



## Provocations, Not Assignments: Teaching Studio Art as Applied Philosophy

**Abstract:** Teaching studio art is generally based on the transmission of technical processes and/or the replication of contemporary or conventional styles and approaches. This paper outlines an approach to teaching rooted in the dynamic tension between critical analysis and creative response through provocations rather than assignments.

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Teaching studio art is generally based on the notion of some sort of generational transmission of technical processes and/or the replication of contemporary or conventional styles and approaches. Critique is typically after the fact, driven by a desire to affirm personal aesthetic responses within assigned parameters in a process that affords or encourages scant critical agency.

I find this approach vapid, tedious and unproductive as it is devoid of the rough and tumble big issues that animate the individual to find their own standing as full-throated artists. I change the entire approach in teaching studio art to one more like applied philosophy—more specifically applied epistemology with poetic and ontological ruminations—buttressed by reading primary source artist statements coupled with standard and experimental studio practices.

Though my teaching I seek to engage core questions of how we see and know the interior and exterior visual world and how then we make something of it — as an assertion, a proposition, a question in the form of an object.

With brush in hand we ask questions such as: What is involved in the abstraction of form? Can it be escaped? What does empirical naturalism take as its goal and core assumption? What is realism, and how might lived experience be characterized visually? What social

responsibilities do artists have? In what way might we access and make art out of subjective visions and to what end? What is the role of spiritual life in the practice of art? What primal and assumed universal emotions might be accessed and made poignant and intensely manifest in the act of painting? How and why might that be a good thing? What is the phenomenology of painting, or making things, as dance, as gesture. What is the phenomenology of addressing the object of art as a body making things for other bodies?

Through these means I seek to facilitate a studio process that values the dynamic tension in creative and critical analysis, individual agency, through provocations rather than assignments, however open-ended they may seem. I admit freely that it is a struggle to not lapse back into an assignment mode, because it is easier and there is a natural conspiracy of complacency between teaching and student to stay the course and not work outside the syllabus, the course description, the schedule or prior objectives. Both are often happy to please the other with certainties. Yet one must resist, and in fact encourage students to feel courageous and nobel resisting as well.

I believe we would be wise to admit that “teaching” studio art is, at face value, self-contradictory in the sense that at best the sincere artist-mentor seeks to teach young artists wanna bes to be independent beings while paradoxically placing them in a subordinate position of learning *from someone else*. Our job as responsible artist-teachers is, it seems me, one of coaxing the often reluctant student-artist up a ladder one then is obliged to kick out from under them. To be kind, we generally wait for them to be holding on to something secure before removing the ladder, but that is never a guarantee that they will arrive at anything approaching full throatedness, let along independent thought and work. Still, I believe the process is sometimes reward enough as it is deeply instructional about life and living.

I teach through provocations, not assignments and especially not *projects*. I do this to honor young minds but mostly, I must confess, to keep myself entertained. One thing I have learned in my long career is that if there is a possible way for a seemingly clear learning objective to be misunderstood, it will be. I also have learned that often the misunderstandings are at least as creative and valuable as anything they might have done had they understood me perfectly. I threw in the towel on this a long time ago, content to plant seeds, ideas and questions for student artists to grind against, free to contradict, invert, re-invent, contradict, morph, etc. I like it that way and critiques are a whole lot more fun. What that may seem chaotic, I am a stickler for verbal argumentation that supports the work. To this end artist statements are written not only about what was done but how they understood and digested the provocation. The “back and the front” of the creative process, to misquote Merleau-Ponty.

I detest what I call the *project mentality* in which the artist posits a fixed end point toward which one works. Fish in a barrel! Building a garden fence may work that way but the real stuff in art does not. The critiques of projects, as opposed to art, per se, typically centers around “how it turned out” relative to the prior intent, not what was learned *in process*, much

less what ideas and values support the entire enterprise. While I am on a rant, I have to say the entire project approach misses the whole meaning of the creative process and is first cousin to another wrong-headed idea we battle constantly; perfectionism. It tends to encourage it. To wit: I believe in loosely defined *points of departure* for open-ended investigations. I talk in terms of *streams* of inquisitive work that meanders across the field leaving the creator free to play, to change, to wander a bit, to explore, most importantly to change, to think while working. *Ars* getting to know *technê*.

You see, I believe in art as applied philosophy. I have rarely known a really strong artist who didn't like to think about the fluid gap between visual and literal realms, between what our minds do while our bodies make things.

So how does it work?

In addition to capstone courses I teach Painting, Drawing and a course I invented a few years ago that grew out of a standard life drawing course I call Approaches to the Figure.

Painting is driven by a set of six focused but open-ended provocations arising from art historical modes of working. While I could complicate the matter further I find that this is about enough for a semester course, particularly since I am teaching the craft and terminology of the medium as we go. A provocation in Painting may be the simple attitudinal proposition that painting is thought to be best and most noble when approached as a physical concrete object, not a depictive sign for something else. They are to wrestle with the proposition and make a painting that conforms, contradicts or goes sideways from the provocation. Fights ensue and predispositions arise to be examined. The next provocation might be the naturalist notion that the highest virtue in painting is to produce verisimilitude. After going over various optical and philosophical problems related *naive naturalism*, admitting the inevitable abstraction involved in any illusion, they are asked to consider the relative value of empirical observation and depictive selectivity. They paint as they think, some better than others, to be sure, but they also paint, think and talk about this mode of working. The same goes for expressionism as a mode of engagement. We discuss the differences between situational emotions and the really driving primal emotional states may characterize an individual for years. They are invited to dig deep in a set of model sessions, typically under a barrage of blues music, plus they may contract or re-interpret the entire provocation if they wish—but they have to paint something and discuss their interpretation in critique. We do something similar vis-a-vis realism, abstraction and subjectivist modes. At midterm and at the end of the course they present independent work that may go back into one of the modalities we looked at, a synthesis of two or more, or something entirely different, but they are asked to address the provocations in context, defining and defending their present stance, assuming agency and commitment.

Approaches to the Figure is particularly apt for a provocation-driven set of inquiries and has proven to be a productive half-way house of sorts for student artists before they engage the

capstone and thesis level entirely self-directed bodies of work. As an intermediate level studio, in Approaches to the Figure students work in a variety of media, depending on their approach to any given provocation. I talk initially about moving from idea to the selection of media rather than the other way around, as is standard in media-specific courses. They are expected to be attentive to the most vivid medium for the material they wish to work with. In pre-critique brainstorming discussions I ask if the idea is best seen in process as a time-based piece (performance or video) or as an object, or some combination of the two. Some paint, some make assemblage, do photography, draw, make sculptures, even animate.