

ART SCHOOL

(PROPOSITIONS FOR
THE 21ST CENTURY)

edited and with an introduction by Steven Henry Madoff

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INTRODUCTION

Steven Henry Madoff

No school is a school without an idea. Every school embodies an inheritance at least and at most is an invention rising out of its inheritance. By inheritance and invention, I mean the transmission and transformation of a creed, of a technique that animates the hand, of a thought about the consecration of knowledge as it individuates the self and enhances a community, a network, many communities and many networks. An ethics of knowledge is the foundation of any school in its essential definition as a gathering place, but the complexity of what that knowledge should be, how its production is configured and unfolds, who translates it across the bridges of generations and time, whether its structure is rigid or limpid in its willingness to change, whether it is resistant to external mandates or longs for the imprimatur of an outside authority, and what status and success signify for its teachers and graduates—all of these define the place of gathering, its ethical complexion, its reasons for being, and what learning means there.

Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century) is an outgrowth of my deep curiosity about what a particular kind of school—an art school—might and will be in this new century. The climate and landscape of contemporary art haven't been as eruptive as the great upheavals of the previous century—at least not yet. Of course, in the past twenty-five years, the inventory of cultural production has expanded far beyond anything before in the history of art. The topography of making has been flattened: no one discipline, style, genre, or artist dominates. But there has been one unstoppable influence, particularly after the 1960s: the juggernaut of Marcel Duchamp as the tutelary spirit hovering above the notion of art as the outward sign of an idea manifested through any sensorial means, using any object from any precinct of production as its instrument, with its concept claiming priority over the making or appropriation of the optical thing, of the sign itself.

From the 1980s on, the influence of conceptualism has affected art schools all over the world. Many schools have erased the boundaries between disciplines, as the supremacy of the expression of a concept in this post-Duchampian epoch rides across all material means—photography, video, painting, drawing, sculpture, or any of them and more joined in an installation. Somewhere between philosophy, research, manual training, technological training,

and marketing, an evolved profile of contemporary artistic practice has pressed the art school as a pedagogical concept itself to address what an artist is now and what the critical criteria and physical requirements are for educating one—or should I say educating tens of thousands, as the complexities of capital markets worldwide have fostered an industry of producing artists for the primary purpose (though not an exclusive purpose—the cultural desires of humanism remain a need of intellectual, social, and spiritual health) of circulating objects tied to the speculative exchange of money. The economy and ecology of images and thought-encrusted objects are only burgeoning, nurtured by technologies that are in fact eruptive, pervasive, and increasingly accessible.

And what does this abundance of art objects and activities do for and to culture and portend? Of course, on one elemental level, it means the proliferation and distribution of *ideas*, and the only matter of final consequence is the quality of the ideas (certainly as much as the quality of the objects, as contested as that may be in some quarters). It's a commonplace to reiterate the fact that an artwork is anything now—a parade, a meal, a painting, a discussion, a hole in the earth filled with the thought embedded in the work's title—and it is now more than obvious that preparing young artists to live in a landscape of infinitely elastic production will demand some new requirements that, as I say, have already begun to be negotiated over the past few decades. The factory of ideas, objects, practices, and pedagogies that constitute an art school today, as they will tomorrow, seems particularly restless, wanting more porosity, irritated by bureaucratic weight, impatient for new shapes, even for an ephemeral life.

This very potency of the *Zeitgeist's* appetite for hybridity has driven the questions and propositions in this book. The writers are largely artists who also invest their creativity in teaching, and their essays range over continents, histories, traditions, experiments, and fantasies of education, as well as the realities of inertia and success. The same holds true for the conversations and questionnaires that I've included. The conversations mean to offer a record of the thoughts of some great artists who have also been great teachers. The questionnaires are a way of asking other artists of note what their own experiences were as art students—and the range of opinion is considerable. But that can be said about this book in general, in considering the viability and use of art schools as they exist today. As Thierry de Duve observes, there's no certainty about the efficacy of art education or whether art schools are a necessity at all and will remain a fixture of the world, just as they haven't always been required in the past. In South America, a vital tradition continues of artists training other artists in their studios—a far more autonomous means of transmitting knowledge than the bulkiness of institutional learning. Across the globe, there

are any number of small, nomadic, peculiar, and useful “academies” that have sprung up over the past decade, whether in bars, as the framework of biennial exhibitions or as residencies and fly-by-night research initiatives. Naturally they are reactions to the stolid weight of fixed institutions, with their rules, their acquiescence to the Bologna Process in the European Union or to the hegemonic regulation of M.F.A. programs in the United States. In the meantime, what the immense and persistent reach of the art market will mean to art school pedagogy as the century progresses is beyond knowing, but not beyond the speculations of the contributors here.

Even this issue may simply be a moment in time, becoming a nonissue, a feature of the landscape that once seemed a challenging promontory that was climbed, tunneled through, acclimated to. But the questions remain concerning the most appropriate, inventive means by which the transmission of knowledge can be accomplished and with what outcomes—which can never, in fact, be guaranteed.

My curiosity has had the benefaction of a five-year project underwritten by the Anaphiel Foundation in Miami in its aim to create a new model for art education to benefit its own creative community. The foundation’s interest allowed nearly one hundred important artists, educators, architects, writers, technologists, and administrators to meet in more than half a dozen symposia in London, New York, and Miami to share their practices and experiences, to wonder aloud, and to vent and predict. Many of these crucial participants and their concerns roam the pages of this book, whose simple and large ambition is to ask what art education is and what it should be in the twenty-first century.

New contentions seem to emerge every day, and there’s no end to the symposia, online discussions, and impromptu conversations at exhibitions, art fairs, and of course in classrooms and studios in which the topic boils and erupts. At the time of this writing, a global recession is in progress, and its impact on the art world will no doubt bring changes of some duration to art education, whether in enrollment, funding, or in a less visible way the attitude that faculty and students have toward the commercial status of the art work as it filters down to the adaptation of styles and strategies. What’s clear in this book and in the ongoing consideration of the institutional and informal transmission of art knowledge is that something has happened in the accumulation of cultural habits that now seems to have quickened with impatience for new ideas and new means. I plead guilty to the impulse. Every author and every editor wants to think of what they’ve published as a gauntlet thrown down. That’s what I hope this book will be for readers—a gauntlet and perhaps in some ways a series of alternative blueprints. There is much to be done.