

TEACHING ART | EPISODE 1: NOTES ON THE CLASSROOM

JOHN VIGNA

When you take on any vocation, whether it's writing, playing an instrument, teaching, you realize that, once you start, you're into a lifelong apprenticeship. And as soon as you start getting proficient at it, it just means now that you need to challenge yourself more and find more ways to get proficient and more skilled and effective at it.

DENNIS

Welcome to *Teaching Art*, a three part collaged audio-essay in which I, as somebody who teaches art, try to find out what that exactly means: what should we teach? Who should we be when we teach it? And what kind of space should the art academy be?

You just heard author and teacher John Vigna (whom you will hear more from in later episodes) reflect on the idea of a lifelong apprenticeship in any vocation you choose. I find this to be true in my artistic practice, but even more in teaching.

I started teaching in earnest a little over ten years ago. ArtEZ just launched its creative writing program and I was one of a handful of first teachers. I was in my late 20's, full of conviction, armed with all these ideas of what the students should learn and a plan on how we would go about that. I prepared a syllabus filled with assignments, deadlines and reading material. I built massive slideshows to accompany hour-long lectures.

A lot has changed in a little over ten years. This series is a way of taking stock.

I never studied Creative Writing in a formal way. After high school I spent one year in Belgium studying graphic design, quickly deciding I was never going to be a graphic designer and quitting in favor of studying philosophy.

All this to say: I had no idea what an art academy really was when I started teaching there. I had all these beliefs about it, sure, but they were based on

nothing. The first time I set foot in one, was the day we were auditioning students for the program.

But I think this disconnect between what we think an art academy should be and what it actually is, also is part and parcel of the idea of an art academy itself. We have been thinking of how to teach art since, well, Aristotle, probably earlier even.

This series is yet another iteration of that question, and, for me, the question of what an art academy can be, isn't necessarily a question of looking ahead, but can also mean looking back.

JOANNE DIJKMAN

I am on the participation council, but I am also part of teaching teams – in which there is a lot of thought about vision, vision for the future, the development of art education, curricula... And I just often have the feeling that people are constantly reinventing the wheel, but we actually already have an incredibly rich history. What can we use from that and what can we learn?

DENNIS

This is Joanne Dijkman and looking back is part of what she does. She is an art historian currently doing a PhD at a handful of legendary art schools like Bauhaus, Black Mountain College and the Joseph Beuys Free University.

Joanne also *teaches* art history at ArteZ. She does so at an academy with its own rich history: the AKI in Enschede.

JOANNE DIJKMAN

AKI stands for Academie voor Kunst en Industrie – Academy of Art and Industry. And there is a direct link with the Bauhaus and the importance of making, of creating. The workshop is the central point in the academy and also yes, the Bauhaus idea that art and industry should be connected. And that's where my interest in that (well apart from the fact that I'm an art historian) also started, in that history of art education.

I've noticed that students often know very little about it. Current generations are not at all familiar with the 60s and 70s, when the AKI was known for its experimental character, its freedom under Joop Hardy and Sipke Huismans – former directors who had ideas about the AKI as a kind of Plato's garden, a kind of walled garden where you could experiment fully, away from the big cities, away from the hustle and bustle and a kind of nice shelter where you could decide for yourself how long you stayed. Similar to Black Mountain College and Bauhaus: that you decided for yourself when you graduated or that you did not graduate at all or that there were no diplomas, no official moments.

DENNIS

Besides being a teacher and audio producer, I am a poet. And I first learned about Black Mountain College specifically through the Black Mountain Poets. An important group of American avant garde poets in the 1940's and 50's associated with the college.

It is only after I started teaching Creative Writing at ArteZ that I started to look into the college itself. That interest turned into a fascination when I visited an exhibition on the school at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. The exhibition featured a lot of historical material, including descriptions of and actual lesson plans. It took me ages to move through the exhibition, since I kept taking notes. To me, it was like taking a course in how to teach art.

Joanne Dijkmans PHD research also stems from a fascination with Black Mountain College and the similarly legendary Bauhaus and Joseph Beuys Free University. But also, and maybe mostly, an interest in where that fascination comes from.

JOANNE DIJKMAN

They have become these perfect examples that have taken on mythical status. They are also romanticized, glorified. And what characterizes them all? They all are short lived schools.

So the question becomes: is that the reason they have become so mythical? Just like all great singer-songwriters died at the age of 27 and therefore

assumed mythical proportions? Or is there something else that keeps us coming back and admiring them over and over again? Is it because Black Mountain College and also Bauhaus have played such a large part in providing great artists, from the entire modern avant-garde and modernist ranks? Big names like Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, et cetera, et cetera

DENNIS

The latter is definitely part of my fascination for the school. Poets like Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley were at some point in my writing career very important to me. And it was intriguing to me that they all were somehow involved with this magical college.

But there's more to it than that. A few years after I visited the exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof, I picked up the publication for that exhibition at a small book and magazine shop in Leipzig. The proprietor of the shop had his own theory about why it was such an inspiring and frankly successful school. To him the biggest part was its location. I'll let Joanne explain.

JOANNE DIJKMAN

Black Mountain College, of course, was in North Carolina in the small town of Black Mountain. It is seen as a beautiful kind of summer residence on Lake Eeden with a very nice summer camp-like atmosphere, which has contributed to the fact that people have been able to make such inspiring works there.

DENNIS

What the shop owner in Leipzig believed was that not only the scenery was important, but also the fact that the college was housed in the middle of nowhere : away from all the major cities, from all the art hubs, the scenes and everything that was mainstream. He believed that having a community away from it all was the college's key to success. The walled garden Joanne referred to earlier.

This is only partly by design of course. A short history lesson: Black Mountain College was founded out of resistance against the undemocratic practices of an existing college in Florida. The resistance' leader, a teacher

named John Andrew Rice, was fired. This incident sparked him, along with a group of colleagues, to not only to create an *alternative*, but an *ideal* college.

The location itself was a lucky find, but the sense of community that arose part out of this 'off the gridness' of the college, was one of the pillars of the teaching there.

The pedagogy at Black Mountain was strongly influenced by the educational views of the philosopher John Dewey, who was also a member of the college's Advisory Council. *He* wrote about communal life: "The very process of living together educates. It enlarges and enlightens experience; it stimulates and enriches thought."

JOANNE DIJKMAN

One of those aspects that we love about Bauhaus and Black Mountain College is that community mindset, that sense of community – and yes, it's all about making things and about learning from each other. And how do we get back to that?

At Black Mountain College, for example, or at Bauhaus, it was of course very much about living together, eating together, having these shared moments, conversations during lunch and dinner and parties. And I think that this feeling of community can bring something very beautiful to an academy.

DENNIS

At Black Mountain College, students and teachers not only shared meals, but also responsibilities: from doing the dishes and tending the gardens, to designing and building a whole new location for the college. Traditional hierarchies between faculty and students were subverted even further by not having a set curriculum. I'll quote from the first catalog issued by the college:

The student is free to choose whatever courses he pleases, provided he has the prerequisite knowledge that is necessary. This extreme freedom of choice would in many cases result in confusion if it were irresponsible, but one of its

purposes is to place the responsibility where it belongs; namely, on the student.

End quote. The famous composer John Cage allegedly had no students during his first two years offering courses at the college. He considered his lunchtime conversations with students his way of teaching. Nobody seemed worried about a teacher without students. Nobody fired him. It was all part of the experiment. And there is a sense of tremendous freedom that speaks to me, in all of this.

But of course, as ideal as they seem now, these schools had their own problems. As Joanne pointed out to me during our conversation: that beautiful scenery of the Black Mountain College? Stolen land.

And the subversion of all hierarchies in some cases led to what we would now consider transgressive behavior. In fact those cases are fairly well documented and known. But despite all that, the ideals of these schools still speak to us.

JOANNE DIJKMAN

Why do they still inspire us? Yeah, maybe because we glorify it. Or maybe because we've lost some of that sense of community, of those ways of freedom, of being able to slow down, maybe not being forced to graduate in four years and the pressure of having to be successful as an artist. That you could just study as long as you wanted – come and go. Students came and went and could determine those moments themselves. Yes, that still inspires me a lot.

And that you were offered a curriculum, but at the same time you could also choose what you wanted to do. Or that teachers were simply given the time to think for two years, to have conversations. And then ask themselves: what am I going to teach those students? That whole holistic idea – which yes is also *Bildungsgedachte* – that it contributes to a human formation, to an education actually.

It's all so very measured now: you have so much class time and it all has to happen in that. There is so much rush, there is so much pressure and that is a great pity.

DENNIS

I don't know where we lost some of these ideals, but I agree it's a shame. Maybe we've become too institutionalized, not only as art academies, but in society in general. A fellow teacher once complained that there was so much paperwork to do, that there was hardly any time left for teaching. He spoke of the 'economy of reporting'. I think of that phrase a lot.

But naive as that may be, I still believe we, as teachers, can partly turn away from that, back to some of those ideals of schools like Black Mountain College. Maybe we can create a smaller version of that walled garden. Even if it's only for our own courses.

LORENA BRIEDIS

I start playing a lot. I think that the first year, you have to settle down an atmosphere of freedom, of playfulness, of like disinhibits and very open creativity. And you have to underline a lot the fact that we're here to have fun, that this is a creative laboratory, a creative workshop, and that we need to free ourselves to become anyone and anything we want.

DENNIS

This is Lorena Briedis, a fellow teacher of creative writing at Escuela de Escritores in Spain. I met her through the European Association of Creative Writing Programs... of which she is the coordinator. It is one of the reasons I wanted to talk to her, since she has seen a lot more creative writing programs than I have.

This might be a good time to note that I mostly focus on creative writing in this series, since that is what I know, but I think all of it translates to other disciplines as well.

A lot of what I think I know about teaching creative writing, I learned from another author who also teaches. Jesse Ball wrote *Notes on my Dunce Cap*, a small book about teaching that I re-read almost every year.

Like Lorena, he also thinks that we should start with that freedom to become anyone and anything we want.

For him this starts with where we teach, the space that we, as teachers, have domain over for at least the few hours we are running it: the classroom.

JESSE BALL

(...)if there's a space that you can enter into where you're free to say one opinion, then say it's opposite, to try out different ways of being, I think that this is the mode in which you will come closer to like a fundamental notion, which is things that you might want to say, like really might want to say. And this is what distinguishes really great writing from just excellent writing, is that the great writing, a person said a thing that is just specific to them. No one else was really going to say that.

DENNIS

We have to create the space where this can happen. We have to actively build it as teachers. It's about how *we* approach the classroom and how we *run* it.

JESSE BALL

The first thing is that when you come into the room where I'm teaching, I do things like I move all the desks over to one side, or like flip them over, like make them in a pile or make some strange new architecture out of the room, just to viscerally signal to the students that this is going to be a different thing, that we are like... in the Paris Commune, we've made some barricades in the streets. Things are a little different in here. The rules are not going to apply previously. Sometimes, it happens that I might be sitting on the floor when the students come in. And they're all sitting in chairs and I'm sitting on the floor, which makes for immediately a very strange and uncomfortable moment at the beginning.

I've had first classes where I'm just writing on the board for the first hour and a half, just like transcribing something. And they're all just sitting there

like beginning to giggle and looking at each other in horror, like, “What is happening?” So, to create, first, some kind of... the expectation that something different is happening, and then to place the students in an orientation with you... and the work that is ongoing. That is not one of like you're above them doing something that where you're going to be whipping them or holding them to account in some way, judging them. But more than that, by example, you will show them an empathetic like borderless existence where one person can finish someone else's sentence, where everyone is working together. It's a group mind to create ideas.

And really, that's necessitated, not because of the conditions of this kind of classroom. It's necessitated because of the previous example of all the other bad classrooms, right?

DENNIS

With all this disruption, I wonder if the classroom still feels like a safe space, which I also believe it should be. Especially if we want it to be a space where anyone can be anything.

JESSE BALL

It certainly should be a safe space. But part of that safety. Is predicated on it being intellectually dangerous. And like a safe space where there is no intellectual danger is some kind of like mollified, horror drone, where like within this thing you're condensed into like a treacle that will just be liberally poured over the top of a French toast or something.

I mean, it has to be that if you venture something like speaking, you venture it with like slight approbation, but possibly you are like... you've hazarded something by speaking. It's terrifying. And you should... because you should feel alive. It's impossible to really speak well or think well, unless you're vividly alive. And so, the classroom has to contain all the things.

DENNIS

Once we've established our classrooms as something different, a place where you will not be held to who people perceive you as, we have to lay down what in fact will happen in this space.

JESSE BALL

On the first day, you demonstrate to the students the class will be a bit different, and then you make them a little confused about what's going on, as you say, possibly a little afraid because... I mean, not physically afraid, but just afraid that maybe this isn't where they are supposed to be. Because we all like to run in a track and go the easy way, or whatnot.

So, at that point I will talk to the students. I always talk about what we're going to be doing in the class and how we're going to be doing it in a quite simple and straightforward way so that everyone can understand. It's very simple. "This is... first, we'll do this and then we'll do this. And then... like, this class will be made-up with a series of exercises. And I'm going to give you these exercises. And in between the classes, we'll go out and attempt these exercises in the world. And then in the space of the classroom, we're going to be sharing these exercises with each other," such a thing.

DENNIS

Clearly explaining what will happen in the space is one way to ensure safety, or at least a clear expectation, a mutual agreement. Every free and safe and dangerous space needs some guidelines.

LORENA BRIEDIS

Going back to the question of, "How do I start a creative writing group?" We do have some proposals which, actually, I kind of rephrased from Jenny [inaudible], a teacher from the Valand Academy in Sweden. And that is a proposal, yeah, like I don't like to call them rules, but proposals of how to approach this space from the very beginning.

DENNIS

Here are some of those proposals.

LORENA BRIEDIS

We are here because we want to write.

We are here to play, to experiment, to rave, to wish for the impossible.

We have also come here to learn to read (us) in a critical way. We write as we read.

We have set aside this time, each week, for our writing and for sharing our writing with each other.

We are here because we have committed ourselves to be here.

We are here to be the best writer each of us can be.

We do not compete or compare ourselves with others.

We recognize that writing is a craft that requires time and dedication, and we are willing to do our best.

Writing every week and commenting on our classmates' texts is our way of giving.

Listening to our classmates with attention and gratitude is our way of receiving.

Giving and receiving require the same degree of courage, commitment and generosity.

We take this space seriously and we take each other seriously, but we also know how to laugh, joke, play, have fun: how to enjoy.

We are personal and private when we need to be.

We are strong and vulnerable at the same time.

Everything that we share here and entrust to each other has a mystical character (ie, secret).

We know that this journey can only be undertaken with patience, perseverance, with faith and with love.

We tell each other: "Take your time. Enjoy. We have a course ahead. We're on our way."

DENNIS

You can find the full list in the show notes. But it's important to note that these house rules, these modes of conduct, or as Lorena calls them,

proposals, are not set in stone. The specific rules are also not as important as the general thought behind it...

LORENA BRIEDIS

Around the whole idea of the proposals, the idea of secret space is consistent, that everything that is said in this space stays in this space. We have to understand this space as our heaven – a place we have protected from other people's hell, you know? Because it's our creative space, it's our secret space. So I would say that's one of the first steps to create that atmosphere of confidence.

DENNIS

So this is where it starts: in our secret space, in the classroom. By changing the kind of place that is and by changing how we approach it. By not having it predefined who we are when we're in there.

That should be true for both students and teachers. And we'll dive deeper into what that means in the next episode, which will be released next week.

Thanks to all the interviewees for their generosity in both time and ideas. We will hear more from them in the next two episodes. Thanks to Jozien Wijkhuijs for dubbing Joannes parts.

Teaching Art is a podcast by me, Dennis Gaens, for Studium Generale ArtEZ.

Thank you for listening.