

Chapter 15 of Robert Irwin's Notes Toward a Conditional Art (J. Paul Getty Trust, 2011; edited by Matthew Simms)  
Pages 93-94

### Statement on Teaching

(in Melinda Wertz, *University of California, Irvine, 1965-1975* (La Jolla; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1975), 90, Reprinted in Notes Toward a Conditional Art)

Irvine was a classic situation, a rare opportunity. It was a new school, not overburdened with assumptions about itself, as yet, not overstructured and turning over a talented faculty with regularity. The students were essentially from the area. They were not a special group who had been recruited or were there because they had heard what kind of place it was.

I was interested in working with a beginning class along with a so-called advanced class to work on how you accomplish that shift of responsibility from residing principally in the assumption of education as a process of inculcation, that what we do is teach from the sum total of the history of human knowledge which underwrites all of our cultural agreements including "Art." This is really a nice idea, that idea of a cutting edge and I can't disagree with it. It is a fact. What I disagree with is the manner and degree that we assume to carry those facts as whole truths.

I think education is an amalgam of the development of a consciousness both of structure and phenomena where the first questions lie equally in taking stock of your own sensibilities. Schools being a structure are inclined to assume the conclusions of structure.

Now a lot of people sensing what had happened in the twentieth century in terms of contemporary art became uncomfortable with the existing rigidity in education and experienced a wave of self-expression, a kind of free-for-all. But since expression once accepted as an idea can mean virtually anything, the issue quickly translated to individual responsibility for its further definition. I felt you had to define this relationship in the beginning year.

But first you must begin with the student's expectations. For example: One must develop their confidence, prove to them in their own performance there isn't anything that they can't eventually accomplish technically with application before you can convince them that it doesn't deserve the kind of focus they have been led to believe by a performance-oriented culture. Simultaneously you want to develop their historical awareness. That they begin in a special time and place, in that historical context, "Art." That they begin already a part of "Art" history, i.e., witness the art school. To realize that 90% of the things you take for granted are cultural solutions, facts, but not necessarily truths. To give them a real historical awareness not in names and dates, but in terms of that progression of ideas. Leading to why certain questions are now being asked by their contemporaries. The most critical part is to begin developing their ability to assign their own tasks and make their own criticism in direct relation to their own needs and not in light of some abstract criteria. That when they are carrying out a problem they are not making art, they are simply working on a problem in terms of their own growth. If you can learn how to make your own assignments instead of relying on someone else then you have learned what you really came to school for, to learn how to learn, and

everything else – history, technique, and practice – simply contributes to that continuing process.

The key to the first year is that shift, from where you start out holding all the reins of responsibility as “teacher” and slowly relinquish them in a process of question/demand, a game of articulation, which forces them to begin wrestling with their own consequences. The name of the game is that by the end of that time they have wrestled away from you all those responsibilities for their own acts. Now you can begin together developing those issues intimate to their own sensibilities, and you begin by recognizing your relationship has changed from leader to participant and that your personal likes and dislikes, biases, are no longer critical to their development but only another issue for discussion.

This kind of education you can’t administer by decree, you can only underwrite the kind of people capable of accomplishing it and maintain an atmosphere open to its open potential, including the risks.

As it turned out the first graduate group I have to think was one of the most competent, interesting and really advanced I have known. Witness the series of exhibitions and activities carried out in their own place, “F Space.” I think this is proof enough that something happened at Irvine. Eventually, it was given over to issues of what the faculty came to think of as a fair share of the budget, class space and loads and the security of tenure, not as protection from external abuse, but against old age.