The Crit
n the other side of America, at the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts, as it is affectionately known, a very different part of the art world looks for multiple meanings in artworks whose financial worth is—at this moment, anyway—negligible. I’m sitting alone in F200, a windowless classroom with cement walls in which long-life fluorescent lights cast a gray glow. The CalArts building feels like an underground bunker meant to protect those within from the mindless seductions of the Southern California sun. I survey the thin brown carpet, forty chairs, four tables, two chalkboards, and lone jumbo beanbag, trying to imagine how great artists get made in this airless institutional space.

At precisely 10 A.M., Michael Asher enters. He has a stoop and a bowlegged gait. Asher is the longtime teacher of the legendary crit class that takes place in this room. (A “crit” is a seminar in which student-artists present their work for collective critique.) Ascetic and otherworldly, Asher comes across as a monk in street clothes. He peers at me through his dark-rimmed glasses with greatly magnified eyes and neutral curiosity. He has given me
permission to audit today's class, but I'm forbidden to speak, because to do so would disturb "the chemistry."

The classroom reminds me of an Asher installation. At the 1976 Venice Biennale, Asher filled a corner of the Italian Pavilion with twenty-two folding chairs. He wanted the space to be a "functional" lounge where "visitors communicate with each other on a social level." The chairs were dispersed at the end of the exhibition and the work was documented with a few obligatory black-and-white photographs.

Until recently I had not seen an Asher piece in the flesh. In fact, most of his students have never seen his work, and Asher's "situational interventions" (as he calls them) or "institutional critiques" (as others label them) are often invisible. One of Asher's signature works consisted of removing the gallery wall that divided the office from the exhibition space, thereby focusing attention on the moneymaking business behind "priceless" art. That exhibition took place at Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles in 1974, but people still talk about it. In another piece, considered quintessentially Asher, the artist made a catalogue listing all the art that had been "deaccessioned" from, or removed from the permanent collection of, the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Although it was on view in the 1999 MoMA exhibition "The Museum as Muse," word of mouth subsequently emphasized the fact that the catalogue was kept behind the counter of the gift shop and was available for free to those in the know.

Asher has no dealer; his work is not generally for sale. When I asked the artist during an interview on another occasion whether he resists the art market, he said dryly, "I don't avoid commodity forms. In 1966 I made these plastic bubbles. They were shaped like paint blisters that came an inch off the wall. I sold one of those."

Although Asher has a steady museum career, the real importance of his art lies in the way it has inspired a dynamic oral culture. His work lives on in anecdotes recounted from one artist to the next. The visual documentation of his ephemeral art is rarely very stimulating, and because his works have no title (they are not "Untitled" but actually have no name whatsoever), they can't be invoked quickly and easily. They demand verbal description. Not surprisingly, Asher's overriding artistic goal has always been, in his words, "to animate debate."

Asher has been running this crit class since 1974. Artists with international reputations, like Sam Durant, Dave Muller, Stephen Prina, and Christopher Williams, describe it as one of the most memorable and formative experiences of their art education. The lore around the class is such that incoming students are often desperate to have the once-in-a-lifetime experience. As one student told me, they "arrive with pre-nostalgia."

The three students who will be presenting their work on this last day of the term trudge into F200, carrying grocery bags. They're all between twenty-eight and thirty years old and in the second year of the master of fine arts (MFA) program. As Josh, wearing a beard, baseball cap, and jeans, unpacks his large black portfolio, Hobbs, a slim tomboy in a pink T-shirt and jeans, claims a seat and rearranges some chairs. Fiona, who evokes the ghost of Frida Kahlo in a long green skirt with a red hibiscus flower in her hair, starts laying out extra-large containers of Safeway's generic cola, chocolate chip cookies and mini-muffins, and grapes. The people "being critted" provide the snacks. It's an acknowledged peace offering to their peers.

Since the 1960s, MFA degrees have become the first legitimateator in an artist's career, followed by awards and residencies, representation by a primary dealer, reviews and features in art
magazines, inclusion in prestigious private collections, museum validation in the form of solo or group shows, international exposure at well-attended biennials, and the appreciation signaled by strong resale interest at auction. More specifically, MFA degrees from name art schools have become passports of sorts. Look over the résumés of the artists under fifty in any major international museum exhibition and you will find that most of them boast an MFA from one of a couple of dozen highly selective schools.

Many people think that the extraordinary vibrancy of the L.A. artistic community results from the presence of so many top-ranking schools. Outstanding programs at CalArts, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Art Center, the University of Southern California, and Otis College of Art attract artists who then never leave the area. The schools, combined with relatively cheap rents, the warm climate, and the liberating distance from the dominant art market in New York, foster an environment where artists can afford to take risks. Significantly, in L.A., teaching does not stigmatize an artist's career in the way it does elsewhere. In fact, many L.A. artists see teaching as a part of their “practice,” and a full-time contract is not just a money-earner but a credibility-enhancer.

A number of students flood the room and a wave of greetings follows. No one arrives empty-handed. One student holds a laptop, another a sleeping bag; a third clutches a Tempur-Pedic pillow.

People remember what they say much more than what they hear. In some MFA programs, a crit consists of five experts telling a student what they think about his or her work. In crits at the L.A. art schools, students do most of the talking while instructors bear witness. Group critiques offer a unique—some say “utopian”—situation in which everyone focuses on the student's work with a mandate to understand it as deeply as possible. Crits can also be painful rituals that resemble cross-examinations in which artists are forced to rationalize their work and defend themselves from a flurry of half-baked opinions that leave them feeling torn apart. Either way, crits offer a striking contrast to the five-second glance and shallow dollar values ascribed to works at auctions and fairs. Indeed, crits are not normally considered art world events, but I think that the dynamics in this room are vital to understanding the way the art world works.

A black terrier trots into the classroom with his pale-faced owner in tow. He is followed by a white husky who bounds in, tail swishing, and stops for a long slobbery lick of my toes. "Dogs are allowed in crit class as long as they are quiet," explains a student. "I have a French bulldog, but she snores, so I can't bring her to class. Virgil—he'll be here today—occasionally makes loud noises. He voices our frustration when the class gets tedious. Dogs are emotional sponges. They're attuned to the mood."

Josh has hung two large, well-crafted pencil drawings on the wall. They're executed in the style of Sam Durant, one of the higher-profile artists on staff at CalArts. One picture is a self-portrait next to someone who looks like an African chief or a black rabbi in a prayer shawl. Josh has inserted himself into the frame in a manner reminiscent of Woody Allen's chameleon Zelig character, who repeatedly pops up in famous documentary footage.

At 10:25 A.M. everyone is seated. Michael Asher, legs crossed, clipboard in hand, emits an odd grunt and nods in Josh's direction. The student starts: "Hello, people," he says, and then takes an almost interminable pause. "Well, I guess most of you know that I've had some shit goin' on . . . Some family stuff happened the first week of semester and I only came out of my funk about
two weeks ago. So ... I'm just going to workshop some ideas that have been going through my head ..."

Asher sits motionless, with a poker face. Students stare impassively into space, swirling their coffee, their legs dangling over the arms of chairs. A guy with stained fingernails keeps looking up and down from his sketchpad. He's using the crit as an opportunity to do a little life drawing—a subject that has never been on the Art School curriculum at CalArts. (Tellingly, they teach it over in the animation department.) Two women are knitting. One sits upright, working on a beige scarf. The other sits cross-legged on the floor, with a stack of green and yellow wool squares to her left, an eye-catching vintage suitcase to her right. "A patchwork quilt," she explains, and then, keen to clarify, she adds, "It's just a hobby. Not a work."

Each student has set up camp, staked out some territory, and distinguished him- or herself with a pet, a pose, or a signature activity. Even if crits are performances, the students seem not to be acting but searching for authentic self-expression. Many have put down more money than they have ever had. Tuition alone is $27,000 a year; even with the help of government grants, teaching-assistant positions, and other part-time jobs, some students find themselves nearly $50,000 in debt after completing the two-year program. In more senses than one, it costs a lot to be an artist.

Twenty-four students—half male, half female—are sprawled around the room. A latecomer in a business suit and hair gel saunters in. He offers a shocking contrast to the jeans and sweat-shirts that are the male norm. He's from Athens, apparently. Hot on his heels is a blond guy in a lumberjack shirt, looking like the Hollywood version of a farmhand. He stands at the front of the class, examines the drawings, drifts to the back, surveys the room, puts his knapsack on a chair. He then moseys over to the food table, where he kneels to pour himself an orange juice. He's Asher's TA, or teaching assistant. His emphatically casual behavior is a mark of Asher's tolerance. Two more men park themselves at the food table. They graze but do not talk. The room is full of activity, but there is no whispering or note-passing. Asher maintains that his crit has no rules except that students have to "listen to and respect each other." Nonetheless, a chimp could sense the enduring layers of convention.

Josh is sitting forward with his elbows resting heavily on his knees, stroking his beard with one hand and hugging his chest with the other. "I was doing work on race and identity in my undergrad, then I went to Israel and had the same feeling of displacement ... " He sighs. "I think I'm gonna call the work I'm doin' now 'Anthro-Apology.' I've been researchin' African Jewry and their different ancestral stories. I've also been writing myself into the traditions of non-Jewish tribes. There's a Nigerian tribe who drink palm wine out of horns and lose consciousness. I put myself in the story. It was like trying to fit a circle into a square." Josh emits another long sigh. A dog collar jingles lightly as one of the mutts has a halfhearted scratch. "I identify with hip-hop culture rather than klezmer culture," Josh says with a glum chuckle. He started loose, but now he is unraveling. "Sorry, I am doing this badly. I don't really know why I am here."

A high proportion of students are looking at their feet. Asher clears his throat and leans toward Josh but says nothing. The knitters' needles slow down, and the room comes to a standstill. Silence. Finally a woman's voice cuts through the air. "I'm so conscious of the fact that Jews are totally uncool. Where do we see Jewish art? At the Skirball Cultural Center, not MOCA or the Hammer Museum," she says emphatically. "And why do
so many white kids want to be symbolically black? I think it is because they can displace their frustrations and validate them somehow. They can speak with the critical voice of the underdog... Maybe you could tell us more about how you displace your dislocation onto Africans?"

Falling apart in a crit is not as shameful as one might expect. Intellectual breakdown is an essential component of CalArts pedagogy, or at least an expected part of the MFA student experience. Leslie Dick, the only writer with a full-time position among the artists of the art department, tells her students, "Why come to grad school? It's about paying a lot of money so you can change. Whatever you thought was certain about how to make art is dismantled. You wobble. You don't make any sense at all. That's why you are here." Yesterday Leslie and I had coffee on the terrace outside the cafeteria next to the desert pines and eucalyptus trees that surround CalArts. She was wearing a no-nonsense white shirt hanging loose over an Agnès B skirt, and no makeup except for some plum lipstick. She admitted that faculty members can be complacent about the pain of the situation, as they've seen it happen so many times. "Everything goes to pieces in the first year and it comes together in the second year. Often the people who are making sense are the ones for whom it hasn't started working yet. They've still got all their defenses up. Sometimes the person is simply uneducable and there is nothing you can do."

During my stay in Los Angeles, I asked all sorts of people, What is an artist? It's an irritatingly basic question, but reactions were so aggressive that I came to the conclusion that I must be violating some taboo. When I asked the students, they looked completely shocked. "That's not fair!" said one. "You can't ask that!" said another. An artist with a senior position in a university art department accused me of being "stupid," and a major curator said, "Ugh. All your questions are only answerable in a way that is almost tautological. I mean, for me, an artist is someone who makes art. It's circular. You tend to know one when you see one!"

Leslie Dick couldn't believe that anyone had taken offense. "The work you do as an artist is really play, but it is play in the most serious sense," she said. "Like when a two-year-old discovers how to make a tower out of blocks. It is no halfhearted thing. You are materializing—taking something from the inside and putting it out into the world so you can be relieved of it."

Twelve forty-five P.M. The crit class discussion has been meandering for over two hours. About half the students have spoken, but Asher hasn't said a word, and no one has discussed Josh's drawings directly. Although the talk is intelligent, it is difficult to feel fully engaged. I have clearly parachuted into the middle of a very abstract and often inchoate ongoing debate. Many of the comments are rambling affairs, and it is impossible not to drift off into one's own thoughts.

A few days ago, I drove out to Santa Monica to see John Baldessari, the gregarious guru of the Southern California art scene. Baldessari is six-foot-seven, a giant of a man with wild hair and a white beard. I once heard him referred to as "Sasquatch Santa," but he makes me think of God—a hippie version of Michelangelo's representation of the grand old man in the Sistine Chapel. Baldessari set up the Post-Studio crit class in 1970, the year that CalArts opened, and has continued to teach despite a lucrative international career. Although he was hired by CalArts as a painter, he was already exploring conceptual art in other media. As we sat, with our feet up, and drank ice water in the shade of an umbrella in his backyard, he explained that he didn't want to call
his crit “Conceptual Art” because it sounded too narrow, whereas “Post-Studio Art” had the benefit of embracing everybody who didn’t make traditional art. “A few painters drifted over, but mainly I got all the students who weren’t painting. Allan Kaprow [the performance artist] was assistant dean. In those first years, it was him and me versus the painting staff.”

Baldessari has mentored countless artists, and although he now teaches at UCLA, he is still seen to embody the think-tank model that exists in one of its purest forms at CalArts, even if it has spread all over the United States. One of his mottos is “Art comes out of failure,” and he tells students, “You have to try things out. You can’t sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying, ‘I won’t do anything until I do a masterpiece.’” When I asked how he knows when he’s conducted a great crit class, he leaned back and eventually shook his head. “You don’t know,” he said. “Quite often when I thought I was brilliant, I wasn’t. Then when I was really teaching, I wasn’t aware of it. You never know what students will pick up on.” Baldessari believes that the most important function of art education is to demystify artists: “Students need to see that art is made by human beings just like them.”

At 1:15 P.M. we’re in a definite lull, and Asher speaks his first words. With his eyes closed and hands tightly clasped in his lap, he says, “Pardon me.” The students raise their heads. I sit in anticipation, expecting a short lecture. A straight-talking moment. Or a lightning epiphany. But no. Asher looks up at Josh’s drawing, and true to his minimal art about absence, he says, “Why didn’t you enter the project through language or music?”

One of the early mantras of CalArts was “No technique before need.” It used to be said that some art colleges instructed their students only “up to the wrist” (in other words, they focused on craftsmanship) while CalArts educated its artists only “down to the wrist” (its concentration on the cerebral was such that it neglected the fine art of the hand). Today at CalArts the faculty is diverse—“We all contradict each other,” says Leslie Dick—but the prevailing belief is that any artist whose work fails to display some conceptual rigor is little more than a pretender, illustrator, or designer.

Following Asher’s question, there is a conversation about the concept of drawing. At 1:30 P.M., Josh peels an orange. Someone’s stomach grumbles. Asher vaguely raises a finger. “What do you want, Josh? Put the group to work.” Josh looks exhausted and dejected. He reluctantly pushes an orange segment into his mouth; then his face brightens. “I guess I’m wondering about the viability of political activism in my work.” Asher responds. “I won’t do anything until I do a masterpiece.’’ When I asked how he knows when he’s conducted a great crit class, he leaned back and eventually shook his head. “You don’t know,” he said. “Quite often when I thought I was brilliant, I wasn’t. Then when I was really teaching, I wasn’t aware of it. You never know what students will pick up on.” Baldessari believes that the most important function of art education is to demystify artists: “Students need to see that art is made by human beings just like them.”

Crits may be opportunities to hash out communal meanings, but that doesn’t mean that students finish the semester with uniform values. The character of Asher’s crit varies from week to week (and from one semester to the next), because each artist sets the agenda for his or her own session. This tendency is no
doubt enhanced by the way Asher effaces his authorship: "Ulti­
mately, Post-Studio is the students' class, not mine."

Group crits are such an established part of the curriculum
in the United States, and to a lesser extent in Europe and else­
where, that only a few teachers reject them. Dave Hickey, an art
critic who describes his pedagogic style as "Uncle Buck—Hey,
smoke this," is one of the few. "My one rule," he says in his free­
wheeling southwestern drawl, "is that I do not do group crits.
They are social occasions that reinforce the norm. They impose a
standardized discourse. They privilege unfinished, incompetent
art." He tells his students, "If you're not sick, don't call the doc­
tor." Hickey is not alone in thinking that there is undue pres­
sure on artists to verbalize. Many believe that artists shouldn't be
obliged to explain their work. As Hickey declares, "I don't care
about an artist's intentions. I care if the work looks like it might
have some consequences."

It is curious that a form of oral exam has become the chief
means of testing visual work. Mary Kelly, a feminist conceptu­
alist who has taught at a range of institutions, including Gold­
smiths (University of London), CalArts, and UCLA for more
than forty years, thinks it's fine for artists to have crits where
they give an account of their intentions, but it shouldn't be the
only way. Kelly wears her hair swept back in an odd 1940s pom­
padour that one writer assumed must be her "auxiliary brain." She
initially comes across as a stern headmistress, but during our
interview, which took place in her kitchen over homemade soup,
I encountered a soft-spoken, maternal intellectual. At CalArts in
the mid-eighties and now at UCLA, Kelly hosts an alternative
group critique where the only person who is not allowed to speak
is the presenting artist.

Kelly tells her students, "Never go to the wall text. Never ask
the artist. Learn to read the work." In her view, works of art pro­
duce arguments, so "when you ask an artist to explain it in words,
it is just a parallel discourse." Moreover, artists often don't fully
understand what they've made, so other people's readings can
help them "see at a conscious level" what they have done. Kelly
believes in preparing to view the work properly: "It is a bit like
yoga. You must empty your mind and be receptive. It's about
being open to the possibility of what you could know." Once
everyone is in the right frame of mind, the class starts with the
phenomenological, then moves on to deciphering the "concrete
signifying material of the text." You tend to "read things very
quickly by their transgression of codes," says Kelly. The most cru­
cial question is when to stop, so she asks, "Is this in the text? Or
is this what you are bringing to it?" She stops the interpretation
at the point when she thinks "we might be going too far."

As an exercise in refining the work's communicative connota­
tions, Kelly's crit method would seem to be exemplary, but most
crits espouse a more complex mix of goals. In the context of
an expanded market for concept-based work, the integrity and
accountability of artists are as important as the specific aesthet­
ics of their work. William E. Jones, a filmmaker who studied with
Asher and then taught the course on two occasions when Asher
was on leave, is a staunch defender of crits that interrogate the
artist about his or her intentions. He feels they prepare students
for a professional career because "negotiating interviews, con­
versations with critics, press releases, catalogues, and wall texts
are part of the responsibility of the artist." When artists are put
on the spot, Jones feels, it helps them "develop thick skins and
come to see criticism as rhetoric rather than personal attack."
Finally, art students need to understand their motivations deeply,
because in grad school it's imperative to discover which parts of
their practice are expendable. As Jones explains, "You have to find something that is true to yourself as a person—some nonnegotiable core that will get you through a forty-year artistic practice."

Howard Singerman, the author of a compelling history of art education in America called *Art Subjects*, argues that the most important thing that students learn at art school is "how to be an artist, how to occupy that name, how to embody that occupation." Even though many students don't feel 100 percent comfortable calling themselves "an artist" upon graduation—they often need the further endorsement of a dealer, museum show, or teaching job—in many countries the roots of that social identity lie in the semipublic ground of the crit.

**2:00 P.M.** A long silence. Josh is looking at his hands. Laughter tumbles distantly along the hall. Next to me, a petite woman with mousy brown hair has made a double-page spread of inky doodle hearts. A clean-shaven chap stares at his mute laptop, discreetly scrolling through e-mails downloaded from the room's one Ethernet connection. At the back of the class, a guy and a girl lean against the wall, looking at each other.

"Let's think about winding this down now," says Asher. "Josh, do you have any thoughts?"

"I really appreciated everyone's comments," Josh says lightly. "I'd like to see you all for individual meetings next week. Please sign up on my office door," he jokes. Josh looks better than he has all day. He has survived the ordeal. There were moments when his crit might have turned into a group therapy session, but the cool discipline of his fellow students kept the conversation in check.

"Class to resume at three o'clock," says Asher.

The exodus is smooth. We're all desperate for fresh air. Hobbs, one of the three students set to present work today, offers me a lift to Whole Foods Market, where the students customarily pick up their lunch. Four students and I squeeze into her beat-up Honda. In the middle of the back seat, I listen to the ping-pong of their dialogue. First they have a debate about one of the most vocal men in the class. "He's so arrogant and patronizing," says one of the women. "When he says, 'I don't understand,' he really means, 'You are an idiot, you're not making any sense.' And why does every observation he makes have to begin with a position statement and end with a list of recommended reading?"

"I think he's great," counters one of the men. "He's very entertaining. We'd go to sleep without him."

"He's overinstitutionalized, domineeringly PC, and macho, all at the same time," intercedes a third student, who then turns to me and declares with glee, "He got ripped to shreds when he had his crit."

Then they talk about Asher. "He certainly gives you enough rope to hang yourself," says one.

"Michael is so minimal and abstract that sometimes I think he might dematerialize before our very eyes," quips another.

"You gotta love him," says a third. "He's seriously good-willed, but he's also lost in a world of his own calculations. He should wear a lab coat."

We drive past bland houses with two- and three-car garages, green lawns, and deciduous trees that defy the desert landscape. Apparently these Valencia neighborhoods inspired CalArts alumnus Tim Burton's vision of suburban hell in the film *Edward Scissorhands*.

What do the students want to do when they finish their MFA?
"I came to grad school because I want to teach at college level. I was an installer in a gallery, but I'm interested in ideas. I think my work will be better as a result of teaching," says the fellow to my left.

"My work is going to fly off the shelves. It is not de rigueur to create commodities, but it is part of my work to create this fantasy economy which overtly tries to sell things," says the male student in the front seat.

"What to do when finished? That's the big question. Go back to Australia and drink. I don't want to teach. I'd rather waitress," muses Hobbs as she takes a left into the parking lot of the grocery store.

"MFA stands for yet another Mother-Fucking Artist," says the girl to my right as we climb out of the car. "I will just try to graduate as preposterously as possible. One year twins received their diplomas while riding matching white horses. Another year a student walked up onstage with a mariachi band. But my favorite story is when a male student locked the dean in a full kiss on the lips."

Whole Foods Market is an emporium of fresh smells and vanguard taste tests. As I load up with guacamole and black beans at the create-your-own-burrito bar, I think about how difficult it is to be an art student looking into the abyss of graduation. Two or three of the lucky ones will find dealer or curator support at their degree shows, but the vast majority will find no immediate ratification. For months many of them will be out of a job. Mary Kelly used to think it was depressing that so few students could sustain themselves as full-time artists, but then she realized "it is not sad at all. I believe in education for its own sake, because it is deeply humanizing. It is about being a fulfilled human being."

Faculty members may understand that the value of art education goes beyond the creation of "successful" artists, but students are uncertain. Although CalArts students distance themselves from UCLA students, who they say "have dollar signs in their eyes," they don't want to languish in obscurity. Hirsch Perlman is a sculptor-photographer who has known market highs as well as many difficult years of enduring the relative poverty of part-time teaching. Now a full-time professor at UCLA, he still talks like an outsider. As he sees it, "The art market simmers underneath all of these schools. Every student thinks that he can jumpstart his career by being in one of these programs. But nine out of ten times the student is in for a big surprise, and nobody wants to talk about it. Whenever I open up the conversation to that aspect of the art world, you can see how hungry the students are. They are dying to know."

Most art schools turn a blind eye to the art market, but CalArts seems to turn its back. Some faculty members are pragmatic; they think students need to develop artistic projects that are independent of the fickle swings of the marketplace. Others occupy a left-wing position that believes the neo-avant-garde should subvert the commerce of art. Steven Lavine has been the president of CalArts since 1988. A bespectacled diplomat who talks about the school like a proud parent, Lavine says that "everybody talks a pretty good left game," but he doesn't know how far left CalArts really is. "We've all made our compromises with the world, so center-left is all we can compliment ourselves with." President Lavine embodies the distinctly high-minded and down-to-earth attitude that typifies CalArts. "We're idealistic. We don't prepare students to do jobs that already exist. Our mission is to help every student develop a voice of his or her own," he explains. "There is a soul to every great institution, and you go wrong if you betray that. At CalArts, people want to make work
that has a relationship to what is under discussion rather than what is hot for sale at the moment."

Back on campus, Hobbs and I walk over to the second-year grad studios—two rows of small industrial units facing a sidewalk that student graffiti has transformed into a "Walk of Fame." Gold stars inscribed with the names of current postgraduates refer to the famous strip on Hollywood Boulevard and to the otherwise unmentionable problem: artists need to make a name for themselves. Hovering over the stars like halo afterthoughts are black spray-painted Mickey Mouse ears that deflate the self-aggrandizement and pay mock homage to CalArts' unlikely founder, Walt Disney.

Hollywood affects the horizons of the L.A. art world in subtle ways. After graduation, artists who don't support themselves through sales or teaching can work in the ancillary industries of costumes, set design, and animation. Sometimes the communities of artists and actors overlap. Ed Ruscha, who admits that "art is show business," used to date the model Lauren Hutton. Actors like Dennis Hopper, who is also a photographer and collector, or artists like CalArts graduate Jeremy Blake, who made abstract digital works for Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Punch-Drunk Love,* move between the worlds. Here on campus, however, one feels if a restrained outburst or cool tantrum has taken place here. It's not grandiose or heroic but private and insistent. You can feel Fiona's diminutive height and the lonely hours. And on one of the canvases, you can almost make out the word "learning."

Back in subterranean F200, the students sit in a different configuration from this morning. It's 3:15 p.m. and Fiona, with a hibiscus flower still tucked behind her ear, has chosen to sit behind a table. One of the knitters has abandoned her needles and lies on her stomach, chin in hands, looking at her intently, while a guy lies on his back with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Fiona is setting out the parameters of the discussion. "I have a schizophrenic practice. I do dry sociopolitical work, but I always have, and always will, paint. I like the process. All the decisions that I made while making the *Painting Room* were formal. I didn't want to work 'critically,'" she says, sweetly but defiantly, as she pulls in her chair and straightens her skirt. "There's a shower down by the workshop," she adds. The cube is twelve by twelve feet, with dirty white walls and a cement floor, but it has twelve-foot-high ceilings and north-facing skylights, which give the workspace some dignity.

A few doors down and across the walk, the class is viewing the installation in Fiona's studio called *Painting Room II,* which will be the subject of this afternoon's discussion. Paint flies beyond the edges of four canvases onto the wall and floor. Pale scribbles evoke the work of Cy Twombly, while the paint on the floor recalls Jackson Pollock's drip method. The writing desk in the corner and the hard-to-pinpoint femininity of the space suggest Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own.* Ironically, given the name of the crit class (Post-Studio Art), the installation is a forceful reassertion of the importance—even the romance—of the studio. It feels as if a restrained outburst or cool tantrum has taken place here. It's not grandiose or heroic but private and insistent. You can feel Fiona's diminutive height and the lonely hours. And on one of the canvases, you can almost make out the word *learning.*
expressionism. I wanted to revisit abstraction and explore the poetics of space with my own hand.”

Shortly after Fiona’s introduction, a woman who is sitting on the floor and wearing her flip-flops on her hands says, “I find it interesting the length to which you conceptualize your work. A painting room requires a lot of justification in this class.” Her comment lingers until Asher says, “You see institutional limits? It would be good to be specific.” The woman, not a talker, fumbles for the right words, eventually spitting out something about the “ideological biases of CalArts.”

A few days ago, a handful of students were loitering in the makeshift living room of the art department, a wide point in the hallway outside the dean’s office where a couch and a coffee table lend the feeling of an outpatients’ waiting room. There I took the opportunity to probe the jargon I’d heard on campus. Criticality was at the top of my list. “It shouldn’t be confused with being harsh or hostile, because you can be unthinkingly negative,” said a young photographer slumped on the couch. “It’s a deep inquiry so as to expose a dialectic,” explained an MFA student keen on doing a PhD. “If you’re on autopilot, you’re not critical,” said a performance artist, with a nod from her boyfriend. During our conversation, an African-American man of about sixty emerged from one of the offices. He turned out to be the conceptual artist Charles Gaines. The students flagged him over to pose the question on my behalf. “Criticality is a strategy for the production of knowledge,” he said plainly. “Our view is that art should interrogate the social and cultural ideas of its time. Other places might want a work to produce pleasure or feelings.” Of course! Conceptualism arose in the 1960s in part as a reaction to abstract expressionism. Criticality is the code word for a model of art-making that foregrounds research and analysis rather than instincts and intuition.

After Gaines took his leave, I explored another word: creativity. The students wrinkled their noses in disgust. “Creative is definitely a dirty word,” sneered one of them. “You would not want to say it in Post-Studio. People would gag! It’s almost as embarrassing as beautiful or sublime or masterpiece.” For these students, creativity was a “lovey-dovey cliché used by people who are not professionally involved with art.” It was an “essentialist” notion related to that false hero called a genius.

Perhaps creativity is not on the agenda at art school because being creative is tacitly considered the unteachable core of being an artist? Asher believes that the “decisions that go into making a work are often social,” but he’s in a minority. Most artist-teachers believe that creativity is a very personal process that cannot be taught. As a result, students are expected to have it when they arrive, so creativity is an issue only when it comes to admissions. President Lavine says, “We hunt for students who have some spark of originality. It might seem like eccentricity or cussedness, but we want students who are in some way on edge with their world.” Paradoxically, many art educators see artists as autodidacts, and high academic achievement can be a contraindicator. As Thomas Lawson, dean of the School of Art here for over a decade, told me, “We are looking for the kind of kids who didn’t quite fit in at high school.”

Lawson’s office is one of the few rooms on this floor that is graced with a shaft of natural light. A marked contrast to Asher, Lawson is a Scottish painter with a firm belief in the visual. He’s an eloquent speaker and a prolific writer who contributes to Artforum and coedits a journal called Afterall. Lawson is a tall, self-
effacing man with thoughtful hazel eyes. When asked the reckless question, What is an artist? he said, with seasoned patience in his lilting accent, "It's not necessarily someone who sells a bunch of objects through a fancy gallery. An artist thinks about culture through visual means. Sometimes it's thinking about culture through any means possible, but it's rooted in the visual. When I was here in the late eighties as a visiting artist, there was an alarming tendency to graduate MFAs with great praise when they were doing no visible work. As they say in the movie industry, ideas are a dime a dozen. You've got to put it into some sort of form. So when I came here as dean, part of my mission was to reinvest the visual."

Nowadays at CalArts there are painters on staff but no "painting staff" per se, and the school has developed a reputation for being inhospitable to practitioners of the medium. Lawson admits, "The beef against us is that we are not an emotional painterly type of school. That's true. But we have a system that is open and intelligent, and as a group we value intelligence. So you can do anything you want, if you can defend it." However, when pressed about the fate of the taciturn painter, Lawson confessed, "I'm a painter and I know that painting is not about talking. The issues of skill and mistake are very close. You can do things that to some eyes look horrible and to others look brilliant. It's very curious—and difficult to defend." Ironically, some of CalArts' highest-profile graduates are painters: Eric Fischl, David Salle, Ross Bleckner, and, more recently, Laura Owens, Ingrid Calame, and Monique Prieto. Their success is likely to be the result of the market's rapacious appetite for the two-dimensional, easily domesticated medium.

6:20 P.M. The conversation isn't going in circles as much as spiraling amorphously. Five guys are milling about restlessly at the back. Two of them shift their weight from foot to foot with their arms crossed, while the other three actually pace back and forth with slow, silent steps. One man is seated with his back to Fiona, while another is conspicuously reading the LA Weekly. In most crit classes, the prohibition against passing explicit value judgments is absolute, yet people's reactions can be read from their bodies.

A good artist and a good student are by no means the same thing. Art students have a reputation for acting out. Recruited for their rebelliousness, for their portfolios that are off the wall, they can be tricky for the institution to handle.

Occasionally the relationship between teacher—role model and student-artist becomes dangerously twisted. In a UCLA crit class, a student wearing a dark suit and red tie stood up in front of the class, pulled a gun out of his pocket, loaded a silver bullet, spun the chamber, pointed the gun at his own head, cocked it, and pulled the trigger. The gun just clicked. The student fled from the room, and several gunshots were heard outside. When he returned to the classroom without the gun, his classmates were surprised to see him alive, and the crit staggered on with a tearful group discussion.

The incident was a misguided homage to—or parody of—a historic artwork by a professor in the department. Back in 1971, artist Chris Burden carried out one of the most notorious performances in L.A. art history. In a piece called Shoot, he had himself shot in the upper arm by a friend with a rifle in front of an invited audience at a private gallery in Orange County. The work was one of seventy-six performances that explored the
limits of physical endurance and stretched people's conception of art.

Although Burden was not running that particular crit, the perverse copycat quality of the student's performance was apparent to everyone at UCLA. When Burden heard about the incident, he thought, "Uh-oh. This is not good." His position was simple: "The kid should have been expelled on the spot. The student violated about five rules in the university code of conduct. But the dean of student affairs was confused and did nothing. She thought that it was all theater."

"The name 'performance art' is a misnomer," Burden told me. "It is the opposite of theater. In Europe they call it 'action art.' When a performance artist says that he or she is doing something, the predominant feeling is that he or she is actually going to do it." After twenty-six years of teaching, the artist-professor resigned. He told the dean, "I do not want to be part of this insanity. Thank God that student didn't blow his brains out, because if he had, you would be on the carpet big-time." Burden distrusts institutions, because they lack accountability and hide behind bureaucratic ways of thinking. "To be a good artist in the long term, you need to trust your own intuition and instincts," he said. "Whereas academia is based on rational group-think. There is a magic and an alchemy to art, but academics are always suspicious of the guy who stirs the big black pot."

Asher looks at his watch. It's 7:01 P.M. I've sunk into Post-Studio's parallel universe of daydreams. The crit is about "being here" and letting your mind flow. Class numbers are ebbing. Twenty students remain, from an earlier high of twenty-eight. People move slowly so as not to be disruptive. The only time people walk out quickly is when, phone vibrating, they leave the room to take a call. When they return, they tiptoe through the debris, the scattered chairs, the sprawled legs, the sleeping dogs.

At 7:10 P.M., after a long silence, Asher stands up and waits. When no one says anything, he asks, "Do we need dinner tonight?" To which a student replies, "Are you cooking?"

We take a break so that pizzas can be ordered. The women put their refuse in the trash as they exit from the room. The men, without exception, leave theirs. I walk through the hallways of the CalArts compound, down to the creepy graffiti-lined corridors of the basement, up the extra-wide stairwell, past the closed cafeteria, up to the exhibition areas. The sounds of a jazzy Latin-experimental ensemble waft through the building. I stroll out the front door into the pitch-black night, only to find Fiona drinking tequila and orange out of a bashed-up Calistoga Springs water bottle.

What was that like for you? I ask.

"I don't know," she says with bewilderment. "You go in and out of consciousness. When so many people open up your work, they say things that you never imagined, and you start to feel baffled."

The lawn sprinklers suddenly switch on. Through the spray, we can hear the hum of huge trucks hurtling along Interstate 5, the highway that extends the full length of the West Coast from Canada to Mexico.

"To get the most out of your crit," Fiona continues, "you have to have a mysterious blend of complete commitment to your decisions and total openness to reconsider everything. There is no point in being too brazen."

Fiona and I deeply inhale the cold desert air. "I wanted to do something different," she adds. "Students make work just
because it stands up well in critiques, but outside the classroom it is often inconsequential."

We go back underground to attend the third part of the crit. Six boxes emblazoned with the words HOT DELICIOUS PIZZA have arrived, and there are only a few slices left. A guy comes over to Fiona and says, "I've never heard Michael speak so much." This is meant as both the highest praise and an act of reassurance. The comment amuses me, because Asher had uttered relatively little.

At 8:15 P.M., Asher looks toward Hobbs and asks, "Are you ready?"

Three medium-sized color photographs are pinned to the wall behind her. One depicts a horse standing by a tree. Another shows a couple of cowboy figures facing off as if they are about to duel. The third portrays a stuntman falling back onto a mattress in the middle of a rugged desert. Hobbs puts three issues on the agenda: photography, the western genre, and the absurd. Only her flushed face reveals evidence of nerves. She discusses the camera as a "violent tool" in the context of "visual pleasure and narrative cinema." Then she delivers the heartfelt confession, "Thomas Mann said that all women are misogynists. I can identify that conflict within myself. I get pleasure from stereotypes even when I know they are wrong." Finally, she talks about the importance of humor in her work: "It's corporeal and crass—that's the language I trust most."

There are thirty-four people in the room—the highest number all day. Some boyfriends and girlfriends of enrolled students have come along for an evening out. The dog population has also increased and diversified to embrace a full range of colors from deep black through splotchy chocolate and golden brown to dirty white. All six are chomping on biscuits distributed by the patchwork-quilt knitter. The arrangement of bodies has again shifted. Several students are doing difficult balancing acts with feet up on multiple chairs. Many are sharing pillows and blankets.

Successful crits can become the basis of lifelong interpretive communities or artist subcultures. Word has it that Sarah Lucas, Gary Hume, Damien Hirst, and other artists later christened "YBAs" (Young British Artists) forged their alliances in a crit class run by Michael Craig-Martin at Goldsmiths. Arguably the equivalent of CalArts in the U.K., Goldsmiths was for many years the only British art school to amalgamate its painting, sculpture, photography, and other departments into a single fine arts school. Compared to most other British schools, it also placed substantial responsibilities in the hands of the students.

A few months before this L.A. trip, I interviewed Craig-Martin, now an avuncular professor emeritus, at his studio in Islington. Craig-Martin believes that "for art students, the people who matter most are the peer group." Artists need "friendships with an in-built critique" as a context for the development of their work. "If you look at the history of art," he maintains, "all the Renaissance artists knew their contemporaries. So did the impressionists. There was a moment in their lives when they were all friends or acquaintances. The cubists were not simply individual geniuses. Their greatest works happened in conjunction. Who was van Gogh's best friend? Gauguin."

The talk in F200 has moved on to a vivid discussion of artist personas. "The art world is like a western—full of cowboys, whores, and dandies," asserts Hobbs. "Robert Smithson is the ideal hero. He even died young. Bruce Nauman buys a ranch and ostracizes himself. James Turrell walks around with a ten-gallon hat and ornate cowboy boots." New World frontiers are integral
to the mindset of many artists in L.A. When I interviewed Chris Burden, I drove through the dry hills, past the scrub oaks, to his studio in the wilds of Topanga Canyon. He bought the land from the granddaughter of the original owner. "It had only changed hands twice," explained Burden. "Coming out here, you have a feeling of space and potential. The physical situation becomes a spiritual thing. Artists need to be pioneering."

It's 9:15 on a Friday night and Asher is probably the only faculty member left in the building. "I don't have a theory of time," he explained to me in an interview. "It is a very simple, practical matter. For clear investigations, you need time. That is the only rule of thumb. If you don't have it, you run the risk of being superficial." Asher doesn't remember when or exactly how the class got so long. "People had more to say," he said. "Unfortunately, we can't go on for as long as we would like."

Many artist-teachers think that Asher's epic crits are a sign of madness, but Hirsch Perlman admires the commitment: "I love the idea. It's one thing to put in the unpaid hours, it's another to get the students to do that." Indeed, Asher personally underwrites the hours after 5 P.M., and the students line up to spend them here. CalArts takes pride in the fact that it is a twenty-four-hour campus, yet Post-Studio is an institution within an institution.

Fiona has fallen asleep on the beanbag. She is out cold, with her mouth slightly ajar. Someone's mobile phone meows. The group giggles. A student is holding forth. "This is going to end up a question eventually ... ," he says.

At 10:05 P.M., one of the dogs groans in the midst of a dream. Another is curled up like a doughnut. Virgil, the crit's smartest dog, ever alert to the goings-on in the room, sleeps but perks up one ear whenever his master speaks. A woman is lying under a table, and it occurs to me that the couple suppressing giggles to my left must be stoned. Asher's distinct style of pedagogy is revealing itself. This is not a class but a culture. But when is it going to end? For a fleeting moment, the crit appears to be a weird rite engineered to socialize artists into suffering. But I come to my senses, and after twelve hours of sitting, I lie down on the hard floor. Bliss.

As we move further away from the regular workday—the rational, business hour—the class takes on a life of its own. The term bohemian has a bad reputation because it's allied to myriad clichés, but Parisians originally adopted the term, associated with nomadic Gypsies, to describe artists and writers who stayed up all night and ignored the pressures of the industrial world.

When I was on the freeway this morning, it struck me as significant that to get to CalArts, one drives against the traffic. There is a huge pleasure in the sense of independence and the unimpeded flow, particularly when the cars going in the other direction inch mindlessly forward in a molten bumper-to-bumper mass. Los Angeles isn't a city so much as a solar system where different neighborhoods might as well be different planets. The real distance from CalArts to the Valley or Beverly Hills is not that great, but the psychological rift is huge.

Several people are sleeping. Apparently it is normal for people to drop off for forty-five minutes, then rejoin the conversation. I become aware that there is no clock in this room, then notice that above each blue door is an EXIT sign, on which someone has written IRAQ. The space is no longer a banal box but a war-torn landscape.

After an hour or two on the floor, I remember why I am here. I'm trying to gain some site-specific answers to some big questions: What do artists learn at art school? What is an artist? How do you become one? What makes a good one? Responses to
the first three questions are wide-ranging, but people’s answers to the final question are all about hard work. Paul Schimmel, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), put it most eloquently: “Talent is a double-edged sword. What you are given is not really yours. What you work at, what you struggle for, what you have to take command of—that often makes for very good art.”

If effort and persistence are essential to becoming a good artist, the work ethic of this marathon crit is bound to be good training. One of Asher’s favorite expressions is workable. When asked about the importance of his class, the artist suggested modestly that it might have something to do with its “spirit of production.” Exhaustiveness is necessary. Endurance is also essential. As a student told me during one of the breaks, “When there is nothing to say, that becomes the question, in which case that’s a really interesting conversation.”

A good art school provides a sense of being somewhere that matters with an audience that matters. “Every artist thinks they’re going to be the one, that success is around the corner,” says Hirsch Perlman. “It doesn’t matter what stage they’re at, either. That’s what’s funny about it.” In L.A., many invoke the once-neglected video artist and sculptor Paul McCarthy and imagine that eventually they too will be discovered and upheld.

Footsteps echo out in the hall. It’s a security guard with a bubbling walkie-talkie. Time to get up. I pick a new chair. It’s 12:12. Midnight is a magical hour. Asher continues to take his slow notes. The crowd is getting giddy; we’re all a bit punch-drunk. A new round of food-sharing ensues—bags of Hershey’s Kisses and other chocolate goodies. The conversation is often vague and people get confused, but it still feels open and earnest. The discussion segues to a video that Hobbs made of a monkey on a bike and everyone falls apart laughing.

Five minutes to one, and no one is sleeping. No one is even lying down. The whole day has been a game of musical chairs—of alignments and confrontations, flirtations and resentments played out in space as well as words. The gaps between comments are getting longer. After a long silence, Asher says, “Is there a bar here?” The comment is absurd. It’s a gesture of camaraderie. No goodbye could do justice to the end of this semester-long rite of passage. Asher takes his leave. As the students filter out, many feel bereft and one says, “It’s so sad to see Michael go.”

The students leave, but I stay to take one last look at the abandoned room. Huge piles of trash-filled grocery bags, orange peels, and snack wrappers litter the floor. The space no longer feels dry and institutional but complicated and inspired. Whether it’s deemed art or not, the Post-Studio crit is Asher’s greatest and most influential work. It’s a thirty-year institutional critique that reveals the limits of the rest of the curriculum. It’s also a sound piece where Asher has been at the quiet eye of a multivo-cal storm. It’s a minimalist performance where the artist has sat, listened with care, and occasionally cleared his throat.