

Notes Toward Socratic Gardening

by Mark Allen

The first time I met with Michael Asher one-on-one was to discuss my first-year grad show, and he closed with the following request: “If you figure out why you are making work about nothing, please let me know. I’m genuinely curious.” I promised to do my best. I was in the MFA art program from 1997 to 1999. I hadn’t heard of him before coming to CalArts. Around campus, people talked about his epic *Post-Studio* class, which lasted hours and involved endless conversations that were both extremely rigorous and completely excessive. It had no other group identity than being the class to take if you were serious. It was talked about as a synecdoche of the CalArts experience, something that everyone should encounter during their MFA time, in that it created everything that the art school as an institution was trying to activate: it was hyper-discursive, it was radically permissive, and it provided a space and context for the emergence of new ideas.

When I took it, I remember spending a lot of time lying on the carpet talking about people’s projects, digging into ideas, making up theories and quoting vaguely understood pieces of critical theory. I remember leaving for three hours and coming back to a conversation that was still going on. The classroom was located at the very center of the building, underneath the ground floor. It had no windows, no clocks--and this was before cell phones--so it created an atemporal space. The absence of time was profound in an educational setting, and one of the reasons I call the class’s method radically permissive.

With other classes, the parameters of the experience are often defined by time. The class ends at a certain point, regardless of what’s been accomplished and whether or not all points have been exhausted. *Post-Studio* was the opposite. It was the only class where we were devoted to allowing the time, no matter how long we were present, for everybody to say everything they wanted to say.

Michael had the reputation at school of being a mysterious teacher. His persona was that of having the biggest brain around, and this was somewhat intimidating. In practice, he pulled his students to new places by asking challenging, seemingly unanswerable questions, then offering no prescriptions for what to do next. He seemed to know the precise question that would point you in a new direction for thinking about your work. Yet, he also kept in mind that you didn’t yet have all the answers, and that his questions were beginnings, places to start rather than places to get to. In this way, he was both very supportive, like a coach, and very rigorous. It was almost impossible to know what he thought about a piece, as he kept those thoughts to himself. He taught by example, silently listening for hours to what everyone had to say and allowing them to say it.

Watching this, I grew to believe that suspending judgment about quality or personal taste is the core skill to learn if you want to be deeply involved in art--or anything, for that matter. Michael was the foremost influence on my coming to this conclusion, both as a maker and viewer of art; he set the example of suspending judgment as a kind of meditation practice. He led without hierarchy, letting us self-organize, and so it always felt as though we were granted space and time to come to our own conclusions, both as

individuals and as a group. He never pointed out what smart thing he thought we should know. His approach was open and generous. I hesitate to articulate his method in any way, but it strikes me as a sort of wandering, Socratic one. With the Socratic method, there's a demonstration of control and authority, a way to engineer students' directions and realizations. Michael was more of a gardener, tending to a space from which new ideas could grow.

Creating and maintaining a space in which to encounter other subjectivities was the principal project of the *Post-Studio* method, and this can be evidenced in its careful allowance for hyper-discursiveness. Critique is ultimately a recursive process. The class thinks they have a grasp on an idea or aspect of the artist's project and they move on to new ideas, but these trigger them to return to earlier revelations in a cyclical form. For me, it was an expansion of the notion of how to be an artist. I was confronted with an understanding of the philosophical intentions of someone else's work, and had to grapple with what that did to me as a viewer. Someone could be presenting an idea that I disagreed with, but I first had to come to an understanding of how that idea was circulating, being made visible, and formally and conceptually operating, before I could take a position on it.

In 2006, I was conducting research with a friend and collaborator of mine, artist Sara Roberts, on the forms of criticism in different artistic disciplines. Sara and I wanted to listen to how different disciplines evaluate their practices, in order to think about interdisciplinarity. We hoped to find some overlap in vocabulary or canonical texts about how the practice of each field was enacted.

Michael was one of our interviewees (the other interviewees were also from the CalArts community) because he seemed like an exemplar for what we found to be central to the discipline of art: its discursiveness and criticality. For Michael, the thing that made up an artwork was its criticality; in fact, for him, you weren't even making an artwork if it wasn't critical or enacting a critical position. The discursiveness, or the process of talking about the meaning of the work, was a way to squeeze the politics out of it. The poetics and subjective experiences of the piece's affect were a kind of smokescreen to what the politics were about, and for Michael, talking about a piece was a way of penetrating that smokescreen and seeing the position that was inscribed.

It was during these interviews that Michael's method came to resonate profoundly with my work, and I realized that, in his class, I had been presented with a life-long model of how to practice art. *Post-Studio* proposes that, to sustain an artistic practice throughout life, there must be a space constantly open to conversation, discussion and being confronted with a multiplicity of ideas and subjectivities. I've come to view art as a framing device, a permissive lens, a system for looking at effects, ideas, ideologies and narratives. The boundary is important: you have to step outside of the thing in order to look at it, and art affords this critical distance, delineating the space by applying a framework. *Post-Studio* was a means in which this boundary was called out; the politics and poetics of a piece were traced through discussion, and the piece came to exist as a thing unto itself. This process wasn't about making the work better, but instead, about making it able to stand on its own. It posed questions of internal consistency: Does what I'm doing make sense? Is

there an alignment of the philosophy articulated by the practice, and the philosophy articulated by the piece, that's independent of how I had to make it? What are the politics in my approach that I don't even see, and does my project reflect those politics? Do I like the politics that the work is presenting?

In the interview, Michael said that the goal of the class was to prepare the student to be a practicing artist in the real world. Perhaps most importantly, it is not the job of the class to tell the artist what to do, but rather to examine how his or her work is interpreted. Although critiquing the piece at hand is important, it is more important to develop a framework for thinking about art. The group's job is to interpret the piece in terms of what is visible in it, through what we all perceived, and to see if it makes sense in relationship to the philosophy it is presenting. As a participant in a group talking about a project for eight to twelve hours, the decisions made by the artist slowly came to the fore, revealing a point of view. Often, this was just as much of a discovery to the artist as it was to the viewer. Inevitably, the conversation offered a million reasons why the wrong decisions were made, but this was not as important as getting to the position of the maker. It was an opportunity for students to inhabit, in a deep if momentary way, another person's practice. What ended up emerging from this process was a plurality of worldviews being brought to bear on the art being discussed. Sometimes the class agreed on how things were interpreted, but it was impossible to have complete agreement, and this was precisely the point. Different readings surfaced from different economic and social backgrounds, and these became another layer of information to bring to the conversation.

This is important on two levels. From the perspective of being an artist, one often negotiates a tension between subjective impulses and the need to communicate with others. Work exists on a spectrum of communication: on the one hand, there is mass communication, which seems to adjust itself so as to be consumed by the greatest number of people; on the other hand, there is that which is so insular it is impossible to penetrate as an outside viewer, and in the end, communicates nothing (or very little). When being confronted with so many viewers speaking about their experience of your work, you can start to understand exactly how it is communicating, where on the spectrum it is located. You start to comprehend the seemingly simple fact that people see things differently than you do, and after that comes the realization that there might be some politics there. When you try to calibrate those things, they wrap back into the piece. You now have something that reflects not only your worldview, but the fact that other worldviews also perceive it.

The second effect of the class occurs in being present to an artist trying to articulate his or her position. This was how I learned to be an audience member and to see through another's eyes. Michael's method influenced not only how I view art but all kinds of cultural experiences. This developed into two concepts that have been central to my practice, which I've come to call "prosthetic enthusiasm"—or being able to identify with someone else's difference—and "empathetic curation"—the importance of understanding that there are other worldviews. It is the act of being exposed to other people's contexts that enriches your own way of life. Trying to see how your own work is received in these contexts helps you become a better communicator. The key to making something

interesting is not to make it simple, but to make it accessible—to be empathetic to your audience, and to allow for an audience to access something rather complex.

Years later, as the executive director of Machine Project, I used the *Post-Studio* model as the core principle for curating events. My method was to find people (artists, thinkers, scientists, amateurs) who were really, really into what they did (experimental poetry, the history of aluminium smelting, the sex life of sea slugs, the history of shipwrecks, operas by and for dogs, vacations for plants, simultaneous aerobics and butter-making) and give them a forum to share their intellectual interests and personal obsessions. I realized that what people were talking about was less important than their ability to help the audience see it through their eyes, like seeing an artwork through the eyes (and intentions) of the maker. As an audience member, I could allow myself to get immersed in other's enthusiasms, and as a curator I could bring people together to encounter difference in a friendly, accessible environment.

In my mind, *Post-Studio* is a microcosm of an ideal art school. At Machine Project, we are interested in producing alternative models of art education in informal educational settings that privilege enthusiasm and the amateur. We are invested in there being a constant circulation of ideas among us, and we all take turns learning from each other. For example, someone who is in the audience of a lecture one night could be the maker of a performance that occurs later in the week, and a student in a workshop could produce a series the following month. I am increasingly trying to develop workshops and classes that help build a vibrant scene, like an art school does.

The classes I'm most excited about now attempt to construct a community or a discourse or a mode of working, much like *Post-Studio* did. I think about what I do as an organization for generating the kinds of things that I want more of in the world, and these classes are a direct means to achieving that goal. We often think about how to replicate art school's space for discursiveness without its excessive financial and institutional apparatus. Our approach is making the political statement that learning in the context of Machine Project is primarily about intellectual pleasure. That doesn't mean you won't learn things, but "learning" is not the sole purpose. It is a space where difference can be encountered, sustained, and learned from, which relates to our core purpose of creating culture and knowledge.

In art, as in life, it is essential not only to have difference, but to celebrate it, to make a space that takes into account the multiplicity of worldviews that are in communication with the work. Machine's core philosophy could be read as an extension of this belief, a project in creating such a space. As an educational setting, and following Michael's approach in *Post-Studio*, we seek to make a place for new ideas to emerge among a group of curious and adventuresome individuals who are willing to share, no matter how much time it takes.

Call us wandering Socratic gardeners.