

from:

**ch-ch-ch-changes: Artists Talk About Teaching**

**Reardon, John and David Mollin**

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**Phyllida Barlow—at home in North London—  
early June.**

In a recent article, Mark Godfrey introduces you as ‘one of the most influential teachers and artists working in Britain today’. With a career spanning 40 years ... you grimace?

I don’t think that’s true.

**Why do you think Godfrey would say that? Is it simply down to longevity, or do you bring a special kind of focus to teaching that produces particular kinds of results?**

It is a very expedient remark that tries to raise interest in the article, otherwise there would be no point in him writing it. From my point of view, I don’t quite know where he would get that information from, other than rolling the credits of a few names that I’ve obviously had contact with over 40 years. I feel that my kind of teaching – and there are a lot of us around – is that every day is a new day. You feel you have no history as a teacher, you almost feel you have no history as an artist. You enter the studio and the tutorial almost starts from scratch each time, and therefore you’re in a process of constant renewal. I suppose that’s the excitement of the teaching experience; that people like myself don’t know how to use their own history. And it doesn’t necessarily stand one in very good stead. It’s unreliable, in as much as I don’t have anything to rely on, everything is always different.

**Why do you think that is?**

Because I think there are so many changes with each decade, or five years, or even quicker now – two years. Each group of students is bringing an entirely new life cycle. If you just want to depend on something that happened to you over 40 years, that is not anything I’m particularly interested in doing. I am genuinely interested in the here and now and how that then relates to a whole history of knowledge and attempts to understand from the past. But I don’t think the past leads, the individual leads.

**How do you keep it from becoming predictable? How do you go in there every day and start again?**

Unfortunately every teacher has their predictable emotional, passionate luggage, and the students are the first to recognise this. They know I might say something like ‘take it outside, go and put it on a street corner’, ‘take it down to Euston Station’, ‘why not do

this as a performance?’ ‘Why are you videoing it, why not do the performance live?’ They know I will say these things, or ‘why have you put it there, why not stick it on the ceiling?’ I can bore myself with my own repertoire of things, but I suppose that’s directly connected to how I would treat the process of making in the studio. You know that nothing is reliable, you know an idea isn’t reliable.

**In a conversation with Sacha Craddock about the making of *Peninsula*, the work you did for the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, you explained how the students you had working with you constantly reminded you of what you would say to them in their studio, but would do the opposite in yours.**

Yes. Touché!

**You taught people like Rachel Whiteread, Steven Pippin, and so on. Did they require much teaching?**

I don’t think either Rachel or Steve Pippin would necessarily think of me as a particularly significant teacher. That particular year in Brighton, where I met them first – at the old Brighton Poly, before it became whatever it did become – there was an extraordinary head of sculpture who was retiring. Which is why Ed Allington and I got this kind of joint job there.

**Who was the head of sculpture?**

James Tower. He needs huge credit for his ability to select really interesting students. If you look at the history of Brighton during that early 1980s era, the artists and the students at the time who became well-known artists who went there, were astonishing. A lot of these things go, they disappear without a trace and that’s just the way it is. But in that particular year at Brighton, there was Rachel, there was Steve Pippin, there was another wonderful artist called Lee – gosh I’ve forgotten his name – Lee Andrews ... And several others whose names have gone just for the moment. Alison Wilding was teaching in this group of people at Brighton as well. It was an astonishing 18 months there, and then the whole system changed. Polytechnics went, the new universities started sprouting up left, right and centre, and that regime disappeared. A new regime came in, but I was very lucky teaching with that team of people, to pick up that group of students

who'd actually been selected by someone else. We were very lucky to just be there at that particular moment. In fact Rachel was far more indebted to Alison Wilding, Ed Allington and Richard Wilson than me. She's become a good friend now, but at the time I was much more in a sort of supportive role than the sort of dynamic teacher. That has emerged later, actually.

**Do you think someone like Rachel arrived with everything she needed? Did she need to be there?**

Yes, I think so. Hugely so, yes. What the teaching context there gave was incredibly studio-based and produced a critical dynamic, between this extraordinary exceptional group of staff, and Eric Bainbridge was also in that group. It was a really extraordinary circumstance to bring these five artists together. It provided a kind of critical breadth. Whether those students then, or really successful artists now, would ever really credit that, I don't know. It was such a fertile environment for ambition really, and motivation, to do things with the work. I can remember Eric Bainbridge, whom I admire hugely – I think he's one of the most exciting artists and teachers actually – looking at this girl's work. It was very clunky and awkward and he just turned to her and said, 'well, why not stick all those bits together with bubblegum?' To make her completely rethink a way of doing something. He wasn't just being facetious; he was actually being really ahead of his time. If you think of what's happened to contemporary art since, you just know that that remark changed her life. Whether she became a famous artist or not, was neither here nor there – I don't think she did, I think she went off and did something completely different ... But you can see somebody's inspired thinking.

**You were around at a time of some major figures in art education: George Fullard, William Coldstream at the Slade, Lawrence Gowing at Chelsea. Are there figures of that stature and creativity working in art education today? And, if so, where is their influence being felt?**

The influence now is coming from the art world itself, and this is the most complicated part of art education today; art has become so successful out there that it's now impacting, to some extent, on what happens within art schools in a way that maybe hasn't quite happened before. The giant educationalists, who really had visions about art

schools becoming dynamic centres for the exchange of ideas, processes and ways of thinking, both George Fullard and Lawrence Gowing and, in a strange way, Coldstream were like that. They didn't see them as places that manufactured finished artists who could be delivered straight into the art world ... they saw them as places where there could be an ongoing process of revealing and testing out, and changing and offering huge opportunity to people. Whereas now there is an intense pressure for young, emerging artists about surviving. That's very different from, say, 20 to 30 years ago. I wouldn't want to say it's a good or a bad thing; it's just a shift. You're looking at what's going on in the art world – outside of the art school – for information, for how to develop.

**And what effect is that having on the art school and educational system?**

It's making it incredibly economy-driven. It's making everyone very, very aware of the economies of being an art student, of how to relate that to economic survival after art school. I would say the running order when you leave is first how am I going to survive economically; then where am I going to survive economically; and, thirdly, how am I going to make my work? Whereas previously it was first how am I going to make my work; then, how am I going to pay for it?; and last where am I going to do that? 'Oh, in a shed in the middle of nowhere.' It's all reversed the other way, and this isn't a criticism; you can't blame people for that, because just trying to survive in London alone, as we all know, is a huge challenge.

**Is this the same for teachers?**

Yes, totally. The pressures, that is, for how to survive as an artist. Although the income from teaching does provide some kind of financial security but the responsibilities and accountabilities as a teacher are now under scrutiny in ways that were not so until comparatively recently. Teaching has offered a false security that has not done teachers, their work, or art schools any good. And in the end these accountability exercises were an inevitability to reveal complacency.

**You mentioned to Godfrey that there was a time when art schools were seen as a form of patronage. 'There was less emphasis on whether you showed your work or not: it was about having the space and time to make work within your own studio, and teaching**



afforded the means to do that. That whole culture of art schools being patrons has virtually disappeared without trace'. It now seems almost to be a career choice of a kind; you go to art school and you'll do the MA and PhD, and that's a way to continue being part of the system ...

Yes. I find it very difficult to talk about this aspect of it, and you maybe need to go to a higher authority, who really knows about it! The dogmatic feeling we have that there's the academic path, which gives you lots of job opportunities within academia and so you plod on through. You do your BA, you maybe have a year out, you do your MA and you do your PhD and then you're away, is deeply flawed as a concept for an artist. And maybe this has all come about through people actually saying, 'we don't have to call artists "artists" anymore, they can be anything ...' It's a slightly politicised thing; are they just like everybody else? Well, of course we're just like everybody else, it's just we have this desire to make visible things that usually aren't visible, and therefore it's a kind of useless profession. Trying to make it thoroughly useful through this academic trajectory seems to give it a kind of pretension, where there are problems with honing the artist into this highly academic being, while they're going to become enormously theoretical through this process.

#### **At the expense of what?**

At the expense of the risk that their work at the coalface might have to experience. Although PhD students struggle to survive – they're trying to get funding, they're trying to do this, they're trying to do that – they're also under this kind of protective umbrella, which I think is very make-believe. The other route, which is taking artists straight to the art world, and the hugely competitive thing that it is now and what that entails, and how they battle it out with galleries everywhere, and showing in your bedroom cupboard etc., that's sort of fantastic in a way. But it's also not without its problems, in emphasising the exhibition as a sign that you're alive, 'yeah, I'm alive, I've got a show.' And if you don't have a show you're dead. So both paths for me have huge problems. Just to finish this off without being too boring; the path towards the art world and showing your work and trying to get a job that just tides you over a bit, those artists who are succeeding in that, they are showing they do not want to do teaching jobs. They don't mind visiting, maybe

doing something that's one day a week, but that's not going to pay for anything now. So you've got this huge rift building up, where the only real way that you can survive through teaching now is to do a full-time job. The part-time jobs don't pay.

**Was there a time when you got a different artist coming in to teach, that wouldn't come in now, because of something to do with what you call the industrialisation of education?**

Up to say the mid-1980s, the hierarchies in art schools were very much that there were these older people who were running the departments. They were rock-solid in their jobs and maybe the work had taken a back seat over the years. You could go around to Sheffield, or visit numerous art schools, and you'd find these very reliable, solid characters whom the students would often treat in a very paternalistic kind of way. Yes, they were usually men and what happened with the change in dynamic in art schools through the 1980s, through the whole rise of Thatcherism, the rise of an aggressive art market, is that educationally that whole system was challenged. So in answer to your question; I think the patronage thing went out of the window, because it had fallen foul of itself, it had shot itself in the foot. It was providing people with comfy incomes and stability, but it wasn't doing what it had set out to do originally 20 years earlier, in the 1960s, which was to foster this kind of huge creative resource. It sort of backfired on itself. And maybe there should never have been full-time jobs, maybe the patronage thing should have always been about three-year contracts, or something, so that it could have refuelled and revitalised itself. And the huge scrutiny that art schools are now under, or that education is under with the Research Assessment Exercise, although I think it's dreadful, there is a sense that you've got to be doing something in order to be able to teach it. That sleeping thing, where you had people who were really sleeping through education, who were running departments, but weren't doing any of their own work, has gone. That's been challenged in some way, maybe in the worst possible way. I don't want to sound as if I support the RAE, because I think these things are all cockeyed, but in answer to your question; the people who are visiting now are usually very successful artists that art schools are trying to get in. That wasn't what the visiting programmes were necessarily about so much previously.

Just on what you said about the RAE; would you agree that, as an artist, you need a practice in order to teach?

I think so.

**In what state does the practice have to be in?**

Good point. Very good point. The emphasis on the famous artist, who has zillions of exhibitions to their name, is obviously satisfying students curiosity, and it's important to satisfy that. But there is a whole raft of other artists who are working in all sorts of other ways. I met this artist I have a huge respect for, who's an ex-Goldsmiths student, Liadin Cooke. We just met the other day at The Henry Moore Institute, where she's got a drawing, and this one superb drawing had taken her two years to do. She's been an artist, but not within this kind of massive production way of showing left, right and centre. It's been a quiet, highly contemplative, very serious, intense activity, with a lot of thinking as well. Sometimes the London artist identity takes precedence over maybe many other forms of being an artist, some of which may be about not producing a single thing. And, my God, we should support that.

**While I agree there is a variety of ways of working, we should also acknowledge what kind of condition a practice needs to be in, in order to have a certain kind of vitality and value. And I'm not just talking about some sort of commercial value necessarily ...**

It is a state of being. I would sum it up as that, where there is a deep sense of longing, and there isn't necessarily the product yet for that longing, but it's there and it needs that time and it needs that desire and it needs that process of deep introspection in order for something to then be catalysed. Those people can have a profound and lasting influence on balancing institutions and what goes on in them, but unfortunately at the moment they're a sort of breed that isn't evidenced within art schools. You see, it's not just about the rote production of work. A lot of these things that scrutinise education and judge it don't have a category for that, they don't know how to.

You've put your finger on something else that came up with Mark Godfrey around a question of failure. When he asked you about what you'd do if you could run an art school for a day – one of those kinds of fantastical 'what if' questions – and, to

paraphrase, you talked about acknowledging a certain kind of failure as being an implicit part of a process of working that's not so much acknowledged now.

Failure, and we've got to examine what that word failure means, because I see failure as a very positive thing, not as a negative thing. I see it as a whole process towards finding out about something. That if something doesn't work it carries an enormous amount of information with it. Whether you are then able to go on and make something work, I don't know, but that phrase of 'whether something works or not', is an extraordinary phrase: where does it come from? Does it come from the industrial revolution? Was it about discovering machinery? And the fact that it's the word 'work' that is associated with 'labour', in some way suggests there's a breakage when something doesn't work. I don't think there necessarily is a breakage. I think it's more that something hasn't fulfilled a kind of promise. That isn't necessarily an image in one's head, it can be as much a kind of sense of touch, or a driving towards something that doesn't yet have an image, or a visual identity, and that's what you're striving to discover. So the failure of it is that it hasn't quite happened yet, but I don't know what it should be. And that not-knowing state is often deemed a kind of failure; you must know what you want, you must know what your intentions are, you must know what your aims and objectives are. It's such a harsh, unforgiving language. And yet the not knowing can often be that, as an artist, you're not working necessarily with very vivid visual, cerebral processes. You're actually trying to find those, and that's why you want to make the stuff, or draw the stuff, or paint the stuff. So the failure thing to me is very much associated with that striving for, and that struggle. Two words that I know are very unfashionable. But there is something for me in the striving to find the visual thing that isn't yet in one's head. It just doesn't have a cerebral identity.

Can I read you something? It's part of a statement you made where you say '... teaching reciprocates my activities as an artist, as does my family (I have five children, now grown up). Sculpture for me has been ephemeral and temporary, and dominating my experience has been an experimental approach to making and exhibiting where I have prioritised an interventionist approach of the here and now ...' Looking across your work, there seems to me to be a number of themes that you constantly touch upon; the first, I would say, is the scourge of subject-led work, and maybe that goes back to the



notion of failure. The second is how you got here. There's a certain kind of humility and self-effacement about how you got involved in this whole thing, and at the same time there's a kind of dissent, or scepticism, in your relationship to it. The third is sculpture as a theme, and the fourth is your family. I was just wondering what it all adds up to?

This is not going to answer the question, but I can remember when I did a talk at Goldsmiths, and I then did a talk at Camberwell, they were quite close together. I had had four years out, because of the children, and life had got extremely tough in all sorts of ways economically. When I went back in, I was quite startled by the changes in that brief time that had happened. I left Chelsea in 1978, and then the twins came along and that stopped me from going back into teaching. There were reasons I had to leave in 1978; one child was quite ill recurringly, and it was really becoming a nerve-racking process. So I left, and then the twins came along in 1981, and I then went back to teaching in 1984 at Brighton. By then I had five children, which was like a guilty secret, trying to not let people know this terrible fact of life. But I remember doing this talk at Goldsmiths, and then, when I got the job at Camberwell, it came up again, because I was describing how when the five of them were around it was very difficult to work. So I would go into the studio very late at night, and I actually hadn't got a clue what to make, so I'd turn all the lights off. I've described this many times in slide talks; it was a very, very pivotal moment, when making things not through an image, but through touch, which made me think about this whole issue of where the subject is in the work. Having described that when I did these slide talks, on two occasions students would say to me, 'well, what's more important to you: being a mother, or being an artist?' And I would just have to say being a mother. There was this recoiling in horror from the audience that one could actually say that – prioritise being a mother over being an artist.

**But why were you being asked to make a choice in the first place?**

Exactly. I didn't have the wits to say what you pointed out; it isn't about a choice, the two are actually reciprocal, although an impossible combination, and I wouldn't necessarily recommend it to anyone, because the split is a very cruel schism; they're both intensely creative processes, but they stand in absolute opposition to each other. One is selfish and the other has to be selfless. The mix is not good. But being asked by these students I felt

so put on the spot, and it was like I had to tell the truth under those circumstances. Where you're maybe picking up the dissent is the fact that there was a kind of feeling of inhumanity about the whole role of teaching in an art school, that was rooted in how you portrayed the artist as this ruthless ambitious creature, which of course is true to some extent, in order to survive, and therefore anything else that might soften that was considered a nauseating, or slightly repellent characteristic. Now things are very different. Things have changed in that respect.

**Is subject-led work still a scourge?**

No. The way in which I might want to initiate work is still through trying to find something, trying to find a form, trying to find an image, trying to find how these materials can become articulate and coherent, and that I won't know what the subject is. At the moment I'm just making these endless folded forms and they look very sort of vaginal and lip-like and ear-like, or they look like folded cloth. And I hate that, because the image of them is too dominant. So a journey with them has begun, and I don't quite know where to make this folded form start to become absolutely itself, rather than having these other connotations. And maybe that shape is impossible without those connotations. So they're finding a subject and I'm reneging on the subject that they've found. Another artist would begin with saying, 'well, I want this very kind of inward-looking shape and it's going to be very bodily and it's going to be very visceral.' They would be very confident about placing those qualities at the forefront of the process. There was a time during the 1990s when the image-based, pictorial object was so dominant. That's what I was thinking about when I was talking about subject-led work.

**Can you teach art?**

No, but you can provide an endless process of enquiry and debate and discussion and conversation around it. But can anyone do that? No, I think that there are two things in that question; one is the object itself, and the other is the privilege of meeting the person who's made that object, who then enables you to question the object through them. So, there's this three-party thing; the object becomes a prompt and a prop for understanding that individual's deepest thoughts, and I think that does require a certain kind of knowledge of the histories that that object might promote. Whether it's an

object that's referring very much to the here and now in terms of the galleries, or whether there's a bit of Arte Povera in there, or a bit of Minimalism, a bit of Victorian kitsch. Having that knowledge, you can bring it to the individual and maybe wake them up a bit about those things, or they might already know those things very clearly ... That might have come over as really kind of arrogant; I just want to qualify that. When I'm saying 'that knowledge', I'm not assuming that that individual doesn't have that knowledge as well, but that kind of pooling of knowledges becomes very revealing in how you can then find out about emotional expressions that might be trying to be communicated through this object that's in front of you. If you're going to talk about kitsch, or Victorian figurative art, and this individual says, 'yes, that's exactly what I was referring to', it becomes a point of contact in how one would want to do that now.

#### **And what do you think is your responsibility as a teacher?**

For me, it's to ensure that a student feels they have a working process with which they can leave their BA degree course, in order to set themselves up as the artist of their choice, as the artist they want to be. And are there enough methodologies at their disposal to be able to do that within the economic restrictions that they're going to have to endure. So you're not just promoting them to use polished stainless steel and incredibly expensive materials. You've actually said; 'try this out in all these other ways, so that you can at least begin to realise ideas and thoughts in your heads in a very direct, expedient kind of way.'

#### **And the student's responsibility?**

I've always thought the student's responsibility was to want to do it, quite simply. That was it. It's almost the question you might ask those incoming students: 'do you really want to do this?'

#### **Can I ask you something about the relationship of the school to the world? I'm thinking about this in relation to your commission *Stack* for the Royal Festival Hall ...**

*Stack*, for me, is a bit of a failure. I'm afraid it doesn't completely work; its base is too big and all sorts of things went slightly wrong with it, including having to cut off 60 centimetres at the top, so it doesn't quite go the height. But the location interests me,

this idea of making something that big, which is then almost camouflaged into the Royal Festival Hall. What I'm almost suggesting with that work is that the public space is actually not just about a big glitzy kind of commissioned work. It's about an intervention, it's about drawing attention maybe to qualities of the space that wouldn't necessarily be looked at. Or using a space that's almost an unusable space, like a ship in a bottle, which is what the whole point of *Stack* was. So those kind of things would, I hope, enable me to talk to students in a very open way about the hazards of taking on a really full-on kind of public space like the South Bank, but still having a kind of flexible relationship with it, and trying something out that may not necessarily work, but to not be afraid of that. Several people have said to me that piece doesn't work, and that's fine. I'm glad they've been honest with me, because I don't think it works, and as I say to the students, 'I'd give myself a low 2.2 for that'. I'm very grateful to the South Bank for giving me that opportunity, but it was a hazardous experience. It was a real roller-coaster ride and I slightly lost my nerve with it. Therefore things, just at the last minute, went awry with it, and one has to live with that. You can't ask them to take it down again, so it's tricky. But I hope it provides students with a chance to be critical of their so-called teacher ... if they ever wanted to talk about it, it would provide the context to say 'look this is a public work, and it hasn't completely worked, but it's interesting to have been put in that position; it's not just the protective space of the gallery.'

#### **The more you talk about this, the more I understand that when you talk about failure, you're actually talking about learning ...**

Yes. It's so interesting, because when I was talking to Alison Wilding, about it not working, she said, 'no, it doesn't completely work.' But she said, 'isn't it wonderful that we can still be learning?' And she's absolutely right. I think that's part of the risk, and if I seem sceptical, it's because I don't entirely believe in the degree show system. It's a whole load of other things that are buried in that experience. It's great that they can put on these shows, but the show isn't the thing that's going to count at all, unfortunately it's going to be many other things. It's like being an athlete, isn't it? A fantastic athlete, except they've got this dodgy tendon in their ankle, and getting the athlete who's absolutely completely all-in-one and can run the 100 metres without hamstrings snapping



and everything. The artist always has something. The very good degree show doesn't entirely convince me, because the sort of flaw that that person is going to have to overcome is the thing that's really interesting.

**Why I asked the question in the first place was something that came up around subject-led work, and what you think got lost, or misplaced with the focus on subject-led work. You seemed to suggest that what got lost was an interrogation of context, or a set of relationships between the work and the world, so to speak. And somehow *Stack* made me curious about what kind of relationship you understand the art school should have with the world, and how this exchange should happen. How the world comes into the school and how you take the work to the world ...**

I saw the very dogmatic subject-led art as providing such a lot of equipment for theoretical semiotics, for semiotic language to be used. The object itself was just an equation for verbal language, providing a very fixed context, in which the object would be shown, for example in the white cube. So you got a whole cycle of things happening that were utterly dependent on each another. And then I began to see that the art school system, with the degree show as the culminating glory of that three- to four-year BA, or two-year MA thing, as absolutely reciprocal to that white cube orthodoxy. The object that went into it that would provide the theory, the verbal language, would provide the exchange. So something seemed to be going missing, and it seemed to be this huge territory between the art school and the gallery. Or it seemed to be about the process of thinking, or dreaming, or making, or imagination, trusting – a whole load of words – and the kind of flow chart that would come out of those words just seemed to be vanishing. It's not that I want every artwork to show its process – I don't – but it's as though something of how the artist would come to the position of being able to realise a work was getting less and less recognition, or acknowledgement. It was more the delivery and the end product that was important, and the best way of showing that – which is absolutely true, one can't deny it – is the white cube space. But it's not the only way, and it seems you don't always need a white cube space to do what you've got to do as an artist. It's been like trying to give students the breadth of experience that moves beyond and outside of that, that I think is very important. Which is why something like the challenge of the South Bank was important, because it's the biggest antithesis to a white cube in terms of

space. Not in terms of people – the white cube space can attract huge numbers of people, and the South Bank has huge numbers of people going through it. But they're apparently very different groups of people, so that was the challenge.

**And finally, how's the health of art education in the UK? Is it in robust health?**

Yes, I think it is. The problem is getting the younger artists into the art schools to teach. I know some really fantastic younger artists and they will only visit. They're selling their work, they're kind of making ends meet through some other route. But intellectually and inspirationally and creatively, as people who can discuss work, they're fantastic. But they don't want that commitment, they don't want to be in that institutional framework. That is going to be an increasing problem.

**Phyllida Barlow taught at the Slade School of Fine Art, London and is now retired from teaching.**