# Should I Go to Art School?

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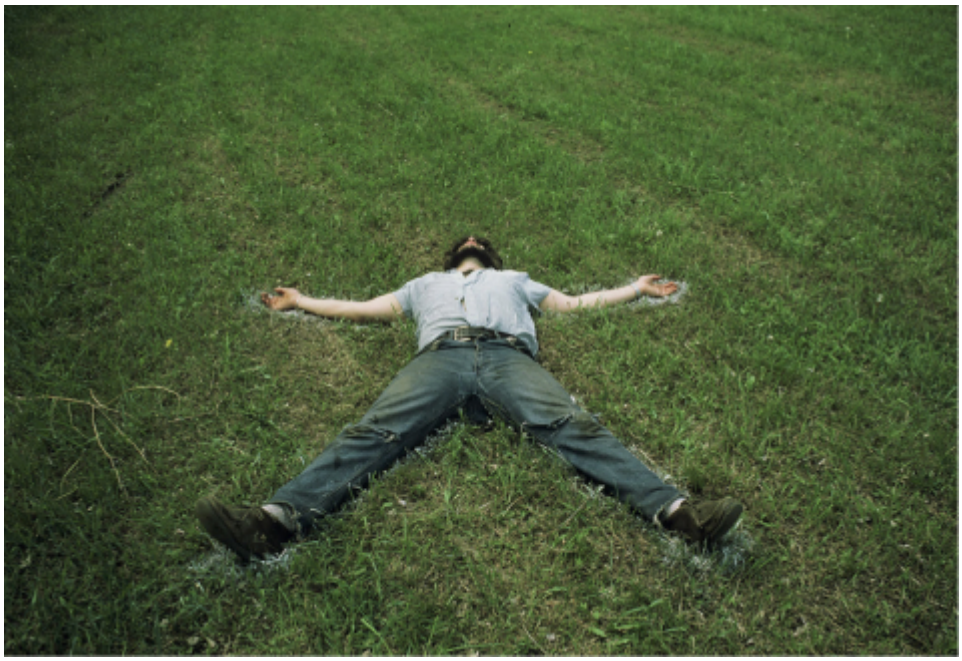
## Confidential

David Salle, Miranda July, Mariko Mori and others talk about their experiences attending (or leaving or forgoing) the academy.



Robert Longo
Laying in his artwork “Body Tracing” in 1976, the year he graduated from the State College of Buffalo.

Whether or not one decides to go to art school depends on a great number of factors, including, of course, one’s ability to get in, which sometimes has more to do with luck than with talent, not to mention an awareness that art school even exists and that being an artist is a viable option, which for many people, especially those from disadvantaged communities, can be a discovery in itself. This aside, it’s usually a matter of weighing the benefits — namely training and time and space to think and make work — against the often literal and sometimes substantial costs. There’s no clear answer, but what is clear is that art school alone cannot make you an artist, or shield you from self-doubt, uncertainty or rejection. Perhaps for this reason, some artists are most grateful for the sense of community provided by those they met while students — often a classmate or teacher becomes a lifelong friend, collaborator or mentor, someone who shows up regardless of the state of the other person’s career.

Below is a compilation of personal histories in which contemporary artists talk about their time in art school. They show that experiences vary widely — Paul Anthony Smith is in favor of reframing art school as a kind of technical school for developing a skill set, while Mariko Mori credits the theoretical underpinnings of classes at the Independent Study

Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, with making her more grounded in her practice — but also that a formal program can be useful, or at least motivating, even when it becomes something to push against. Amalia Ulman, for instance, felt she had to discard much of what she was taught at art school in order to rediscover what truly propelled her to make art. What the novelist George Saunders once wrote of artistic mentorships seems apt here, too: “At the end of the mentoring period …, the student snaps out of it, disavows the teacher’s view, which is starting to feel like a set of bad-fitting clothes anyway, and goes back to her own way of thinking. But maybe along the way, she’s picked up a few things. These are things she likely knew all along, of which the teacher simply reminded her.”

A look at how art is taught – if it can be taught at all – and what the future holds for aspiring creators.

## Ayana V. Jackson, photographer, 45

Universität der Künste Berlin, guest student, 2004-5

I come from a family of travelers, so I always say that my origin as an artist was sitting in the dining room with the slide machine and looking at pictures of trips to Korea, Brazil, faraway places like that. We have Olympians in our family, and not only would we watch the games, we’d look at what they saw as tourists. Their documentation, archiving and storytelling — it was always about geography, about how they saw the world through images. That was my true art school. Also, my dad spent time teaching me how to take pictures. Then I studied sociology at Spelman College, which is a historically Black liberal arts college that’s part of the Atlanta University Center Consortium. To fulfill my arts requirement, I took photography at Clark Atlanta, one of the neighboring schools, and learned how to function in a darkroom.

A self-portrait of Ayana V. Jackson, the result of an assignment in a photography class she took at Clark Atlanta, circa 1996.Credit...© Ayana V. Jackson, courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

Jackson (kneeling), circa 2005, at the Universität der Künste Berlin, where she was a guest student.Credit...© Katharina Sieverding, courtesy of Ayana V. Jackson and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

After I graduated, I worked in corporate America, for AT&T, and then I got laid off and took all my stuff and my severance and went to South Africa and Ghana, where my family has a compound in North Odorkor. I came back after 9/11, and that's when I started to think about getting a more formal art education. I met someone and we moved to Berlin together. While there, I met [the photographer] Katharina Sieverding. She's from the Czech Republic and super powerful, solid and sturdy. I wear a classic red lip because of her. And she brought me into the Universität der Künste Berlin.

From what I recall from my experience — I don't want to put words in her mouth — she was teaching in this school that had mainly privileged white German people, most of them men, for students**,** and she'd bring in different practicing artists as "guest students" — there were folks from Serbia, from Lithuania, from Iran, my ex, who is Mexican, and me. We studied from 10 to 5 two days a week. The classes mainly consisted of showing our work and critiquing others' work. It was a multidisciplinary class, so there were video artists and other photographers, too. **No one was there to learn any one thing — it was more that we were there to learn how to talk about our work and think through concepts.**

That's where I got my first proper introduction to photo theory, which gave me something to talk about when I showed my pictures. I did that for three semesters. Then, around 2007, I went back to South Africa.

Jackson's "La Ascención de Nuestra Señora de Primavera" (2005), taken in Llano Grande, Oaxaca, Mexico.Credit...© Ayana V. Jackson, courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

I thought I wanted to apply to Goldsmiths, University of London to study more, so I asked the Nigerian curator Bisi Silva [1962-2019] to write me a recommendation. She said, "Girl, yes, I will write you a recommendation, but at this point you have a practice, and if you go back to school, you're going to be disqualified from a lot of opportunities because they don't want students. Beyond that, you kind of have something great going. And if you fill your head with other people's ideas, you never know." She suggested that I apply to a prestigious artist residency instead. And I said, "OK, but will you still please write the recommendation?!" And she did. But before it was time to submit it, I got a residency in Paris.

One thing about art school is that it thickened my skin. Because people are mean [laughs]. And I can be mean, too, but the whole purpose of a critique is to find a problem. So you subject yourself to people pointing out the holes in your theory or project, and then you either defend it or you go back into the mix and keep working. I became the person who's like, "Don't tell me why you like my work. Tell me why you don't."

## Miranda July, filmmaker, artist and writer, 48

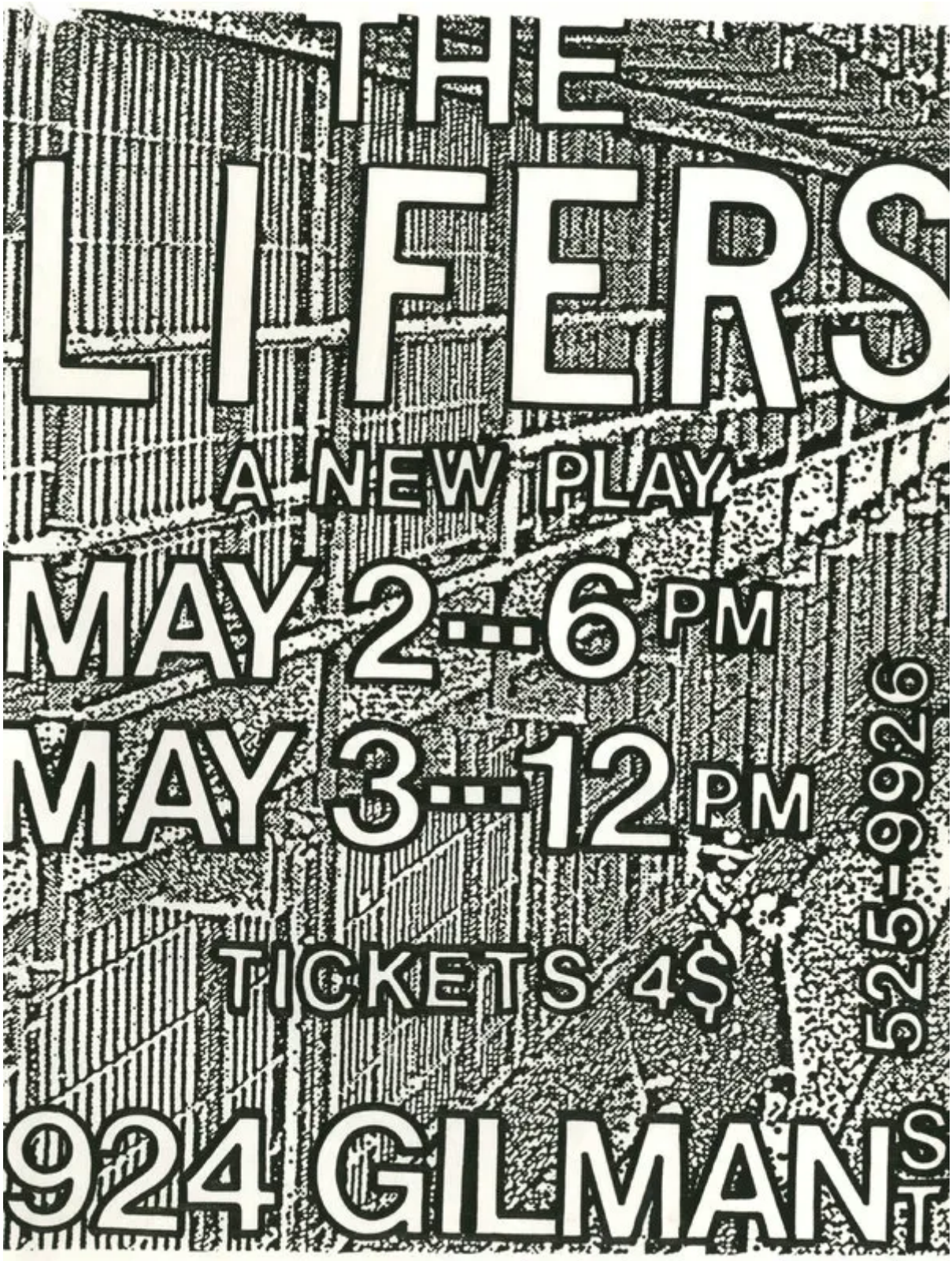
University of California, Santa Cruz, student, 1992-94

Miranda July in her Portland, Ore., apartment, circa 1996, not long after she'd left the University of California, Santa Cruz.Credit...© Heide Foley, courtesy of Miranda July

My parents are both writers, and they ran a publishing company out of our house, which always made clear to me that you do your work because it's meaningful to you, because they were never famous for being writers. But they wrote every day and set an example of that. They showed me that the work that you made a living from could also be meaningful, but it didn't have to be the same thing as your art practice.

My brother and I were often wanting things that my parents either couldn't afford or didn't want us to have, because they were kind of anti-materialistic. So we would make things — he was a bit of a child prodigy woodworker. He built me a giant dollhouse. We went to a friend's house and they had this amazing attic playroom with a carpet with all these different colors that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, and we recreated that in the dollhouse's attic with carpet samples, fitting them together ourselves, which was really beautiful and satisfying.

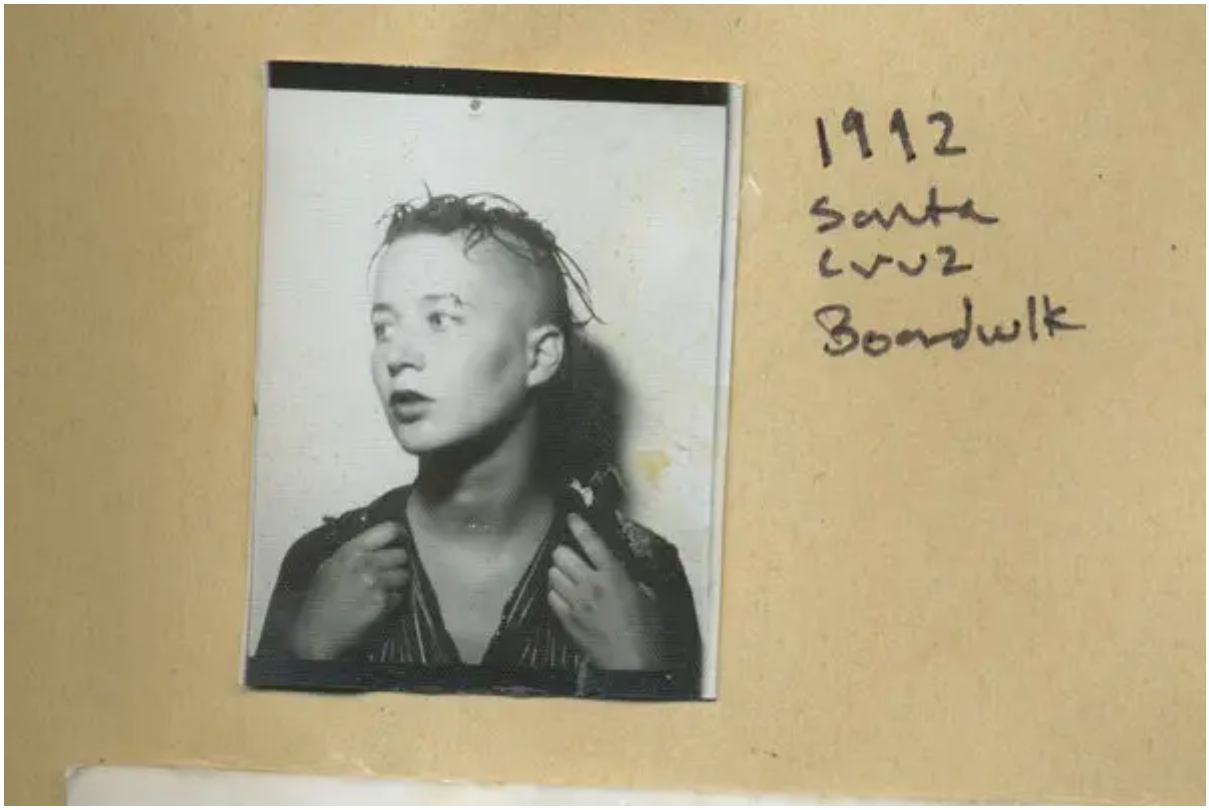
July, circa 1979, and her brother, Robin, with whom she used to embark on various creative projects.Credit...Courtesy of Miranda July




A poster for “The Lifers,” a 60-minute play July wrote and directed during her last year of high school and presented at 924 Gilman in Berkeley, Calif., in 1992.Credit...Courtesy of Miranda July

My time at UC Santa Cruz was sort of a demonstration of how little I cared about school. The big career-defining moment for me had already happened, which was that I’d written and directed my first play. Kind of in keeping with that early world of myself and my brother, it was important to me not to do it within school, so I put it on in this punk club. I already felt like I was in the world, that I’d crossed that threshold where I knew what I was doing, so I only applied to that one school. It was the school my brother went to and

was appropriate for him because he was in the sciences, but it didn't have a department for film then, which was ostensibly what I wanted to do. But I knew it was relatively cheap because we were in California, and it was a state school for us, and I didn't want to waste my parents' money. I think by the end — I dropped out after two years and never declared a major — I wasn't even going that much. I lived pretty far from campus and had to hitchhike to get to class and remember thinking, "This is not quite functional."




A scrapbook photo of July on the Santa Cruz boardwalk, 1992.Credit...Courtesy of Miranda July

I'd also fallen in love, and my girlfriend lived in Portland, Ore., and was in a band, and all of the Riot Grrrl stuff was happening up there. I knew my parents wouldn't let me drop out. So while they were out of town on a Christmas vacation, I moved to Portland. I wrote them a letter that I recorded on a cassette tape. When my brother picked them up at the airport, he was tasked with playing the tape, which began like, "By the time you hear this, I'll be living in Portland with my girlfriend. ..." [Laughs] I sort of blacked out, and I don't remember their reaction. But I did it and it felt so heady. I remember thinking, "Oh, you just make the life you want." And that I didn't have to do things a certain way.

But my new life wasn't easy — my parents had been paying for everything and now they weren't, so I had to do a bunch of odd jobs. I worked for a car door unlocking company; I worked in the peep shows — not that anyone put a gun to my head and said I had to do these specific jobs, but I was also very disciplined about my film and performance pieces, so every job was chosen for maximum flexibility. I began the thing that I do to this day, which is beginning each day by making up what I'm going to do and then doing those things. It's been so long now, but early on, it felt wild.

**I remember being rigorous about reframing my practice — going along in a certain direction, then thinking, "OK, but what do you really want to be doing artistically? Is this exactly it?"**

I would have these little board meetings with myself. I guess that's the thing — I was very disciplined. I had an office downtown that a friend gave me that I went to each day, so I maintained a certain professionalism. I was furiously fighting against the sense that this could all fall apart at any moment, that it was my belief that was holding it all together.

## Robert Longo, artist, 69

State College of Buffalo (now SUNY Buffalo), B.F.A., class of 1976

Robert Longo with Cindy Sherman's dove, Birdy, at their loft in Buffalo, 1976, the year the artists graduated from the State College of Buffalo. Credit...© Cindy Sherman, courtesy of Robert Longo and Pace Gallery

I played football to get into North Texas State University. I was a terrible student, but I could always draw. I went to an art class at a community college at night, and my teacher there said, "Why don't you think about going more into this?" I said, "To be honest, I

don’t quite have the courage to be an artist.” I thought maybe I could be an art historian or something like that. And she said, “What about learning how to do restorations of paintings?” She connected me with this school in Florence, Italy, where I could try doing that. I went there. It was horrible. I was watching them restore art and they were doing a terrible job, and all I was doing was washing brushes and being abused, except by this wonderful woman who was yelling at these restorers, saying they were f-ing up these works. I believe she went on to work on the restoration of “The Last Supper” [1495-98]. I remember her telling me, “Get out of here!” And I did. I took my art history books and I traveled around Europe and got to see all this art.

Longo’s sketches of Russian tanks, 1974, made when he was 21 years old.Credit...© Robert Longo, courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

When I got back to the U.S., I wasn’t quite sure what to do, but then I fell in love with a girl who told me there was this really good art school where she went to college in Buffalo. She was a home economics major, and it turned out that it was actually a pretty mediocre art school, but it was across the street from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, this incredible museum. There was also a great art history professor at the school who took a liking to me. He knew Frank Stella and people like that, and was very helpful. Otherwise, the art department was terrible, but what was great about that was that it was a thing to react against. I sort of had to seek it out myself.

That’s where I met Cindy [Sherman]. She didn’t quite have the balls to be an artist yet, either. Our first dates were like — I was so intense about art at that point that we’d go to museums and I’d give her lectures about painting and stuff like that.


Cindy Sherman (center) in Buffalo, 1975, as Rose Scaleci, a fictional art student Longo and his friends created in 1974. The character was an accidental homage to Marcel Duchamp's alter ego, Rrose Sélavy.Credit...Courtesy of Robert Longo and Pace Gallery

I did a major in art history and a major in studio art. One professor gave me the keys to the school so I could work at night. At some point, I heard about this place called Ashford Hollow Foundation, an old ice factory where they had artist studios. I went to check it out and met this extraordinary guy called Charlie Clough, who was a real artist who was living in his studio there, and who had all these books about contemporary art, was just surrounded by them. Together, he and I — and I used some of the money from the school's art club to do this — started an alternative space called Hallwalls, which was basically the hallway between Charlie's studio and mine. And this was my education; this was my master's program.

Longo’s “Body Tracing” (1976).Credit...© Robert Longo, courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

We’d go to New York and knock on doors and tell artists, “We’ll give you $200. Do you want to come up and do a talk or maybe an installation?” We got an incredible response; it was so inspiring. We went to see Sol LeWitt, and he gave us a wall drawing, so then we had to show the Sol LeWitt wall drawing. Or Vito [Acconci] came in, and we had to build a special installation for him. It was really the best schooling I could ever have imagined. The last group I curated a show for were from CalArts. It was a weird thing — here were these guys from the most prestigious, elitist contemporary art school, and we kind of merged with them in this place. Later on in my career, I was asked to do a lecture at CalArts, and I went to the cafeteria and sat at a table where Jack Goldstein, David Salle, Troy Brauntuch and Matt Mullican would have sat while they were in school. These guys had become my friends, and I still consider them friends to this day.

A still from Longo's "Artful Dodger" (1976), a multichannel video with an accompanying performance.Credit...© Robert Longo, courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery

I don't teach professionally now, but my assistants are my students — and what I teach them is not how to make art, but how to be an artist. **What's really important to try to explain to young artists is that it's a long-distance run. We're not like athletes — we don't have a shelf life where by the time we hit 30, it's over.** But the problem is all these young artists [who have success early on] burn out young and the discipline can disappear. I'm never going to retire, and I think the most exciting challenge at my age is grappling with how to remain relevant. The ebb and flow of my career kind of shows that you can come and go and reappear. And I'm still looking at art history books. I think art education helps you make the bullets that you put in the gun.

## Marilyn Minter, artist, 73

Syracuse University, M.F.A. in Painting, class of 1972; University of Florida, B.F.A., class of 1970

Marilyn Minter with a 1968 self-portrait she painted while an undergraduate at the University of Florida that same year.Credit...© Marilyn Minter, courtesy of the artist, LGDR, Regen Projects and Lehmann Maupin

For me, art school was a seismic change. I'd left the Deep South for the first time in my life. I'd never seen snow. My whole life was about trying to get to New York City so I could go to the Factory and meet Andy Warhol. I had this thick Southern accent, and I went from the University of Florida, which is a state school — and where I paid $125 a trimester — and got a full scholarship for graduate school at Syracuse.

There were 17 guys and me. They'd all gone to art schools — Cooper Union and Cranbrook and Cleveland Institute of Art and Pratt and Parsons — and thought I was this hick. And I was. I really was. But I bonded with this one guy, Thomas DeSmidt, who was like a mentor to me. A lot of these guys were there so that they wouldn't get drafted. At the time, I was married to a Vietnam veteran against the war. We met at protests. And we came up to Syracuse together because we wanted to get the hell out of the South, where it was all football players who looked at us like we were these leftist, longhaired freaks.

Minter's "Mom Smoking," from her "Coral Ridge Towers" series (1969). The artist took the photo during her school days at the University of Florida.Credit...© Marilyn Minter, courtesy of the artist, LDGR and Regen Projects

Syracuse opened me up to a world of information — I'd never gone to museums. I began reading art magazines, taking the bus to New York City to go to galleries. But what I really found was a like-minded group of people.



**We were friends for years, my grad school friends and I. They were the ones who came to your studio when no one else would. And I learned more from my fellow students than I ever learned from any teacher.** We helped each other out. We put each other in group shows. I didn't have a really good teacher ever.

A 1972 oil on canvas by Minter, one of the first paintings she made after finishing grad school.Credit...© Marilyn Minter, courtesy of the artist, LDGR and Regen Projects

When I got to the School of Visual Arts in New York, where I've been teaching for over 30 years, I started teaching the way I wished I'd been taught. I wouldn't pull punches. I'm tough, but I'm not mean. I try to tell people what their gifts are. They don't know half the time. I think it's because there are so many people in art school and everyone thinks they're a painter, but most of the time they aren't — they're conceptual and theory-driven, and because I work between so many fields, I feel like I can help them realize what they're good at. I really believe, and this is what I try to tell my students, that the thing that comes easily to you in the beginning is the thing you should be exploring. I have to do damage control a lot of the time, because so many teachers tell them, "Well, you already know that. So challenge yourself and do something else." But I always say, "Do what you lose track of time doing and really enjoy." Another reason I think students don't know what they're good at is because it comes so easily to them — they think all the other students can do what they can, and none of them can. I have to prove it by bringing the whole class into the room and asking, "Can any of you do what this person can do?" And they all say, "No!"


A drawing on a 1957 encyclopedia flyleaf page Minter made in the mid-1950s when she was 8 or 9 years old.Credit...© Marilyn Minter, courtesy of the artist, LGDR, Regen Projects, and Lehmann Maupin

Should people go to art school — is it worth it? Well, it was life-changing for me. And I've never been able to leave New York since I got here. It's the only place you can go, I feel, where you can turn a corner and change your life. I learned to be really voracious about looking here. And that you can't think yourself into right action. You have to act yourself into right thinking. In other words, you have to move a muscle to change a thought. Just stop and go do something else — don't just sit there and beat yourself up. Move a muscle, change a thought. Those are the quotes. But I didn't think of them [laughs]. I heard them from somebody. And this one, too, I've seen said by Brice Marden: The word "pain" is in painting.

## Mariko Mori, multidisciplinary artist, 55

The Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art, student, class of 1993; Chelsea College of Art and Design, B.F.A., class of 1992; Byam Shaw School of Art, foundation course, 1989

Mariko Mori's "Magic Mirror" (1993), a self-portrait made when she was 26 and attending the Whitney Independent Study Program.Credit...© Mariko Mori

My mom was an art historian of Western renaissance art, so I was around that a lot as a child. But I remember discovering, at around 9 years old, a postcard of a Jackson Pollock painting. It was the first time I'd encountered Abstract Expressionist painting, and it was sensational for me. I felt this sense of total freedom. I loved art and design both, so I applied to Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo and went there. Now, here's where it takes a bit of a turn, and I think I'm finally ready to reveal my secret. I wanted to continue my studies in fashion after that, so I sent all my design work in a portfolio to apply for a foundation course in the U.K. at the Byam Shaw School of Art. But [the school] did not

offer a fashion course, only fine art. So I made a mistake. I got to class and didn't see any sewing machines — it was a drawing class — and that's when I realized it wasn't fashion college [laughs]. My English wasn't good enough to explain the error. And it was only for a year, so I decided to stay, and that's how I ended up shifting my interest.

I found more freedom in London than in Japan, where the education system was much more formal, even for creative disciplines. It was nice to have your own studio, to make your own decisions, to have tutors to talk to who had successful careers of their own and who treated you as artists whose work was deserving of their time and attention and even criticism, which was very precious to me. And the libraries were excellent. After that, I did the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum, which was a really good steppingstone to the New York art world. We were given studio space in TriBeCa and a lot of mentorship from artists and curators and writers. It was very stimulating for me intellectually. I got to see tons of exhibitions and absorb the energy of the city, which can be overwhelming, with the help of the right people. I think a lot of students find the program challenging because in addition to making work, you're expected to do a lot of theoretical studies, and those things can be hard to balance. But for me it was significant because I learned to ground my work more deeply in concepts I was interested in. It's easy to get lost in your own work, and I'm not necessarily sure that's a good thing. … Even now, I do conceptual writing for my projects, and I find it very helpful.


Mori's "Art as Fashion" (1991), a photo of the artist from 1991, when she was 24 and a student at London's Chelsea College of Art and Design.Credit...© Mariko Mori

**It isn't necessary to go to art school, I don't think. It really depends on your personality. But I do think it can be helpful.** When you're in the art school environment, you have time to look at yourself, to build your confidence, to be nurtured by other artists and talk with them about your work sincerely. At the same time, if you

already know what you want to contribute to the world, if your life is already rich with experience and there's something that you'd like to offer to the public, I believe you're ready. But for a lot of people that can be intimidating, and for them it's perhaps better that their practice is built privately, at least for a while, before they go out there.

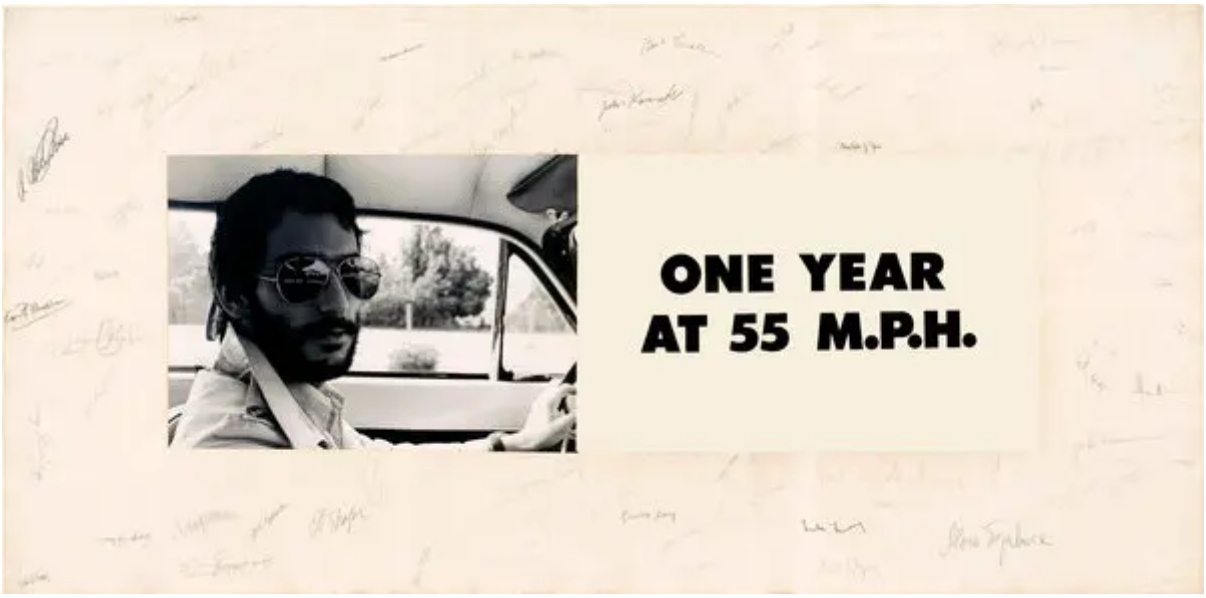
## David Salle, painter and essayist, 69

California Institute of the Arts, M.F.A., class of 1975; B.F.A., class of 1973

David Salle as a freshman at the California Institute of the Arts, 1970.Credit...Courtesy of David Salle

There are two main reasons to go to art school, both of which were fulfilled in my case. It's where you meet practicing artists, and also where you come into contact with other aspiring artists of your generation, some of whom will form your cohort in the art world. I was very lucky to have landed at a place — CalArts in the early '70s — that was rich in both. Few of us grow up knowing much about what an artist's life is like, how it's done. Ideally, school is a laying on of hands.

A 1971 oil on canvas with wood, string and paper by Salle.Credit...© David Salle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y., courtesy of Skarstedt, N.Y.




Salle's "One Year at 55mph" (1975), made the year he graduated from the M.F.A. program at CalArts.Credit...© David Salle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y., courtesy of Skarstedt, N.Y.

I think art school helps. Nothing is strictly necessary — everyone's different. **If nothing else, art school is where you learn the critical attitudes and vocabulary of your time.** I have also seen that be inhibiting — destructive, even — for some people. My advice would be to develop a healthy skepticism about the theory component.

## Paul Anthony Smith, mixed-media artist and painter, 34

Kansas City Art Institute, B.F.A., class of 2010

Image


Paul Anthony Smith as a sophomore in a ceramics studio at the Kansas City Art Institute in 2007.Credit...Courtesy of the Kansas City Art Institute

I'm originally from Jamaica, and growing up, I became fascinated by the comics in the evening newspapers that would be distributed throughout the community. I remember seeing a lot of Flintstones drawings. I would copy them and draw around them and scratch them out. I was around 4 or 5 or 6. I still keep my second-grade sketchbooks with me. In third grade, I discovered clay. I understood how it worked because my aunts used to make soup and they'd use flour dough to patch the pots when they cracked — they roasted the dough over the flame so it became this hard callus that kept the liquid from spewing out. Fast-forward a few years to when I moved to America — I always thought if I did that I'd try to become a full-time artist. I went to an arts magnet school in Miami called New World School of the Arts. Before that, I was in another magnet art program in middle school. All of these little things helped to propel me to the next stage.

A Flintstones-themed childhood drawing of Smith's, made circa 1995.Credit...© Paul Anthony Smith, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York


An untitled painting Smith made when he was a 17-year-old high school student. Credit...© Paul Anthony Smith, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

In high school, I decided to attend college in the Midwest because I wanted to know what America was really all about. I'd applied to schools such as Pratt, RISD, S.A.I.C., Cleveland Institute of Art. I don't think I applied to Cooper Union. But the place that really appealed to me was the Kansas City Art Institute [in Missouri] because it was in a quieter place and I liked the country atmosphere. While there, I decided to study painting, but I didn't like what I saw coming from the painting department, so I ended up majoring in ceramics. I was attracted to the scale of the kilns because of their relationship to ovens and cooking. I thought, "Oh, I can use these large ovens to cook." So that led to me doing these large ceramic sculptures for those few years at school.

Smith's "Aristocratic Black Man" (2009), which he made his junior year at Kansas City Art Institute.Credit...© Paul Anthony Smith, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.


"The Birthing Process" (2010), another one of Smith's college-era works.Credit...© Paul Anthony Smith, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

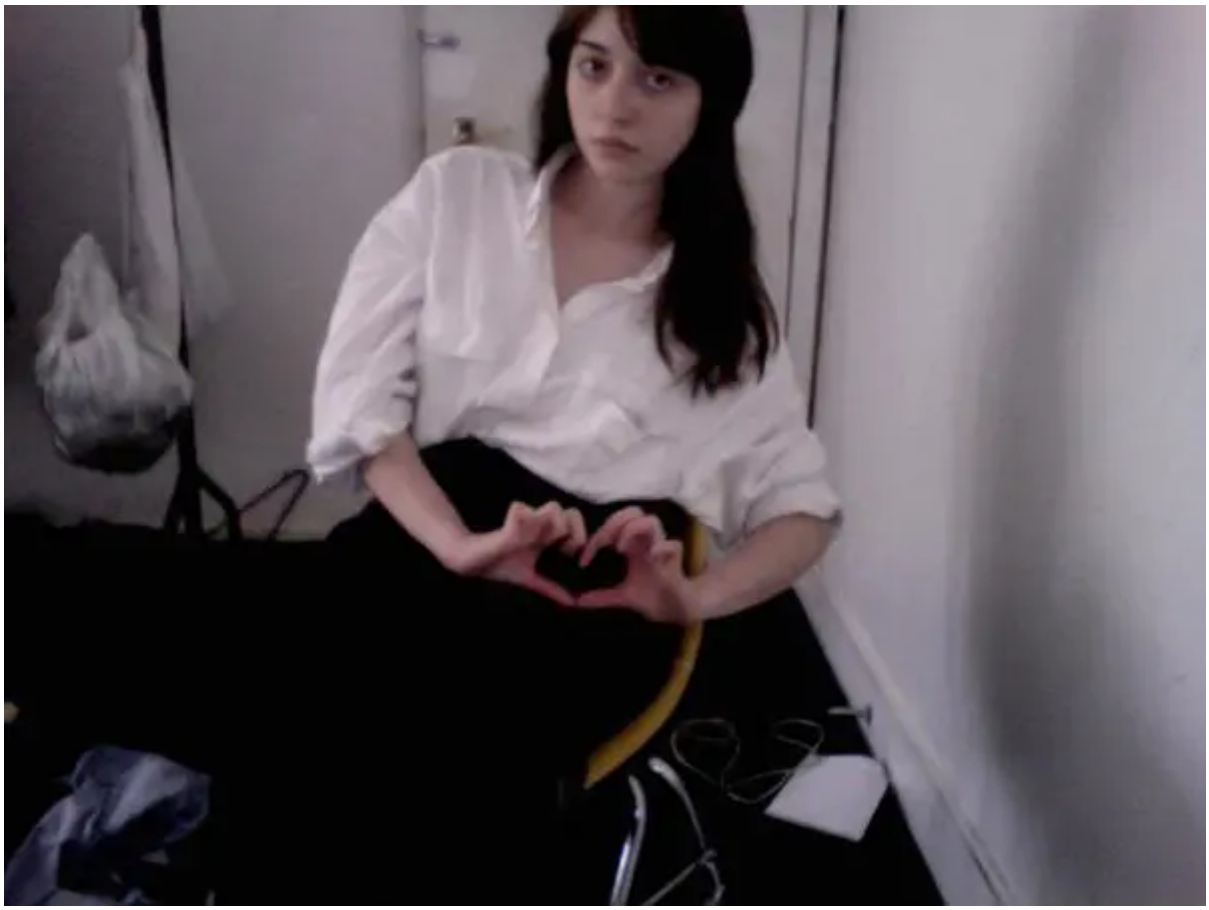
**The thing about art school is that it's kind of like you're going to a technical school. It creates skills and you learn how to use tools — you learn how to make things from scratch, and you learn how to communicate to figure out what you want.**

What's funny about that is, I personally feel now as an artist that I need a lot of time alone. I don't really have any mentors and I'm kind of a recluse. I just try to stay in the studio as much as I can. But learning to communicate is still important.

What was special for me, too, was that there were museums on both sides of the school — the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, where I currently have a show, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, which offered internships and summer jobs. For me, it was always about learning to survive, and I always had a lot of jobs while doing a paid internship or a work-study. Because I had skills, I found places to fit myself in. I hear a lot of people say they don't see themselves in a certain environment, but as a Black person living in Kansas City who knew nothing about America other than what I'd been told, I decided to have blinders on and be open and accept what I was offered. I left Kansas City having worked at all the museums there. So I think college is important if you want to learn specific skills. But later I prioritized making art — I didn't go into an M.F.A. program after I got my bachelor's degree, because I really wanted to think about what I was doing. That's when I made a U-turn — I stopped taking assignments, decided to make use of what I had learned, went home to Jamaica for a while and began making work about the Caribbean, a marginalized place, but a place of opportunity nonetheless. And that's what a lot of my work still deals with: Caribbean ecosystems, their issues, what's beautiful. School taught me to write down my dreams and attack them, that they turn to dust if you don't.

## Amalia Ulman, artist and filmmaker, 33

Central Saint Martins, B.A. Hons Fine Arts, class of 2011



Amalia Ulman while a student at Central Saint Martins in London, circa 2010.Credit...Courtesy of Amalia Ullman

I went to art school partly because of personal reasons — there was trouble at home. I chose London because it was an hour away from where I was via a cheap flight, and it was common for people in northern Spain to go there. I Googled “best art schools” or something. Central Saint Martins came up, and I applied and got in. It was a time of showing up and not really knowing what was going on.

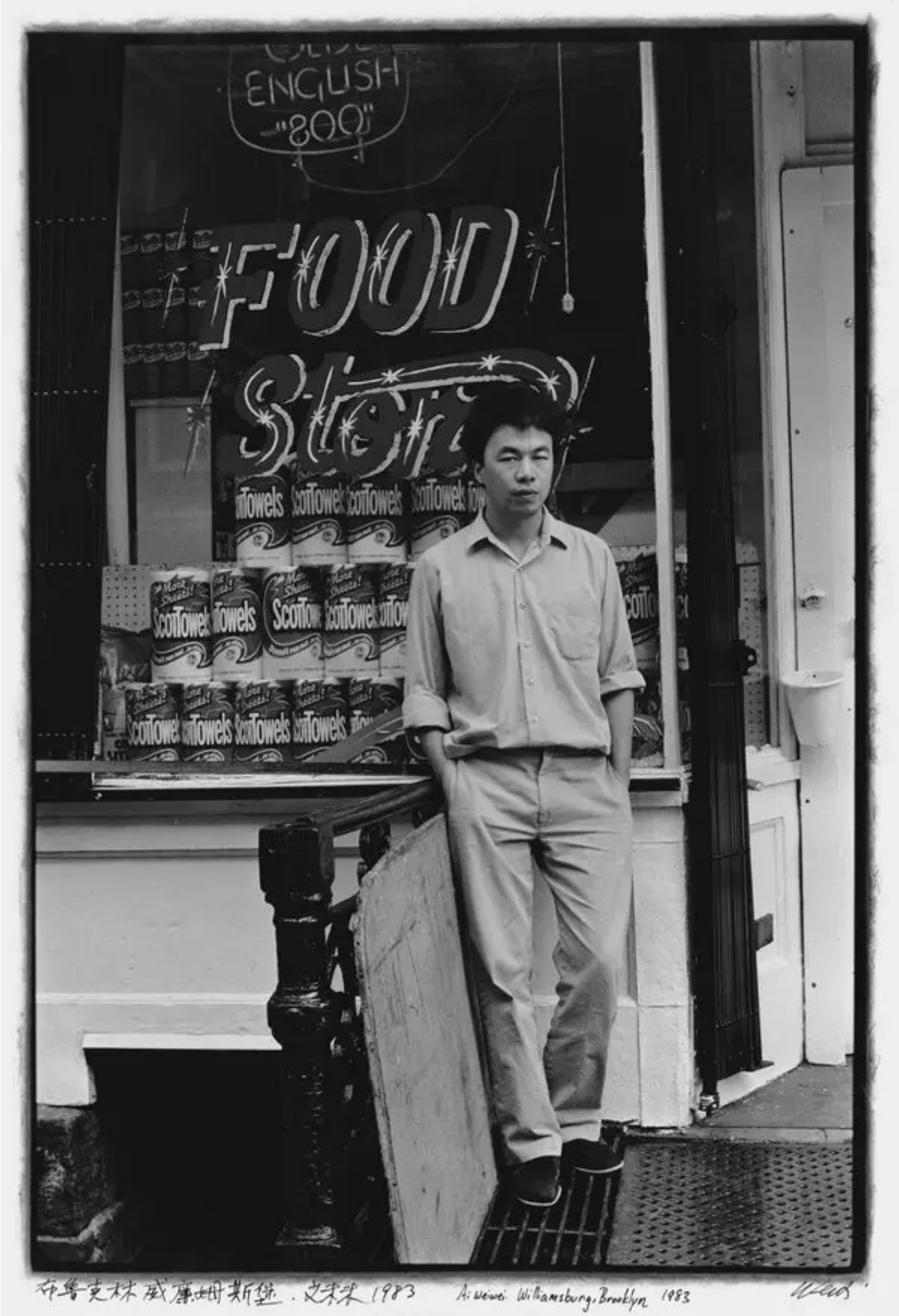
**My time outside of school was frankly the most important for me as far as education goes. I had to unlearn a lot of things I learned in school.** There was a lot of careerism and a set of instructions on how to make art that had more to do with how one might create a design object and what materials to use, followed by a requirement to write an essay explaining what it all was. During my second year, I really wanted to be a good student and began forgetting what I’d loved as a teenager. I’d say things like, “Oh my god, I’m so provincial — I really need to learn.” I internalized all these things and had all this disdain for outsider art and anything that wasn’t part of the contemporary Eurocentric discourse of the first world. It was only a few years later that I began really thinking about all this and forming different opinions about what art truly is. I have to give credit for some of that to my boyfriend at the time. It was a difficult relationship, partly because we were both artists, but he was also a great teacher because his mother was an artist, and I think he was very resentful of institutionalized anything. He was suspicious of art galleries, for example. And he was stubborn, always giving me a hard time for being overexcited about things that, in retrospect, weren’t actually important.

Ulman's "Been There" (2010-12), a hand-built wooden cabinet containing nail stickers, handmade bracelets, a Goldman Sachs golf ball, a used disposable coffee cup, a wooden egg and key chains, among other objects. The work, which she started in graduate school, became part of her 2013 solo show "Moist Forever" at Future Gallery in Berlin.Credit...Courtesy of Amalia Ulman

I think what's good about going to art school is learning to make things. It's great to get better technically at whatever you're interested in. But I don't think anyone can really teach you what art *is*, or, fundamentally, how to make it. Things work or don't work, and it's hard to explain why, and that's a job that should be left to art critics. You don't need to be a great spokesperson for your art practice. If there are things that turn you on that you can't explain, all the better. What's important is being fully aware that your experience and resulting voice are unique and therefore valid. It might feel awkward to put the work out there, especially if it's different from the prevailing trends of your time, but if it's something you truly believe in and it makes you happy, I think that's something you should embrace. I took many years to be honest about the things that interested me and to realize I didn't need to defend them.

## Ai Weiwei, multimedia artist, 65

Art Students League of New York, student, 1983-84; Parsons School of Design, student, 1983; Beijing Film Academy, student, 1978-81




Ai Weiwei in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood in 1983. He was a student at the Parsons School of Design at the time.Credit...Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

My situation was rather particular. When I went to art school, the Cultural Revolution in China had just ended. At that time, it was impossible to enter other schools, because I didn't have a good education from my earlier years. So I gave art school a try. If I hadn't

been accepted, I would have become a farmer. Between farming and going to school in a city, I chose the latter because I was rather lazy, and I had grown up in the countryside.

My first art school was the Beijing Film Academy. After its 10-year closure during the Cultural Revolution, it started admitting students again and welcomed applications from the cream of the crop across the nation. I did not learn anything there, and disliked the sense of superiority. It was a typical school for “intellectual aristocrats,” and I didn’t feel comfortable, in large part because my family background and experience were considered inadequate.

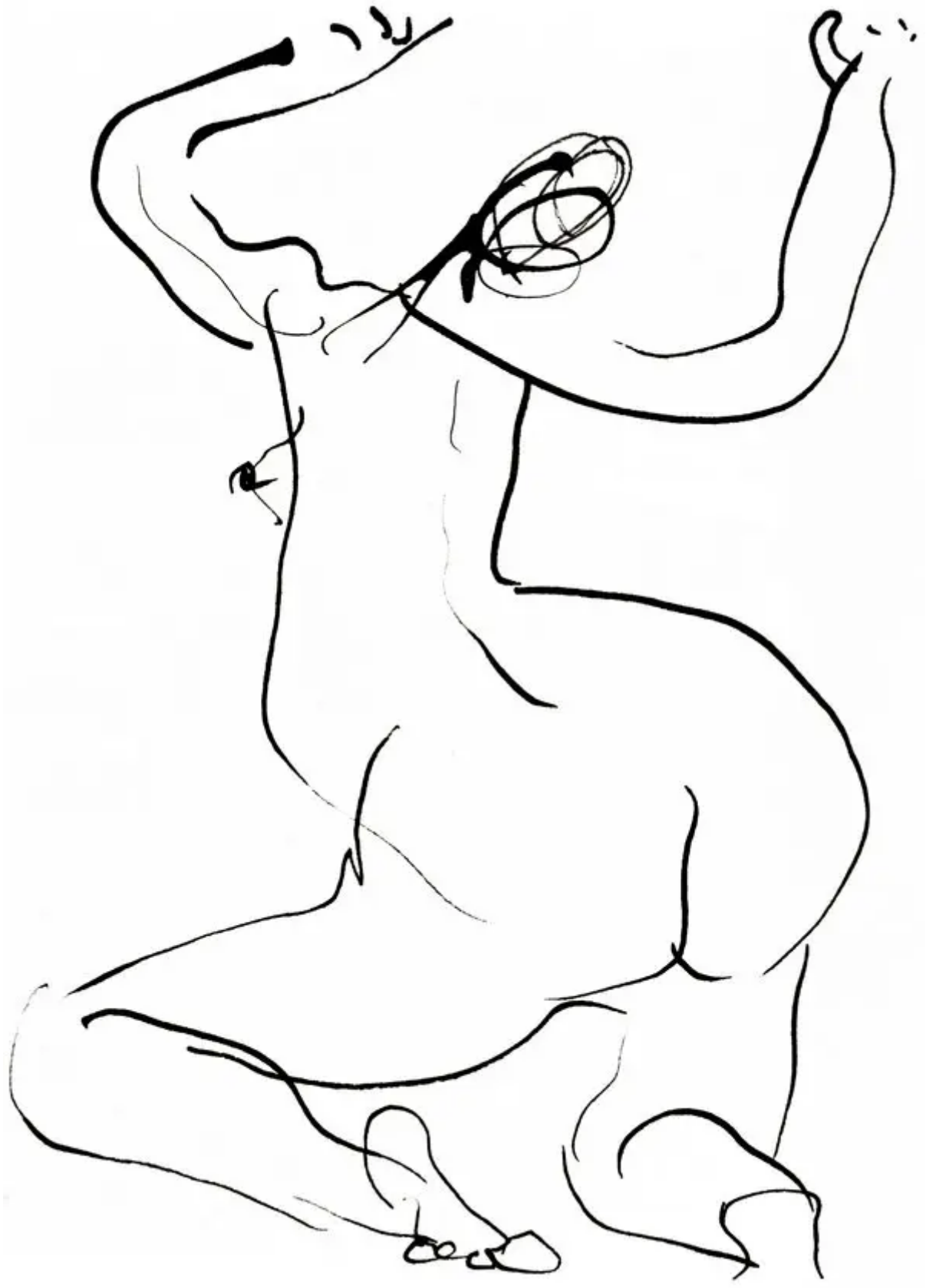
Ai's "Forest" (1977), made when he was 20, before he was an art student. The drawing was used for the cover of the 1979 edition of his father's poetry anthology "Selected Poems of Ai Qing."Credit...© Ai Weiwei, courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

During his first year at Beijing Film Academy, Ai went to Shanghai for the first time, for an internship, and produced this work, “Shanghai Sketch” (1979).Credit...© Ai Weiwei, courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

The second art school I went to was Parsons School of Design, in New York. The teaching method was completely different from what I’d experienced in China. The school was fairly open-minded, and the professors were established figures in the art world. My painting professor was Sean Scully. What benefited students the most was that we got to observe what these professors were doing, and their attitudes toward it. Take Sean Scully, for example. He would take us to his TriBeCa studio so he could show off. He wasn’t that

famous yet, but you could see from his temperament that he was very market-oriented. His success was foreseeable because his works corresponded to the mainstream aesthetic. In the West, if you look at faculty profiles, you can see the overall level of an art school and the kind of graduates it produces.

Because I didn't complete my exams in art history and was not a top student in all subjects at Parsons, my scholarship was revoked. Without the scholarship, I couldn't afford the tuition fees, so I had to leave. Then I went to the cheapest art school — the Art Students League. There, if you paid tuition fees for one month, you could attend classes for that month. It was at the Art Students League that I met a professor called Richard Pousette-Dart, who'd belonged to the inner circle of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, the so-called New York School. He was a very interesting and kind person.



A figure drawing Ai made in 1983, while he was at Parsons School of Design in New York.Credit...© Ai Weiwei, courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

**Still, I feel that students can't really learn anything from art schools. They become artists through their own efforts.** If there's one student out of a hundred who could become a professional artist and live off paintings after graduation, that would be an overestimation — unless the school they're coming from is a top-notch school that is

highly organized. That kind of place offers a strong personal network and can determine aesthetic and ethical standards. These schools aren't only about the work itself — they also control the fields of art collecting, museum curation and art criticism. Once a system is formed, artists can survive within it. That's the only reason people strive to be admitted into them, I feel.

Art school could be more important when it comes to the field of art history by providing a rich, accurate and truthful account of what happened regarding the phenomenon of art; a narrative, and a historical study of different standards of aesthetics and ethics during different periods of time. This is the only thing that art school is necessary for, but people don't need art schools to acquire that knowledge. Anyone who's willing to read on art history, from ancient to contemporary art, would only need one to two years to have a thorough understanding.

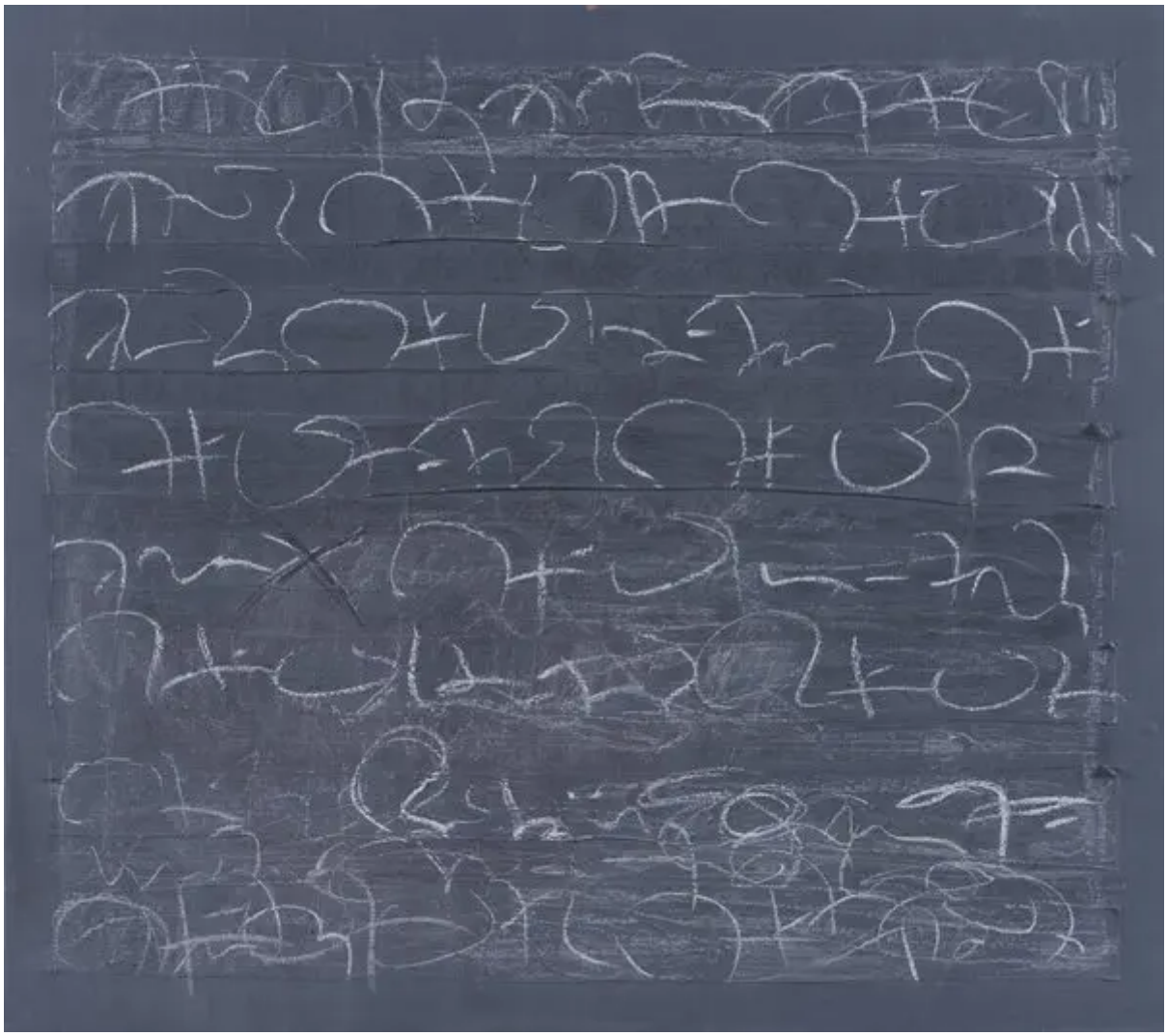
## Tina Weymouth, musician, 71, and Chris Frantz, musician, 71

Rhode Island School of Design, B.F.A.s in Painting, class of 1974

Tina Weymouth and Chris Frantz in 1973, when they were third-year painting students at the Rhode Island School of Design.Credit...© Roger Gordy 1973

**TINA WEYMOUTH:** I started out at Barnard College, trying to double major in art history and French literature. And I had a professor there who told me, "Listen, this is really challenging, what you're trying to do. Both majors are so demanding

independently.” We started to have a heart-to-heart, and I’d gone back to taking courses in life drawing at Columbia University and had studied at the [now-shuttered] Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., before that, on the strength of a teacher’s recommendation. So this professor said, “Let me look at your portfolio,” and I brought it to him and he said, “Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t be an art historian — I would go straight to art school.” So when I finished my sophomore year, I talked to my parents about it. My friend and I both wanted to run away to New York City. But it was 1969: Crime was super high, and my parents just freaked out. They said, “Why don’t you apply to the Rhode Island School of Design? Your grandmother always wanted you to go there.” I’d resisted the idea because I’d always told myself, “[Art school] is where you’re going to meet some weirdo who’s really gonna hurt you.” I’d say most of the weirdos I met there were really sweet — though I unfortunately did meet that one weirdo [laughs]. Butoverall,I loved it. I entered as a transfer student in my sophomore year, and that’s when I also met Chris [Frantz].



Weymouth’s “Untitled” (1974).Credit...© Tina Weymouth

Weymouth, photographed by Frantz at the Carr House painting studio they shared at RISD, 1974.Credit...© Chris Frantz 1974


Posters for the RISD senior show at the school's Woods-Gerry Gallery in March 1974. The originals were separate fliers that Weymouth and Frantz put up around campus.Credit...Courtesy of Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth

He was in my very first painting course. I already had a boyfriend, but we became really good friends. He had such a great outlook and I thought, "This is one of the things I really like about art school — a lot of people play music here." It's a very different approach than, say, going to a music school, where it's all about technique and a lot of rote learning. Art school is just a better choice all around, because if you're really an independent

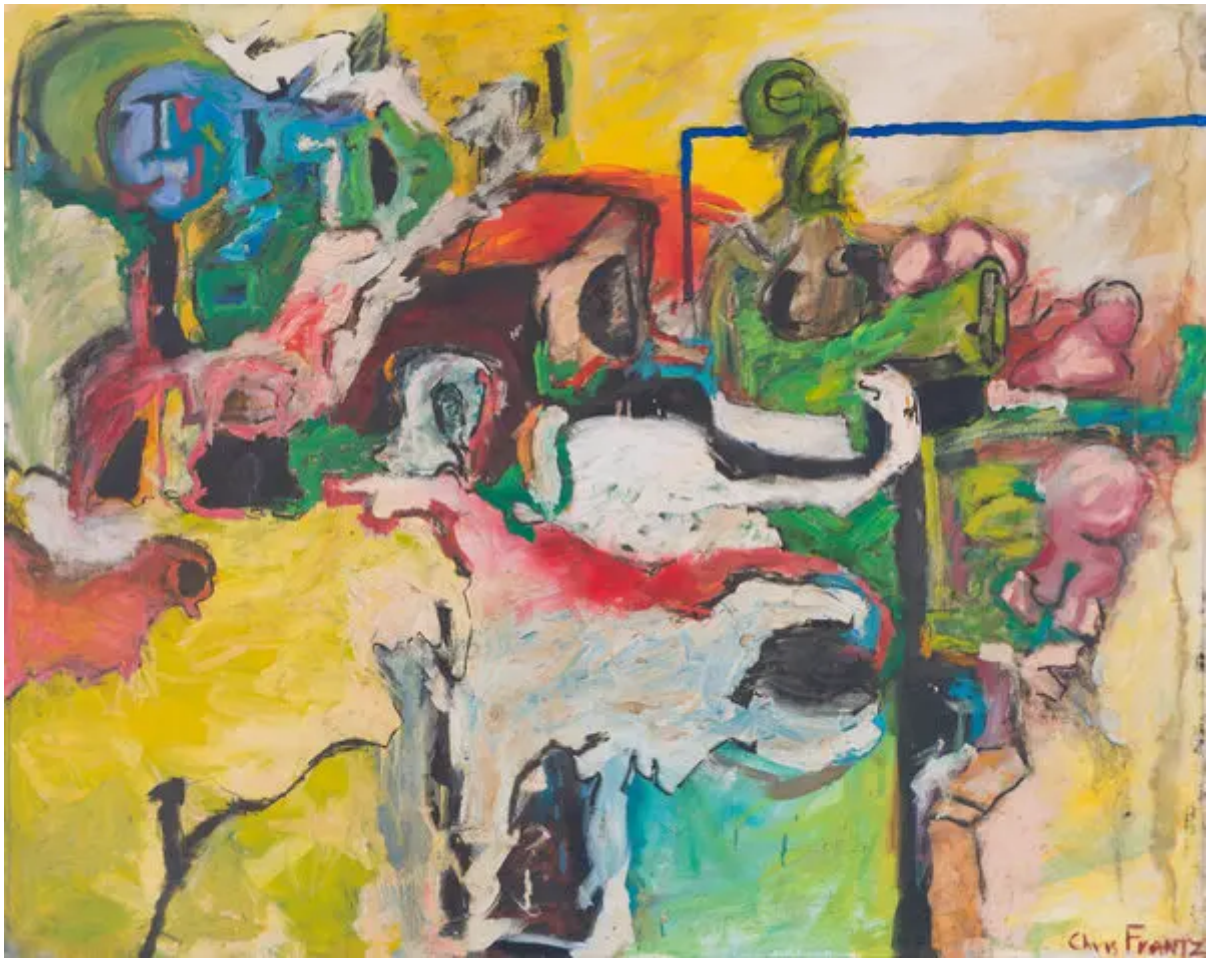
thinker, you want to go someplace where yes, you learn a craft and a discipline, but at the same time, you learn to ask the right questions, which you do mostly on your own. You don't get stuck in this mold of having other people search for you. And even if you don't really have the discipline or the technique yet to create something that you have in mind, you'll find ways and resources to do it.

**That's what art school does, which is so very different. It's a rigorous readying of a young person to launch into adulthood with nothing. You can have absolutely nothing and learn to make something out of it.**

Frantz and Weymouth at the opening of their RISD senior show at the Woods-Gerry Gallery in Providence, R.I., March 1974.Credit...© Paul Krot 1974

You also learn the importance of community: when you're young, the older artists hate you, and when you're old, the younger artists hate you. So it can be hard to find friends, but those are the only friends you're ever going to have as an artist — other artists. They're the people who support and sustain you, especially when you're down and out. Go back in

time to Claude Monet supporting Paul Cézanne. It meant everything for him to say, “What you’re doing is really important. Don’t quit!” at the same time that Émile Zola was putting Cézanne down for being a failed artist.




Frantz made his painting “Pittsburgh Trip” (1970) when he was in high school.Credit...© Chris Frantz

**CHRIS FRANTZ:** The most important thing for me, as a kid coming from Pittsburgh, was to be surrounded by people of like minds. People who were thinking about art and creating art every day. At this point, we were all above the hobby level — we were expected to be serious.

Frantz's "Glory of Love" (1974).Credit...© Chris Frantz

**One thing that was instilled in us at RISD was that it's OK to copy people and be influenced and inspired by the artists who have come before you, but if you ever want to be taken seriously, then you have to be able to dig down really deep and reveal something that's unique unto yourself.**

I feel like that was the most important thing I learned there. It's really a philosophical thing — but philosophy has a lot to do with art and vice versa. There was also a young teacher by the name of Alan Sondheim who taught a course called Post-Conceptual Art. He had guests come up from New York, people like Vito Acconci and Kathy Acker, who at the time was writing under the name "The Black Tarantula," and James Lee Byars and Michael Snow. Their work was kind of mind-blowing because it was part of this whole new thing in the mid-60s to early '70s called conceptual art that had nothing to do really with painting, or sometimes even making things — it was about ideas. That made me

think, “Wow. So maybe a rock ’n’ roll band is another way to convey our ideas.” Songs don’t just have to be about the predictable things. They can be about things that are very offbeat or very common, things people don’t usually write songs about … like buildings and food.

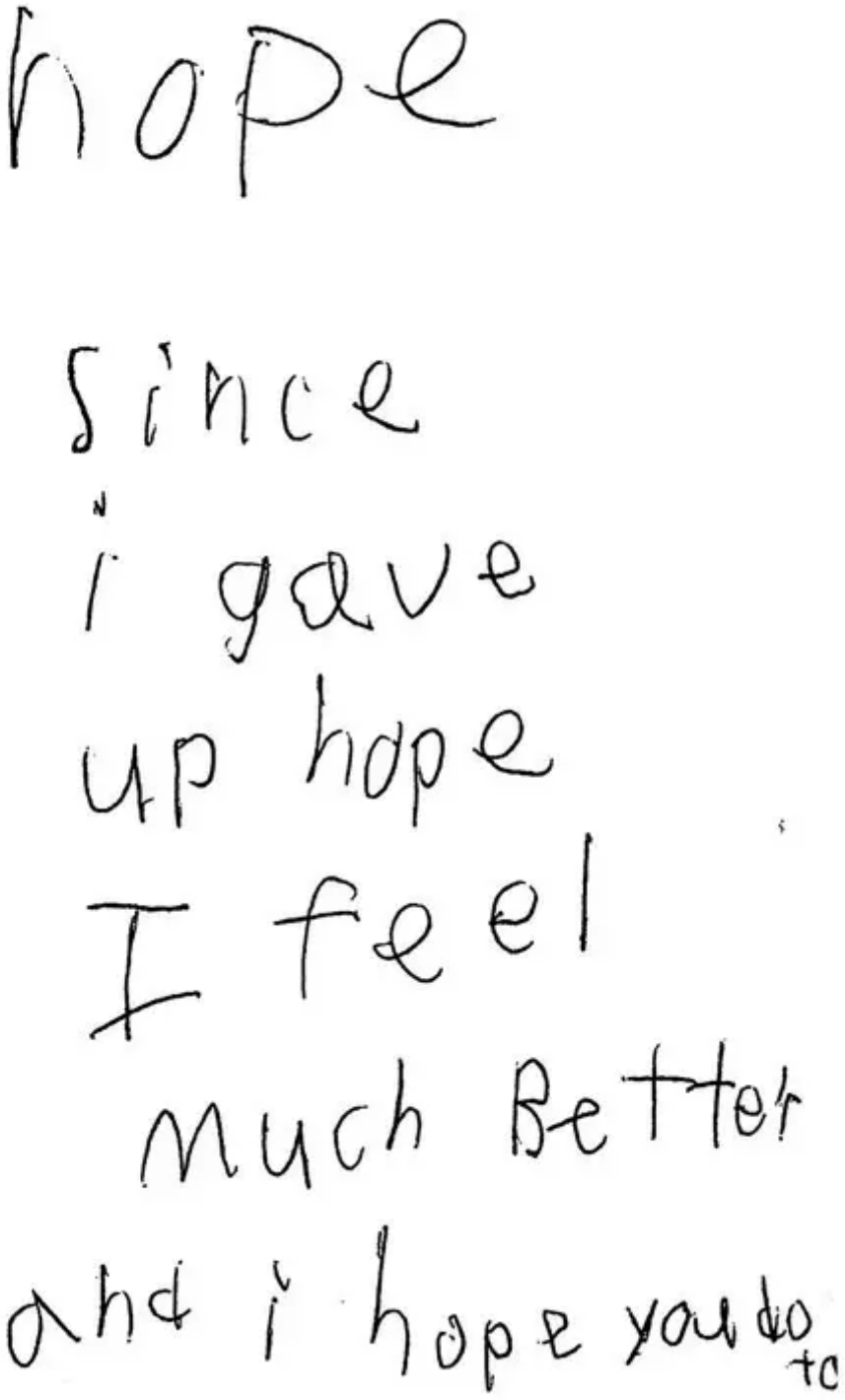
## Dustin Yellin, multidisciplinary social practice artist, 46

Self-taught

A polaroid of Dustin Yellin in 1999, the year he turned 24.Credit...Courtesy of Dustin Yellin

Ever since I was a kid — I was born in California and raised in Colorado — art was the thing that allowed complete freedom for me. There wasn't a ceiling. I was late to study art history, though. I didn't grow up in a household in which that kind of thing was embedded — I got that later, through other people.

I had a hard time in school. I didn't even finish high school. And I think maybe deep down in some unearthed psychological part of me, I probably built Pioneer Works as a remedy to that. There were certain touchstones for me — learning about Joseph Beuys, about the idea of social practice and social sculpture and taking that one step further, which is beginning to look at civilization as sculpture. Maybe because I didn't go to school, I always thought being around and working with people was the best way to learn, and not just other visual artists but writers and musicians and scientists and technologists. I wanted to get everyone in the room so you could think about your practice differently and push what you were cognizant of at any given moment.

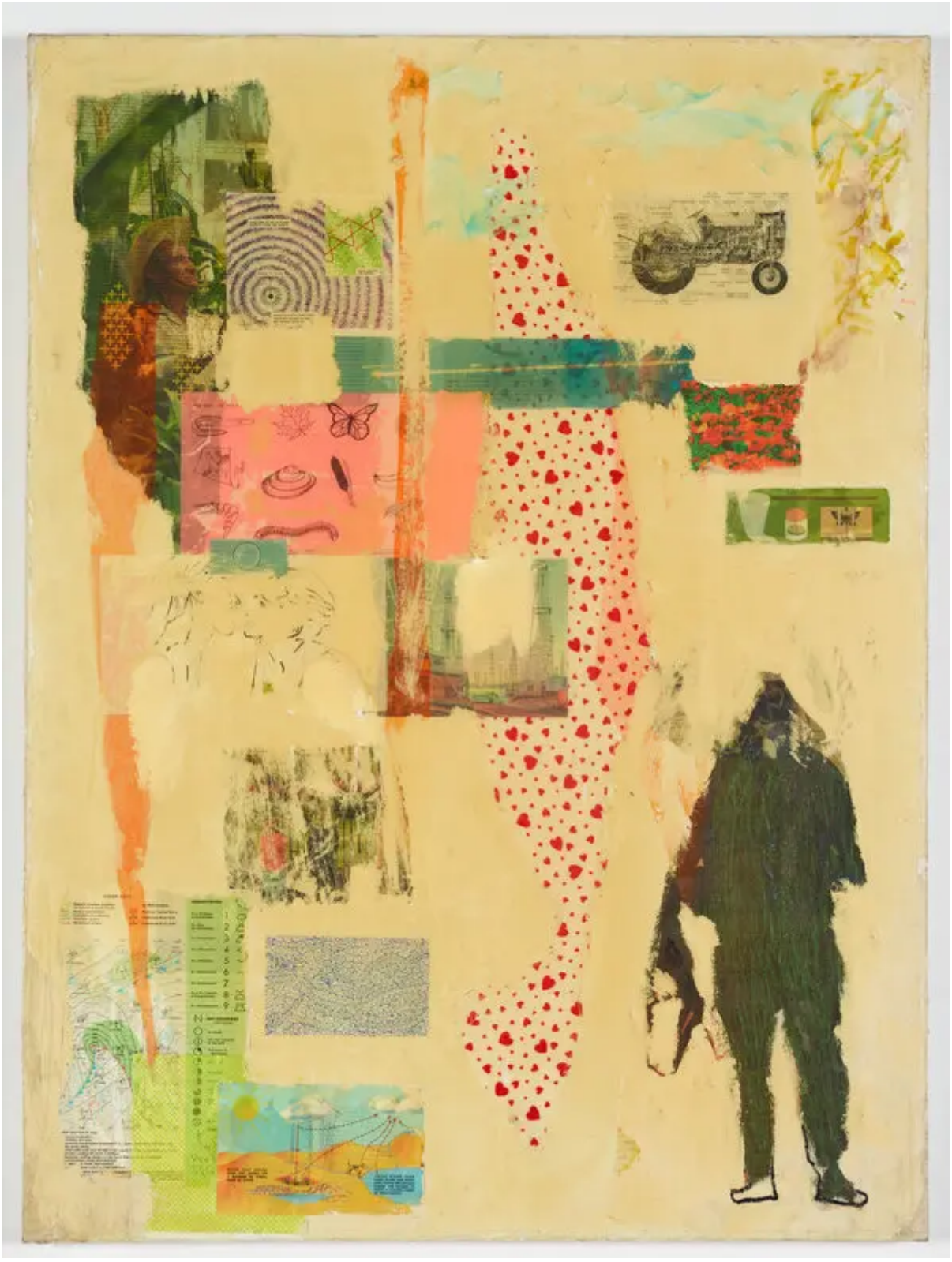



Some of Yellin's school writing, circa 1982, when he was 8 or 9 years old.Credit...© Dustin Yellin, courtesy of the artist

Yellin's "Yellow Octopus" (1998), made the year he turned 23.Credit...© Dustin Yellin, courtesy of the artist

I met all these kids who went to art schools when I got to New York, and through these friends of mine, I got educated, if you will. They were all going to Cooper Union and Columbia and Yale and I was the one who wasn't, but they were telling me to look at Sonia Delaunay or read Buckminster Fuller. Through them, I learned everything.

**But unless you're going to be a surgeon or go into another field where higher education is most important, I'm not sure art school in the traditional sense is worth it.** I have friends whose kids don't know what they want to do, and their only option right now is to pay a quarter of a million dollars to go to school without even knowing what they want to go to school for. It's a big commitment.



Yellin's "Untitled" (2003), a collaged painting.Credit...Courtesy of Dustin Yellin

If you have a choice between art and something else, I think you're better off doing the other thing, because this is a life, and it's for your whole life, and it's so difficult. It was hard for me. I have friends who went to these amazing art schools, who were championed by curators and then got picked up quickly by the biennials and the gallery system, and I was struggling in my 20s because I wasn't in the system. Even now, when I'm not so young, I feel it. I saw friends of mine having great, great success in their mid-20s and early 30s, and some of them can hardly pay the bills now and some of them are killing it — it's just so different for each person. To distill that, I would say that people are the key to everything. If you get lucky and you go into a program and you meet the right friends and teachers — and those can be the same people — then you've hit the lottery. Thank God so many of my friends were so hard on me. They forced me to read everything, to know who everyone was. If there's rigor in your life — which you need regardless of whether or not you go to school — bigger things can manifest, in many ways.