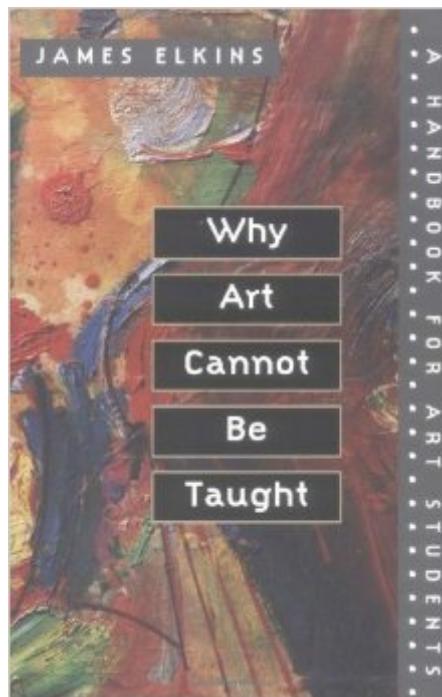


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# Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook For Art Students



## Synopsis

In this smart survival guide for students and teachers - the only book of its kind - James Elkins examines the curious endeavor to teach the unteachable that is generally known as college-level art instruction. This singular project is organized around a series of conflicting claims about art: Art can be taught, but nobody knows quite how. Art can be taught, but it seems as if it can't be since so few students become outstanding artists. Art cannot be taught, but it can be fostered or helped along. Art cannot be taught or even nourished, but it is possible to teach right up to the beginnings of art so that students are ready to make art the moment they graduate. Great art cannot be taught, but more run-of-the-mill art can be. Elkins traces the development (or invention) of the modern art school and considers how issues such as the question of core curriculum and the intellectual isolation of art schools affect the teaching and learning of art. art as a whole and dissects real-life critiques, highlighting presuppositions and dynamics that make them confusing and suggesting ways to make them more helpful. Elkins's no-nonsense approach clears away the assumptions about art instruction that are not borne out by classroom practice. For example, he notes that despite much talk about instilling visual acuity and teaching technique, in practice neither teachers nor students behave as if those were their principal goals. He addresses the absurdity of pretending that sexual issues are absent from life-drawing classes and questions the practice of holding up great masters and masterpieces as models for students capable of producing only mediocre art. He also discusses types of art - including art that takes time to complete and art that isn't serious - that cannot be learned in studio art classes. Why Art Cannot Be Taught is a response to Elkins's observation that we know very little about what we do in the art classroom. involved in it, while opening an intriguing window for those outside the discipline.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The answer: I think so. The author changed my way of thinking about the subject of what is plausible in arts education in our time. The appearance of total artistic freedom from judgement as formulated by postmodernists, yet the intrinsic nature of how the academy/school affects an artist, is seriously examined by Elkins. This book is amongst the first to pragmatically question some of our common misunderstandings about the methodology involved in teaching the visual arts. The reason for this maybe due in part to modernist and postmodernist intellectualizing of art (e.g.-the endless pages of ink spilled in history books about content free Minimalist paintings and Conceptual Art). Elkins really does an marvelous job at collecting the evidence that studio art teaching and learning is fundamentally different in goals from more conventional subjects such as the sciences, languages and even music...yet, artists should have a somewhat rounded education. To the authors credit, the book avoids the idealistic view of the arts, dispenses with the RomanticEra cliches of " the gifted talent" or "starving artist" or "outsider art" and deals with THE pragmatic reality of art instruction. Elkins' surveys are about the historical roots of art instruction: the Medieval workshops, the Renaissance guilds, the Baroque academies, and the 20th c. Bauhaus School are compared and contrasted with one another. THIS comparison of instruction models is EXCELLENT!The assumed historical 'reality' of the types of artists each system was capable of producing serves as a spring board for discussions on how philosophical discourse influences the instruction model. The book addresses the question of "what body of knowledge is central to the education of an artist?

James Elkins is not an artist... he is an art theorist. The book should be titled "Why Art Theory Fails in the Studio"... or "Why James Elkin's Generally Fails to Educate". If you are interested in the 1001 and one ways that Critique and Art Theory confound themselves in inherent contradictions, then by all means. If you are down with the Elkin's self-proclaimed skepticism and cynicism... with his claim that his art teaching experience is typically irrational and useless (and a dozen other negatives)... but that he doesn't want to see it changed... then by all means. As for the question "Why Art Cannot Be Taught"... that is easy. It's not true. Art can be taught in any environment that can articulate and commit to a coherent idea of what art is. The problem is, that the typical postmodern art institution cannot articulate a meaningful conception of art. Elkins states that the issue doesn't matter... that he is fine with any number of contradictory conceptions of art. What matters to Elkins is not what art

is... but how to talk about it. How you can talk about a subject that you can't or won't conceive of clearly, is absurd... and is also the specialty of post-modern art talk. Let's be honest here... You can't teach what you can't state clearly. Imagine you want to teach something like "plumbing". You want to teach people to do plumbing work. The first thing you have to do is state clearly what plumbing is... something like... "Plumbing is the systematic use of pipes to route fluids around the house". Given that conception, you can build a body of knowledge and techniques, and teach it to someone. Now imagine if you let the conception of plumbing fall prey to a series of re-definitions that are incommensurate with the original idea of plumbing.

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