

Go Tell It on the Mountain

LA'S NEW NOMADIC ART SCHOOLS

words HOLLY MYERS

THE STORY OF ART IN LOS ANGELES is inseparable from the story of its art schools, which typically goes something like this: the pioneers laid their foundations between the wars – Otis College of Art and Design in 1918, Chouinard Art Institute in 1921, Art Center in 1930, UCLA's College of Applied Arts in 1939 – dwarfed by the behemoth of Hollywood, so far from even the shadow of New York as to scarcely register on its radar and catering primarily to a population of students who hadn't the means, the talent or the ambition to go East. Over the course of a generation or two, however, as California's postwar confidence rose, a critical mass of luminaries emerged (Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari and so on). In 1961 Walt Disney transformed Chouinard into CalArts, which – in one of the most peculiar of LA's many high/low entanglements – proceeded to mine the avant-garde enclaves of New York and Europe for faculty and visiting artists, setting into motion a powerful, self-perpetuating machine. Ever more prestigious faculty, at CalArts and elsewhere, drew ever more talented students, who in turn became faculty, tipping this pool of talent from the art schools to the city's other colleges and junior colleges, and then to outlying regions, producing estimable programmes in unlikely places like Long Beach, Pomona and Irvine – thus attracting more students, spawning galleries like souvenir shops along a newly established tourist route and spurring a flurry of contemporary programming in museums.

It is a heady state of affairs, one that reflects trends felt around the world – the rise of the MFA, the boom of the market – but which feels particularly acute here, in a city with a short historical memory and, until recently, little cultural infrastructure to speak of. It is a shift that raises significant and sometimes troubling questions, however. What are the economic ramifications of large numbers of people coming into a financially unstable field tens of thousands of dollars in debt? What are the artistic consequences? How many risks can one take in one's work while carrying that sort of a burden? Do creative practices actually excel in a climate of academic specialisation? How do the conditions

of pedagogy affect the work of those who, by choice or necessity, are funnelled back into teaching? Does the experience these artists gain from these programmes, whether as students or teachers, actually lead to more interesting work? And how many artists, for that matter, do we actually need?

Take, by contrast, this scene: a geodesic dome in the hilly neighbourhood of Mt Washington one Thursday evening last November, where 12 people – several artists, a graphic designer, an apparel designer, two writers, a new-media professor visiting from Illinois, two graduate students and a young high-school teacher, ranging in age from late twenties to early forties – sit on pillows in a circle, drinking tea and discussing the fate of humanity. To what degree, they ponder, is environmentalism a form of misanthropy? Are we mistaken in applying questions of morality to a fundamentally amoral realm of nature? How does one grapple with the violence of the food chain? What's to be done about population growth? The dialogue is intelligent, informed, respectful and engaged; the vibe is one of a comfortable retreat.

What does this have to do with art school? It represents the most recent incarnation of the Sundown Schoolhouse, one of a handful of pedagogically oriented grassroots endeavours to emerge in the vicinity of the LA artworld in recent years, endeavours which draw upon the city's wealth of educational resources – namely the proliferation of individuals in the habit of teaching and the abundance of those with a fondness for learning (not mutually exclusive populations, by any means) – to pose a welcome antidote to the hype of the MFA: a vision of education both more expansive and more accessible. These loose and in some cases amorphous institutions – the Schoolhouse and the Mountain School of Arts are the most visible – work on a small scale, without a lot of fanfare, and with little to no concern for the boundaries between disciplines. Though they differ considerably in structure and approach, they share a commitment to broadening the foundation of the artistic and intellectual life.





Goals

- integration of social life and intellectual life across disciplines
- provide access to tools + technologies
- use art as a system to investigate other practices
- support and exhibit neat art

The Schoolhouse, which was conceived by Fritz Haeg as an outgrowth of a series of salons he hosted in the dome (where he also lived until recently) from 2001 to 2006, is a continually morphing entity. In its first season – autumn 2006 – it took the form of an intensive college-like course, with a preselected group of nine students meeting every Sunday, 12 hours a day, for 12 weeks, to participate in discussions, workshops and projects led by a rotating assortment of teachers, on subjects ranging from yoga to poetry to magic to community organisation. This autumn it was a book club, meeting every Thursday for nine weeks and open to anyone who wanted to stop by (Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, 2007, was the featured book on the evening I visited). The school's functions, however, aren't limited to the vicinity of the dome. Last winter, it travelled to Manhattan for 'Dancing 9 to 5', a day of movement workshops in a Whitney Museum sculpture court, and to the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art for 'The Philadelphia Training Camp for Expression Skills', a two-month 'clinic' devoted to communication, with topics such as 'The Fine Art of Writing Bad Poetry', 'How to Be an Unorthodox Tourguide of Your Own Terrains' and 'Make an Instrument Out of Everyday Shit'. Because Haeg no longer lives in the dome – he is on the road almost continuously with other projects – the Schoolhouse will now become almost entirely nomadic. This spring will find the project in Texas

with 'How to Eat Austin', a seven-week series of workshops relating to ecology and gardening, presented in conjunction with Haeg's solo show 'Attack on the Front Lawn', in a local space called Arthouse.

"My biggest problem with MFA programmes is how insular they are", Haeg says, "and how focused they are on contemporary fine art. If you want to be a really thoughtful, challenging, innovative artist, I think that the last thing you should be looking at is contemporary art. You should be looking at science and reading history and looking at the newspaper and looking at everything *but* art – you know? To just be stuck in a building with other artists your own age, and then only meeting with other artists that are maybe 10 or 20 years older than you – it's just such a small, narrow world to be living in. It's so limiting."

He points to the work of Buckminster Fuller, whose biography he presented in the book club's final session. "Basically his theory is that the powers that be want us to be specialists", Haeg says, "because they don't want us to see the big picture, because the more you see the big picture, the more apt you are to question things. He's saying that decades ago, but I think it's even more true today."

A similar concern underscores the philosophy of the Mountain School of Arts, which was founded in 2005 by artists Eric Wesley and Piero Golia, though the approach is very different. Whereas the Schoolhouse functions, to some degree, as an extension of Haeg's

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own artistic practice – though he considers himself more architect than author – Wesley and Golia are adamant that the Mountain School is neither a ‘project’ of theirs nor an art school, but an institution patterned on the university model and devoted to general education, with a curriculum grounded in science, philosophy and law. Wesley stresses this point multiple times in our correspondence, clearly wary of seeing the school featured in an art magazine. ‘The mission of the school today is to diversify’, he writes in an email, ‘to break out of the constant reference of art school or remain trapped in the “art world” where you don’t have a chance at the “real world”.’

The school accepts around 15 students per year, half of them from outside the US, for a single three-month term (January through March). Classes are held two nights a week in the back room of a bar in the gallery-studded neighbourhood of Chinatown, and tuition is free. In both administrative and financial terms, it is a shoestring operation: the faculty (a handful of regulars and a rotating – often spontaneous – roster of visiting lecturers) donate their time, the bar donates the space and a sympathetic real-estate lawyer donates housing for the foreign students. The school’s wealth is in its contacts, which, despite the founders’ aversion to ghettoisation, are particularly impressive in the creative disciplines (Paul McCarthy, Pierre Huyghe, Dan Graham, Simone Forti, Franz Ackermann, Christian Jankowski and Hans Ulrich Obrist have all made appearances). The goal, however, is to have an equally deep reach into all fields.

To illustrate the dangers of narrow thinking, Golia – a chatty and very funny Neapolitan who rarely gives a straight answer – recounts a call he received from the Department of Motor Vehicles, informing



him, mistakenly, that his driver’s license had expired the previous August: “Ma’am, it can’t be”, he says, “because I got it in October, so in August I didn’t have it. And she’s like, no, it’s here on my computer: expired August 16. And I’m like, OK, does your computer say that it was issued in October? And she’s like, yeah, October 22. And I’m like, so, do you have a *brain* to put your computer together?” He laughs incredulously. “So that’s the idea of the school: stimulating thought. Obviously – thank God – we are not dealing with such tragic cases.

“Our dream”, he continues, “is to become an encyclopedic school, to put together a community that is not anymore just artists, but that is... whoever. Like, if you want to become a better surgeon, come and expand your mind. Look around. The more you look around, the more you learn in life. You know, if you go to work for a mechanic for a year, it doesn’t necessarily make you a better writer, but it helps your brain to keep moving. If you just do one thing in your life, you become like a machine – and my driver’s license really *will* expire in August, before it was actually issued. So our dream is to cross the border.”

Though markedly different in the particulars of structure and personality, the Sundown Schoolhouse and the Mountain School reflect what has long been a defining quality of LA art history: the capacity of its players to look beyond the grip of categories, hierarchies and institutions. As the community shifts now into a position of unprecedented visibility, globally speaking, and its dynamics continue, inevitably, to codify, the need for such vision is only more acute. •

Sundown Schoolhouse, www.sundownschoolhouse.org, *the Mountain School of Arts*, www.themountainchoolofarts.org



IMAGES
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Sundown Schoolhouse: Fall Session, 2006, morning movement in the dome
photo: Mark Rodriguez

Sundown Schoolhouse: Fall Session, 2006, meeting in the cave
photo: Fritz Haeg

Dancing 9 to 5, 17 January 2007
The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria
photo: A.L. Steiner

Sundown Schoolhouse: Fall Session, 2006, LA tour in capes designed with Andrea Zittel
photo: Fritz Haeg

All images
courtesy Fritz Haeg/Sundown Schoolhouse