

# frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture  
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## Art schools then and now

Joseph Beuys: leader of the pack?

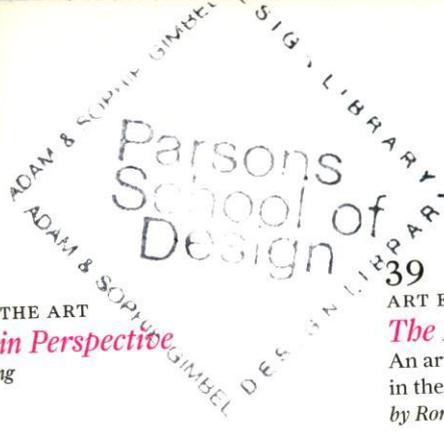
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Manifesta 6 untangled

MFA: the new MBA?

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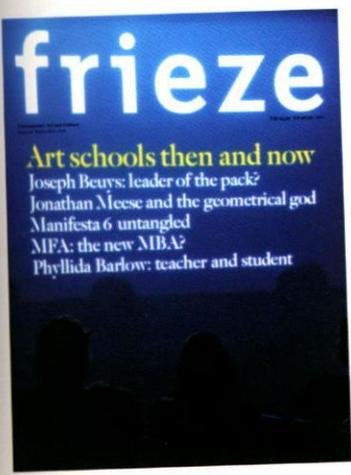




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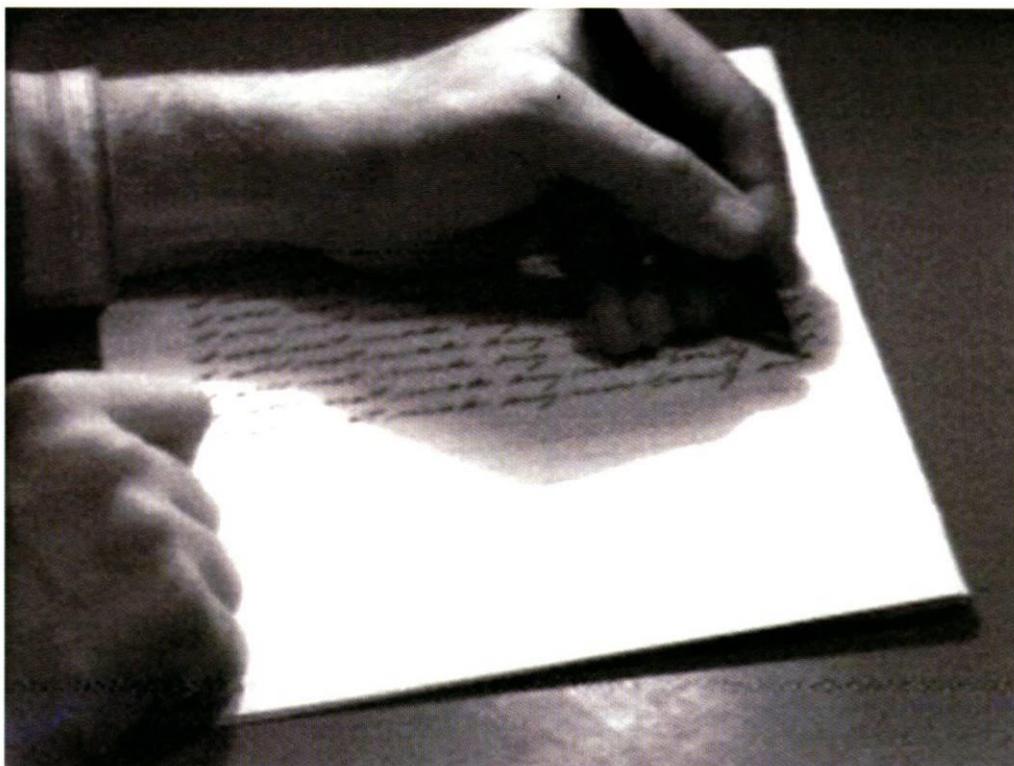
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Left:  
Laura Owens  
*Untitled*  
2006  
Acrylic, watercolour,  
pencil and collage on  
paper  
76x57 cm

Right:  
John Baldessari  
*I Will Not Make Any  
More Boring Art*  
1971  
Video still



# What Lies Beneath

Many of the most interesting American Conceptual artists of the 1960s and '70s became teachers in art schools such as the California Institute of the Arts and Yale. What is the legacy of their teaching for a generation of painters including Laura Owens, Monique Prieto, Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin? *by Lucy Soutter*

When I think of late 1960s' and early 1970s' Conceptual art, I envisage austere accumulations of photocopies and empty rooms filled with radio waves. The visual form of such work contrasts dramatically with the hedonistic eclecticism of contemporary painting. Yet many of the most exciting American painters, from Laura Owens and Monique Prieto to Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, are linked to Conceptual art through the postgraduate training they received at institutions such as the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and Yale.

Many Conceptual artists turned to art schools in the 1970s as a way to make a living. For some, teaching became an extension of their creative practice and a way of articulating their ideas about the artistic process and the nature of art. Conceptual artists as teachers pushed beyond the *beaux-arts* and

Bauhaus models that had dominated their own educations to develop radical new assignments. When he had to cancel a visit to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1971, John Baldessari sent instructions for a combined exhibition and teaching assignment: the students were completely to cover the walls of the college gallery with the lines 'I will not make any more boring art'. Teaching at the University of California, San Diego, Eleanor Antin sent students onto the streets to commit a creative, non-violent crime. She also encouraged her life-drawing students to strip and draw each other naked.

Perhaps the most influential teaching form taken up by Conceptual artists was the group critique class or 'crit'. As Howard Singerman describes in his book *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (1999), the crit first emerged in the 1950s,

when painters needed to develop a teaching format that would allow them to get to grips with abstract form and the possible kinds of content it could carry. The crit really came into its own in the 1960s. Reacting against the subjective language of Abstract Expressionism, Conceptual artists transformed it into a logical, analytical affair. In a critique such as Michael Asher's weekly Post-Studio Art class, which has now been running for almost three decades at CalArts, students take turns to have their work discussed for several hours at a stretch. The description and interpretation is exhaustive, with the process considered more important than the specific results.

Some kinds of art are better suited to this educational approach than others. Work with a discursive, self-critical quality can yield complex, satisfying discussion, while work



John Currin  
*Becky Baer*  
1989  
media  
86x76 cm



that is primarily intuitive or expressive in nature often leads the conversation back to the artist in a series of frustrating cul-de-sacs. This kind of training forces students to extend their sense of engagement beyond their own experience and the image or object they have made to consider its edges and external supports. This is perhaps the most crucial legacy of Conceptualism: the requirement that students consider the phenomenological, social, historical, political and institutional implications of their work. While the work that results may take any number of visual forms, it ends up having something in common with classic 1960s' Conceptual works – a rigorous internal logic and a kind of accountability to itself and its viewer.

If we look at an artist such as Laura Owens, it may at first be difficult to see the impact of her mid-1990s' CalArts training on

her painting. Shifting genres as easily as she does styles, Owens seems to drift effortlessly between figuration, abstraction and decoration, with references to high art, textiles and children's book illustration along the way. An individual painting may not seem particularly rigorous, but the project as a whole is a deliberate exploration of the idea of permission within contemporary painting. On the one hand we could read Owens' diverse work as a refutation of the kind of coherence sought by an art school critique class. On the other, her layered project argues that expressive elements can be reclaimed within a broader practice. Although Owens describes herself as having been resistant to the model of education she encountered at CalArts, she has ended up producing work that is at once satisfyingly visual and also ideally suited to extensive classroom discussion.

The kind of art school training pioneered by Conceptual artists rests on a number of important assumptions: every work of art has a certain responsibility to the interpretations that it generates; it should have layers of meaning, of which appearance is only one; it should be able to generate a sustained discussion; and it should do at least some of what its maker intended it to do. These values have firmly established themselves at the core of ambitious contemporary art. Although contemporary painting is characterized by its painterly pleasure and rich formal references, much of the best work rests on a foundation that was established by cool, pared-down 60s' Conceptual art and the artists who produced it.

*Lucy Soutter is an artist, critic and art historian. She lectures on photography at the London College of Communication and the Royal College of Art.*

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## About this article

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By *Lucy Soutter*



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