, Catherine currently is Chair of the Fine Art Graduate Program at U of C, and Sharon taught at USC and now at Cal Arts. They have all had huge art careers in sculpture, video, and film. I have learned from them and others more than I imagine they learned from me. My goal is to teach artists to become my colleagues in the future. Yes, I learned to operate from a position of enlightened self-interest.

I also learned from my fellow teachers more than I can even describe. In fact, at the time it would have never occurred to me to thank them. I was as competitive and resentful as the next artist, but I thank them now. So, for ten years, I was in grad school while teaching grad school. What a gift. At the time, I would never have used the term “remain teachable,” but I did and I like to think that now I remain teachable in all circumstances.

I will share with you another memorable teaching experience in addition to my bullwhip escapade. I taught as an adjunct in Los Angeles until I was 40, teaching at many

institutions, one class here, one class there... After which I decided I wanted to try life as an academic and became willing to move to Washington University in St. Louis in order to teach full-time.

But, before that, at Chapman College in Orange County California, 1992, I came prepared to teach an undergraduate upper-level seminar with many readings: classics like Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," to segments from Gertrude Stein's *Making of Americans*, to sections of *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* by Julia Kristeva. You know, everyday readings that helped me out in the studio. I laid them all out, introduced myself, and talked about the requirements of the class: read and discuss these materials that would then be supplemented by films and field trips, and develop a large-scale installation anywhere on the campus.

I was met by stunned silence and one student spoke out and said that they weren't used to reading things or having assignments and so he could speak for all of them and say: no, they weren't going to do this. I looked around and then said, "Oh, okay. I'm sorry, I thought I was contracted to teach this class, but I see that I am not in the right place." And I packed up my books, handouts and such, and left the room. I didn't make it down the hall. In a couple of minutes, the same young man came running and said, "I'm sorry—we will do it!" It ended up being a great class. They made work that exceeded their own limits to their surprise and, truthfully, to my surprise as well.

One of my strengths—one that has evolved over the years—is that I am able to create a classroom as a safe place for an artistic community to take hold. I had to give up the need to take credit for it and let the students think that it was all their doing. I outline what I hope the class will accomplish and we discuss. Then they write the syllabus, pick the readings from things I suggest, set the timeline for the rhythm of the class, and organize the exhibition, the external outings, and events. The class becomes practice for what they will need to do with and for each other once outside of school. They will take care of each other, be respectful, helpful, critical, and generous—all in order to live an artful and art-filled life. I have been fortunate enough to live that way—as a making teaching learning artist and my goal is to teach younger artists how to live that way as well if they choose to.

When I first began teaching, I thought it was all about me. Then I thought it was all about the students. Then I understood that it was also all about my colleagues. Concentric circles expanding like ripples caused by a rock thrown in the water, but all in the same pond, all affecting one another, interconnected and reciprocal.

To that end, five years ago, I decided to dedicate my front yard to the exhibition of work by other artists, to gift the incidental viewer with their work, and feed the contributing artist and their friends at a celebration of them and their work. These events have manifested in Biennials worldwide as well as their iterations in my yard once a month.

Enlightened self-interest, again, is a motivation. I get to cook, host and hang out with artists from multiple groups with various approaches to making work. It's pure pleasure. Today, a neighbor kid stopped and told me about his favorite yard piece and asked when the next was coming. I love that there is anticipation in the neighborhood and that children want to interact with artworks.

A bigger picture.

**“What you do with what you know is the important thing. To know is not enough,”
John Rice, founder of the Black Mountain College.**

Last week, I had the great fortune to see the current exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, “Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College.” I realized that the teaching artist model that I hold dear, that I came to be within, was embodied by the Black Mountain School—perhaps even created by that school. Started in 1933, it survived until 1957 and was responsible for the kind of artist-/student-centered education I benefited from and value as a teaching artist. With pedagogy developed out of the work of John Dewey, Rice created a school that dissolved the distinction between curricular and extra-curricular activities, that conceived of education and life as intertwined, and placed art at the center of learning.

“At Black Mountain,” he said, “our central and consistent effort is to teach method, not content; to emphasize process, not results; to invite the students to the realization that the way of handling facts and herself amid the facts is more important than the facts themselves.”

John Dewey visited Black Mountain several times and joined the Board of Advisors. In a letter to John Rice, he writes, “No matter how the present crisis comes out, the need for the kind of work that the College does is imperative in the long run interests of democracy. The College exists at the very ‘grass roots’ of a democratic way of life.”

Black Mountain College offered a horizontal model of governance, empowering faculty instead of trustees to lead the school and involved the entire school community in discussions about major decisions. As the college catalog explained, “Teachers, staff and students share housing so that the relation is not so much between teacher to student, but of one member of the community to another.”

To quote Rice, again: “The artist thinks about what they themselves are going to do, does it himself, and then reflects upon the thing that she herself has done.” Black Mountain pedagogy begins with art only to end with democracy through self-reflection and the translation of thought into action.

Is it obvious that as we allow our universities and classrooms at all educational levels to be dominated by boards of trustees, by corporate governance, by managers rather than

by faculty and students, we have moved away from democracy to oligarchy? Art must move back to the center of education, away from the margins into which it has been pushed, if we are to have the free-thinking population a democracy depends on. All of us are charged to do this. I only hope it is not too late.

Thank you Ruth Erickson, from whose essay in the "Leap Before You Look" catalog I was inspired by and that I have freely paraphrased.