

AKADEMIE X

LESSONS

IN ART

+ LIFE

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AKADEMIE X is an art school without walls. Unrestricted by geography and open to all, it brings together the finest faculty of arts educators from across the globe.

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AKADEMIE X has links to the top international art institutions, from CalArts, Yale University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Bard College in the USA, to the Royal College of Art, Rijksakademie and Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in Europe.

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Its tutors have the freedom to instruct and guide according to their individual style, revealing wisdom drawn from their own experiences or setting structured assignments and tasks.

They inspire creativity by presenting examples of their work, while their resources lists offer stimulating guidance for self-directed study.

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AKADEMIE X's educational philosophy is that, above all, students need preparation for professional life – in practical, financial and ideological terms. Here, they can become fully prepared for the real business of being an artist in the fast-changing environment of the contemporary art world.

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AKADEMIE X aims to empower its students, providing the essential toolbox for thinking, seeing and living as an artist.

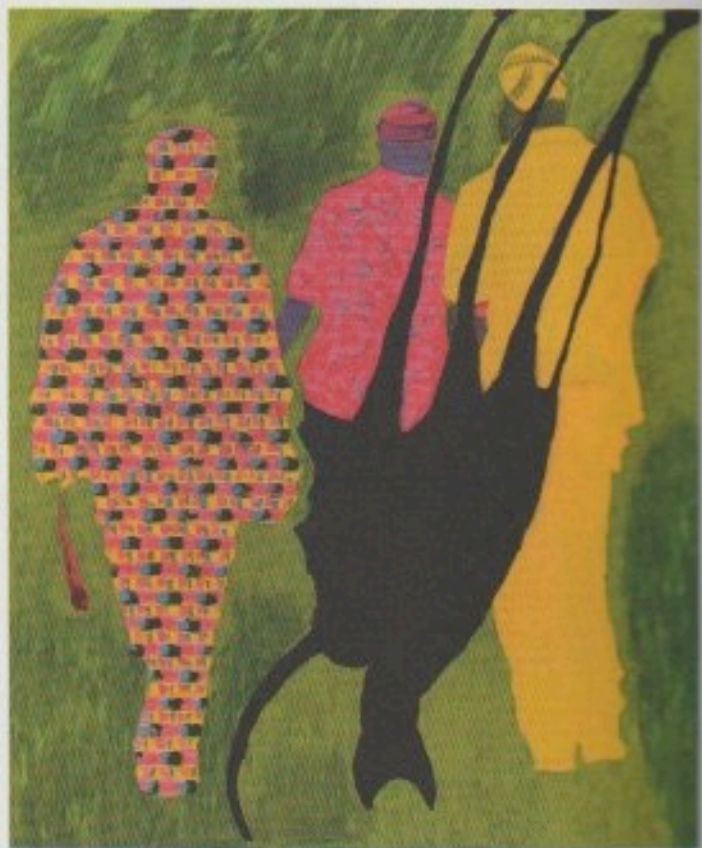
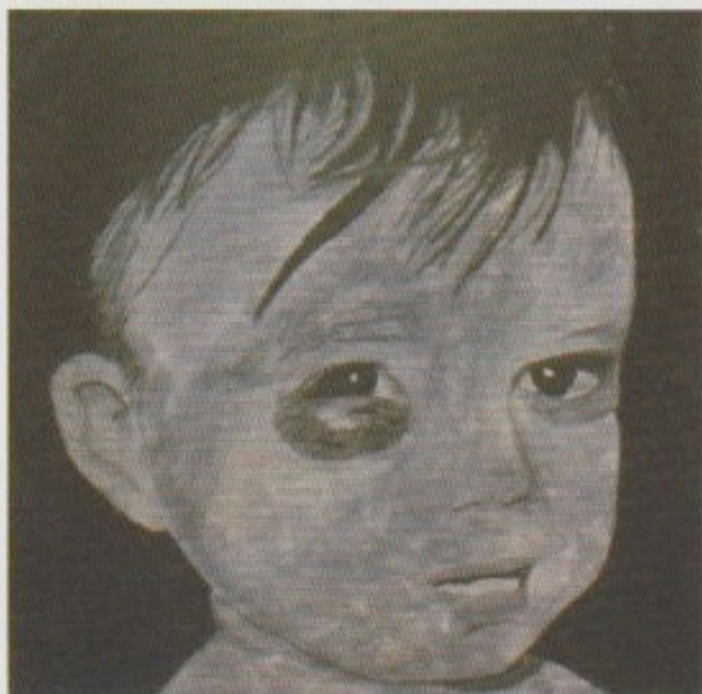




+ *Confrontation: Headbangers*, 2010, oil on canvas, 1.83 x 1.52 m

+ *Red Menace*, 2009, oil on canvas, 1.83 x 1.52 m

+ *Don't Hit Her Again*, 1981, oil on canvas, 1.22 x 1.22 m





* The Hanged Men, 2011, oil on canvas,
1.83 x 1.52 m

I began looking at art when I was a boy, on regular visits to the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow with my granny. She liked to look at the Salvador Dali crucifixion and I liked to look at the model steamships and the suits of armour. But standing next to her in front of the Dali I became increasingly fascinated by the crazy, deep perspective, the drama of the shadows, the wee boat at the bottom. I began to think about pictures as complicated puzzles and found myself wandering off to the picture galleries, forgetting the models and armour; although maybe not entirely – there was a Rembrandt of an old man wearing a helmet that became my favourite and I can still remember being fascinated by the way the texture of the paint mimicked the texture of old skin, the way some well-placed white made it seem that metal shone in the light.

To get to the museum, we had to take a long bus ride from the south side of the city, through some troubled and desperate areas. Even then, I was struck by the contrast between the dark, depressing streets, the lack of hope or vision they embodied and the rich, imaginative space that the museum opened up. I'm still very much committed to finding and keeping the liberation that the space of art offers as a way of putting the rest in some kind of perspective.

Artists notice stuff – the way things come together or fall apart, the telling detail or overlooked ruin, the tell-tale gesture. To be an artist, you have to train yourself to pay attention to the world in which you live, constantly looking for clues, always aware of your surroundings. Make notes, try observational drawing or taking photographs, study how things are made. There is no one method here. The task is to find a way to notice the details that make sense to you, the details that will open your eyes to content.

This is why so many of us get pissed off with lazy thinking that equates making art to expressing feelings. Too often, this simply means the equivalent of throwing a tantrum and nobody cares to see that. If you are interested in expressing emotion, you have to examine that emotion, find its source, calibrate how best to represent it. The most successful expressionist art is always coldly calculating.

A good artist pays attention to the world she finds herself in, which includes the political and moral dimensions of that world. Making straight-up political work is difficult, and most attempts fail. They come across as simple-minded or strident; worse, they are usually so tied to a particular moment that they are irrelevant within a couple of months. But work that is grounded in a specific set of observations, developed through appropriately considered and handled techniques, will always speak to an understanding of relationships, and thus to society.

It's a fine romance to think that artists have a special voice in the political realm, that we somehow understand truths better than the average person,

but this is a slippery slope to hubris. Shelley claimed that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world; some of the Italian Futurists took him up on the idea and Hitler followed roughly the same principle.

Making art is all about lining up ideas with the materials appropriate to expressing them, and good art begins when that match-up appears seamless and inevitable. Bad art happens when the ideas are uninteresting, banal, over-familiar, and the materials and handling are indifferent.

In the mid-1980s Sherrie Levine was thinking about the extraordinary value placed on originality in the modern era, on the insistence that deep meaning could only be found when a particularly gifted person – usually male – made an impromptu but inspired mark on a piece of canvas. To question that, she asked a lumberyard to cut some plywood to the size of a traditional portrait painting, filled the knots on the face side with gold-leaf paint, and had the result framed. She decided on the size and proportions of the plywood and the nature of the frame; contracted labour did the necessary work. Chance dictated the compositional arrangement, and she applied the gold-leaf paint herself. With great eloquence and economy of means, the final work speaks to her concerns, ties them to a by now well-established tradition of making art that ultimately stems from Duchamp's investigations of ready-mades and assisted ready-mades in the second decade of the twentieth century, and delivers its own particular sense of melancholy.

About five years later, Damien Hirst began making a series of paintings that consist of equal-sized dots of colour arranged on a grid. The colours are chosen from commercial decorative paints and applied at random by studio assistants. The paintings are on traditional canvas supports and come in all sizes and dimensions. It seems that at the beginning, the paintings were made as a way of thinking about issues of scale and composition and soon developed into a kind of punctuation around Hirst's more controversial work with animal carcasses. In time, they became a kind of ever-ready standby, and then, as the dots migrated to prints and T-shirts and other more readily marketable items, they became markers of the Hirst brand. They became commodities.

Levine's work is good art because it takes up a series of ideas and finds a fresh way to further the argument through the deployment of materials and methods well-matched to the task. The Hirst work, on the other hand, is bad art because it succumbs to glib thinking and decision-making as it seeks to capitalize on a marketing idea. The project may have begun with a reasonable chance of becoming good art, but, as the choices informing it became increasingly arbitrary and driven by an over-riding desire to sell, it went bad. And, by the way, Duchamp is properly accorded the 'great artist' label because his investigations and choices led to a radical rethinking of the entire project of art-making over the past century. Great art, then, is art that brings together extraordinary ideas and the materials and methodology to match.

If you are serious about yourself as an artist, you are going to have to figure out a way of working. First of all, you have to think about how you are going to pay the rent and feed yourself. You can't be freaking out about this every month – that would destroy you and your hopes of making art long term. Getting some sort of job is one option for this, but so is determining that you will live off your art. (Just remember that this requires you to put aside enough time each week to take care of business – schmoozing, meeting with people, but also doing book-keeping and so on.) I don't support the idea of artists paying the rent through any kind of criminal activity. I know there might be some sort of outlaw romance to that idea, but the reality is you get caught and spend a lot of really unproductive time in a jail cell.

A lot of the time, being an artist is about getting things done – either making stuff or overseeing other people making stuff. There is no formula for how much time you need to dedicate to this each week, but there has to be some regularity. You need to be in whatever space you set aside for thinking about and making art often enough to ensure continuity in your thinking process, and sufficient time to make mistakes.

One of the most common clichés about artists is that we're all dreamers, impractical people out of sync with the hard choices of the real world. The fact is that making art is all about judgment and choice; artists have to be decisive. We also have to be business people. You need to keep an inventory of your work, track its movements in the world, record its history. You also need to keep a sharp eye on both income and expenses, and make sure that one is covering the other so that you can continue to do what you want to do. Depending on what your costs are, and how you plan to cover them, this may also mean honing other skills, from marketing to teaching, mixology or something else entirely.

One thing all artists need to be able to do is to present their ideas confidently to the range of people who come through the studio – peers, curators, gallerists, writers, collectors. If you clam up, you run the risk of seeming timid or arrogant, and neither does you any favours. The work is always paramount, but unless you can set up a convincing context that gives these first viewers a way into your processes, nobody else will ever see what you are doing. And once the work is presented in a public place, your voice again is the most important, the most convincing, in getting the public to pay attention. There are no rules dictating how much of your inspiration/process/technique you should reveal. What is important is that you sound as if you know why you're doing what you're doing and how it's relevant to the present moment, and that you have some sense of where it's going, where you're taking your investigations.

Around the turn of the millennium I was having some problems in my studio; a number of projects and series had come to an end, and, although some

new things were stirring, it was hard to feel confident that anything was happening. I was in a funk. Just then, I was approached by the curator Paul Schimmel to write an essay for the catalogue of a show of paintings by Laura Owens that he was planning. I had worked with Laura when she was a student at CalArts, and we'd stayed in touch, but going to her studio to begin work on this essay was a revelation. The walls were covered with drawings and small paintings working out ideas and themes. Despite their casual appearance, her large paintings were carefully planned and plotted. As I wrote then:

Owens offers a simple, generous kind of comedy, accepting the treasures of the given, relishing in the condition of here and now. This is a subtle act, requiring droll precision with an unflinching gaze. On the surface it is an entertaining and sweet art form, but it is also an art of cruelty towards accepted notions of taste and decorum. It offers a hard look at what painting is, and how its practice, and reception, might fit into daily life. It offers a grace in the present, a lightness of being, of touch, of thought.

If I could go back in time and speak to my twenty-three-year-old self, my advice would be threefold: travel further and more often to see what art actually looks like, figuring out sooner which ideas are currently convincing, which have become passé; spend more time making stuff, less time thinking about it; and do a better job of networking, staying in touch with people who show interest or friendship.

When I was twenty-three, in the early 1970s, I was in Edinburgh trying to puzzle out what was going on in this art world that I was so keen to become part of. I tracked down copies of *Artforum* and *Studio International* – they arrived in a forgotten corner of the old university building on an erratic schedule, usually four to six months after publication. Sitting alone in a dusty, overheated nineteenth-century room, I tried to make sense of these complex arguments about Conceptual art and performance, but without much experiential back-up, and the translation was uncertain at best. I tried to fill in the back story by reading John Golding on both Cubism and Duchamp, Richard Hamilton's Tate Gallery catalogue essay on Duchamp, and the newly published *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* by Pierre Cabanne. I read Harold Rosenberg on American Abstraction but did not know to read Clement Greenberg.

Through the pages of *Artforum*, I'd become fascinated by the obdurate, inscrutable painting constructions of Jasper Johns. I had no idea what to make of something like *Target with Four Faces*, and the idea of a painted flag made no sense at all. (Pop DJs painted Union Jacks on their Jaguar sports cars. How did that translate to serious art?) But I kept returning to pictures of these works in the magazines and soon came to the realization that I had to see the actual paintings. So I wrote a letter to Johns courtesy of the Castelli Gallery in Soho, and he wrote back to say he'd be in New York until July and that I should come by his studio.

I'd made a few trips to London but found it something of an echo chamber for what I'd been reading was happening in New York. The summer I turned twenty-four, I flew across the Atlantic to see for myself. At MoMA, the Whitney and the Guggenheim, face-to-face with Picasso and Pollock, with Johns and Stella, I began to breathe and understand the physicality of art. I took the train to Philadelphia and confronted the weird, perverse mysteries of Duchamp, face pressed up against that infamous old door. I called Johns, and he invited me to his studio in an old bank on a corner of East Houston Street. He and his assistant Mark Lancaster, who'd been a student of Richard Hamilton and had worked on the replica of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, were very friendly and asked me if there was anything in particular I wanted to see. I'd become obsessed with *No* (1961), and, although it was a thirteen-year-old work, it was still there. They pulled it out and left me to look it over. I took in the scale of the work – about the size of a smallish person – as it leaned against the wall, sensing the heavy, slightly dusty weight, and yet fragility, of each waxy brush mark, the depth of material and colour. Above all, there was the poignancy of that irregular piece of wire hanging down the centre of the picture, a resistant, moving line that held the two letters that spelled 'NO' suspended over the canvas, an uncertain rebuke to – what? Suddenly it became clear: all the references to the repetitions of Beckett, to Duchampian ready-mades, to Wittgensteinian interrogation now somehow made sense.

I moved to New York the following year, and visited Johns once more. He was as friendly as before, but busy with preparations for an upcoming retrospective at the Whitney. I felt I was intruding and didn't attempt any further contact. If I could reach back in time, I think I'd encourage my younger self to push past the limitations of provincial shyness and seek some sort of friendship with one of the most significant painters of our time.

There's a narrow perspective on life that seeks to identify a purpose behind it, as if living weren't good enough on its own. I remember in Sunday School being told that the chief end of man was to glorify God, and hearing elsewhere that I was expected to get a job, settle down, have a family. It seemed to me then, and still seems to me now, that people who hunt for purpose in this way are looking to close down options and erect simplified codes of conduct that will have predictable outcomes. They want to limit choices within a range of what they consider acceptable, and try to punish anyone who thinks differently. Art exists as a rebuke to all that; it celebrates being. Making art is a communicative act, but the most stunningly liberating thing about it is that it has no purpose in the day to day. It may help make sense of things, but it prescribes nothing.

ASSIGNED READING, VIEWING AND LISTENING

READING:

- * Alpers, Svetlana. 'Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of Las Meninas'. *Representations*. No. 1. (1983): pp. 30–42

As an antidote and trigger for further thought after reading Foucault (see below), they should then take on Alpers.

- * Cabanne, Pierre. *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp*. Paris: Editions Belfond, 1967. Translated by Ron Padgett as *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Viking Press, 1971

Picasso, Matisse, Pollock: these are the giants of twentieth century art, but it isn't clear what they can teach us. Duchamp, on the other hand, left the legacy of the ready-made, the use of chance as a compositional tool, the idea of indifference as opposed to taste, and demanded that artists consider their relationship with their viewers; in short, he opened up our thinking about art, widened it, democratized it. The best way to figure out what he meant is to read his own words, and this is the finest collection of interviews.

- * Foucault, Michel. 'Las Meninas' in *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1966. Translated as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2001

Anyone interested in the complex relationships that an accomplished artist can create between painted images of human beings and the live, thinking people standing in front of a painting must read Foucault's deft analysis of one of the great humanist works of the premodern era.

- * Krauss, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986

In a tour de force of observation and argumentation, Krauss attempts to figure out the new forms of the 1970s – performance, video, earth art and photographically based work – without entirely giving up on her earlier training as a Greenbergian formalist, wedded to the idea of a historical development in art towards an ever more pure expression, reduced to an elemental essence. A fascinating struggle between what she sees and what she thinks.

- * McEvilley, Thomas. *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism*. New York: McPherson & Co., 2005

McEvilley doesn't look as closely at art as Krauss, but he brings a more open mind, and a broad and deep understanding of philosophy, from pre-Socratic Greeks to Hegel, to bear on the question of where art is going. He makes a compelling case for the transformative effect of Conceptual and Performance art, and explains the profound ways in which they've reoriented our thinking about the means and ends of art-making.

- * Singerman, Howard. *Art History, After Sherrie Levine*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012

If the arguments above have stimulated your thinking, then delve into this case study of one of the pivotal artists of the 1980s. Levine's work makes us consider questions of originality and skill, mark-making and mechanical reproduction, ownership and theft; it also obliges us to consider the role of the art market in the reception of art.

VIEWING:

- * Antonio, Emile de, dir. *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the New York Art Scene 1940–1970*. Sphinx Productions, 1973. Film

It's always great to hear artists talking directly about their work, and this film gives you New York straight up, from Barnett Newman to Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. It's a clash of the titans, with Robert Rauschenberg as a mischievous pivot between elders and youngsters. We also get the added pathos of seeing Newman, with almost his last, but still amused and cantankerous breath, declaim that 'art criticism is to artists as ornithology is to the birds'.

- * Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, dir. *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant (The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant)*. Filmverlag der Autoren/Tango Pictures, 1972. Film

This film is a beautiful and melancholy consideration of love and betrayal, mixing the stylized acting and nonlinear narratives of avant-garde theatre with the over-wrought emotionality and off-key colour of the 1950s melodramas of Douglas Sirk and Luchino Visconti.

LISTENING:

- * Bob Dylan. *Highway 61 Revisited*. Columbia Records. 1965

This is a brilliant mash-up of old and new, found and forgotten – echoes of a vanishing rural America caught in Dylan's perfectly imperfect voice, framed and delivered with the electric, urban urgency of rock and roll. There's no better model for what art can be.



— Salvador Dalí, *Christ of St. John of the Cross*, 1961, oil on canvas, 205 x 146 cm, Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum

— Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Man in Armour (aka Alexander the Great)*, 1655, oil on canvas, 128 x 134 cm, Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum

— Sherrie Levine, *Large Gold Knot 3*, 1987, metallic paint of plywood, 152 x 102 cm

— Jasper Johns, *No. 1961*, encaustic, collage and sculptural on canvas with objects, 128 x 101 cm

— Laura Owens, *Deflected*, 2000, acrylic, oil and watercolour on canvas, 2.8 x 3.7 m, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles



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Regent's Wharf
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Phaidon Press Inc.
65 Bleecker Street
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Project Editor:
Rebecca Morrill

Production Controller:
Steve Bryant

Design and Illustrations:
Julia Hasting

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Julia Hasting

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THIS INSPIRATIONAL AND PRACTICAL GUIDE ON HOW TO LIVE A CREATIVE LIFE HAS BEEN DEVISED BY THE WORLD'S MOST THOUGHT-PROVOKING ARTISTS + WRITERS. FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS, 36 'TUTORS' SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES, WISDOM, TECHNIQUES + PHILOSOPHIES ON ART + LIFE.

ILLUSTRATED LESSONS BY MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ / WALEAD BESHTY /
SANEORD BIGGERS / DARA BIRNBAUM / CAROL BOVE / TANIA BRUGUERA
/ MARK DION / ÓLAFUR ELÍASSON / HARRELL FLETCHER / CHARLES GAINES /
SAM GILICK / PIERO GOLIA / MICHELLE GRABNER / DAN GRAHAM
/ KATHARINA GROSSE / JOAN JONAS / MIRANDA JULY / CHRIS KRAUS /
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COLLECTIVE / NEO RAUCH / TIM ROLLINS / MICHAEL SMITH / JOHN
STEZAKER / STEPHANIE SYJUCO / SHIRLEY TSE / JAMES WELLING /
RICHARD WENTWORTH / CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS / KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

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