

From Mary Poppins to Easy Rider: Paul Brach on CalArts

by Barry Schwartz

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Paul Brach was a painter from New York hired to be the founding dean of the art school at CalArts. In this interview, he discusses his earlier career in New York in the 1950s and early '60s, as well as his move to California in the late '60s. He moved to La Jolla to become chair of the art department at UCSD but found the local community suffocating and so jumped at the chance to move north to take up the challenge of creating a new and lively art school. He discusses his own inability to make more politically relevant work at a time of social unrest



Paul Brach, ca. 1970s. Courtesy of the California Institute of the Arts Archive.

but admires the experiment his wife, Miriam Schapiro, had begun, along with Judy Chicago—the creation of the Feminist Art Program within the school. He also has some interesting thoughts—good and bad—on artists who teach.

BARRY SCHWARTZ: I am now sitting in a luxurious conference room minus one door at the California Institute of the Arts and talking with artist Paul Brach. Paul, maybe you could start by giving us a little bit of background about yourself.

PAUL BRACH: I was born and raised in New York City. Both my parents were children of immigrants. They are both alive, and both are very intelligent people but not intellectuals. I think that the comparative economic security that I grew up in—we weren't even wiped out in the Depression, my father being a very successful accountant—in a certain sense removed any pressure from me to make it in any one of the professions or business. So I was very free in growing up. I had the most privileged kind of education. I went to the Ethical Culture School and Fieldston. And I guess the first break with that pattern was when my folks wanted me to go to either Yale or Cornell. In those days, Yale had a very bad art department. I wanted to go to Black Mountain. We ended up with a kind of compromise. I went to the University of Iowa, which was one of the first places to give a degree for creative work. After a year and a half at Iowa, I was drafted and spent three years in the service, some of it in combat in Europe. I came back, returned to school on the GI Bill, went through and got an MFA and married a painter from New York, Miriam Schapiro, who I had met in Iowa. I spent two years teaching in the Midwest at the University of Missouri. I couldn't take it. I arrived back in New York City in the early 1950s, made the scene at the Cedar bar and at the Artists' Club. In those years my friends were Mike Goldberg, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Bob Rauschenberg, etc., etc., etc., the whole second generation of Abstract Expressionist thing. I wrote an article for Artforum about this, a very short piece about my memory of the 1950s. The talk was very pure, but everyone wanted to make it. The Abstract Expressionist rhetoric was extraordinarily

idealistic and had a kind of meta- Marxist flavor that Harold Rosenberg gave it and a kind of crypto-Marxist flavor that Clem Greenberg gave it. But essentially everyone was out to make it. And it was very, very hard to be deeply, deeply critical about the social world around one in the fifties. It was the Eisenhower years, you know, so you voted for Stevenson. And then what did the artists do at the beginning of the civil rights period? We got together and had a big auction. We made about fifteen grand, and we gave it to C.O.R.E., and they sent the first bus down. There were no artists on that bus, that's for sure. And I think that a lot of us have been semiradicalized by our students, you know, coming back in the middle years.

BS: In the sixties.

PB: Well, yes, mid to late sixties. I never got rich enough or famous enough—that is, a string Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Jewish Museum, ten important galleries, fifteen important collectors, and a whole bunch of artists scrambling for crumbs. I went through a kind of 40-year-old crisis maybe a few years later than 40. The result was an arduous and painful and expensive psychoanalytic period and a decision to accept that I was a very good teacher and to realize that the life I was leading in New York was very destructive. During all these years I was exhibiting regularly, always selling from \$5,000 to \$15,000 of work a year and living in a big apartment on the West Side for very little rent. My wife and I were at the studio, and our kids were in private schools—that New York life.

BS: Openings, parties?

PB: All that. And a very good regular poker game that helped supplement my income. The people we hung out with were essentially family people. Most of them were married; they were the people who go to bars on Sunday, you know, to buy breakfast. It was the whole West Side scene. And then we had a lot of friends in other parts of the world other than just the art world. In the literary world, there was Jack Gelber and people like that from East Hampton. It was a kind of meritocracy; that is, almost everybody I knew was very good at what they did. It seems that the people who were stumbling never found themselves. Downtown loft life was accessible. But East Village drug life was not accessible, nor did I want it. And most of my friends were a little too old to be involved with a heavy drug scene, although there was and remains a good deal of alcoholism.

BS: So what you've been describing is really for most artists the achievement of relative success?

PB: Right. In comparison with some of my very good friends like Lichtenstein and Bob Rauschenberg, my success has not been that much.

BS: But still, for an artist growing up in New York, you made it.

PB: Right, I made it. So that leaving New York was not a sour grapes situation. Although, if your friends are selling a quarter of a million dollars a year and buying buildings downtown and taking off to Europe at the drop of a hat to have another show, etc., you begin to feel a little stuck. And you begin to wonder how corrosive a competitive mentality becomes, anyway. In California, I remember I was driving around in the backcountry of La Jolla, where the University of San Diego is, and they were trying to sell me on the job. They were talking health insurance and retirement benefits, and I was looking at the mountains.

So I did get to California. We rented a modest but big house on the cliffs, with the Pacific Ocean shining in when I had breakfast. I found sailboats and horses, and I bought a racing car. The university gave me a studio, and I started to recruit a small faculty. I went out of my mind with boredom. It was a tight little company town. You'd go to parties, and everyone would be a full professor or over. And I just went out of my mind. Also, they had very strong nepotism rules. My wife is one of the best women painters in the country. They allowed her to keep a disguised lectureship or something, when she would have been a full professor if you do it on teaching experience, how many shows, age, experience, name, rank, and serial number, you know. La Jolla just got boring. So I decided to come to California Institute of the Arts because Los Angeles was more fun, and I could find my peers here. I mean, there are artists like Bob Irwin and Ed Kienholz and Larry Bell and people who I think are doing good work. And CalArts seems goofy enough. What really knocked me out was that the makers of Mary Poppins are inadvertently funding something that's going to make Easy Rider. And they blew my mind. The whole level of large ironic culture joke in CalArts is fascinating. I mean, the school is nowhere, nowhere in these beautiful hills. We just finished a year in a converted convent school. With minor modifications, the architect had planned the whole building long before Bill Corrigan, Herb Blau, myself, Mel Powell, any of the top management, were hired.

BS: Paul, during that period of change out of the New York scene into another scene that was more personally satisfying, did you come to evaluate the scene itself, the game, the competitiveness? Did you come to question the way the whole thing has been set up? Did your art change any during that time?

PB: My art did not change. I had another show in New York during the time I was in La Jolla. Mimi and I had something we would not have done in New York, a joint mini-retrospective in two little museums here. I have not been satisfied that the school here could provide the total ambience for an artist; the school is not giving our faculty studios. It wasn't built into the original plan. The idea of a working community, which exists in some of our rhetoric, just doesn't exist, so that it becomes a kind of a gig. And there is the whole year or more of my life during the first planning year and this year at CalArts, during which time my work in my own studio has been minimal. I have not yet found, in either New York or in Los Angeles, a meaningful, coherent alternative to making luxury goods for the rich, although there have been a lot of promises. During this time I've been very moved by two of my friends who last year during the Cambodia business swore off elitist criticism. One of them I didn't believe for a minute, Barbara Rose, who was just doing a radical-chic number. Max Kozloff, who is a more thoughtful, less facile man, has been writing articles about prisons, reviewing films, even though he has an elitist mentality, is a very raffiné 19th-century gentleman. Let me tell you what I think is the most interesting alternative I've seen. It's the connection between working female artists and the women's liberation movement here in Los Angeles. I think it's taking hold in more intense ways than what Lucy Lippard and Marcia Tucker and the girls are doing back in New York. My wife is very into it; Judy Chicago is very into it. They're starting consciousness-raising groups. A lot of the women have said, "Why do it just with women artists? Why not do it with all women and get together? Why be elitist?" And the women artists say, "Yes, but we have certain special kinds of problems. We want to talk with our own people." Then, with the old idea of picketing, for example, they go do a number on the county museum and say, "Why aren't we in the 'The Art and Technology' show? Why not question the \$400,000 rip-off that 'The Art and Technology' show is, anyway, you know, in which artists work for advertising firms building up the prestige of these corporations and all of that?"

Some of the more sophisticated women who say the revolution starts with self don't want to pressure the corrupt institutions. There's been some tension within the group. Mimi, for example, who came to this later in life—also like myself not out of a sour grapes thing; she shows at André Emmerich, has played the game and profits from it—is very aware of how wiped out you can become. She and Judy are developing a feminist art program for young women students, which freaks all the liberals around here in exactly the same way other liberals were freaked by the Black Power thing, you know, the idea of black nationalism. The idea that women might want to get away from us in order to get themselves together, to come back to us on different terms, is very disturbing to a lot of people who are saying, "Look, we're letting you into our game; we're going to let you become men. We're going to give you men's education and all of that." I don't know where you're at on the whole women's lib thing, but I'm fascinated by it. You know, I can be nothing but a bystander. Well, you know, when you're winning, you don't have to be political. White, middle-class American men don't have to be political, whereas white, middle-class American women do have to be political. And black men have to be political. I think American men get political out of conscience. They see themselves going along with a system that is debasing other people. But it's not the kind of being political, let's say, that the student in India understands, knowing that when he gets out of his university there are no jobs. Maybe another two years with no jobs, American students will be a little less involved with nobility and a little more involved with self-interest. And that will be interesting. I don't know where you stand on this.

BS: I'm with you personally a hundred percent.

PB: You know, so far all through the 1950s and the 1960s, the politics of the American middle-class kids has been nobility. It's like Narodniks, you know, the people of Tolstoy's time when the children of the aristocrats went around and started a revolution.

BS: Or played at starting a revolution.

PB: Well, for instance, the Weathermen—white, middle-class kids playing revolution out of guilt for being on the wrong side. And guilt isn't a strong enough motivation.

BS: Right. I wholly agree with you on that. I've written much about it.

PB: I feel we've met, and I don't know where. Or maybe you're just a New York type of guy that I'm very familiar with.

BS: I get around a lot. The women's group is named what?

PB: It's called the Feminist Art Program. The group of women artists at CalArts has no name. It's really a series of consciousness-raising groups that are starting to get together. As yet it's only about three or four months old. I think they're starting to examine their situations collectively and personally. And whether that will lead to social action or not, I don't know. The elitist, competitive, status, luxury, investment, etc., thing we now have is working less well than it did ten years ago because more and more people are buying the work of less and less artists through organizations like Multiples and Gemini and all of these parasite operations. On the other hand, why shouldn't Jasper Johns make lithographs? I'm not against that. But the possibilities of getting the status feedback of a superstar artist are widespread. Now you can

lay out just a few hundred dollars and get a print or some little commercial artwork.

BS: And there's a movement toward public art now also

PB: Yes, I'm for that. But now you can have all the prestige of having in your home the work of the right names by spending less and less money. And fewer and fewer artists have more and more work around.

BS: It's the star system finding new markets.

PB: Exactly. It's very close to what happened after World War I in Europe, where Cubism leveled out to four or five superstars, and a lot of people fell by the wayside. And the history of art was written based on that. The question really is—and I would think the Art Workers' Coalition would be interested in what I'm interested in—how can people make art in an ambience where they can feed off each other spiritually, and they can feel that their work is having some effect in their culture, being seen? How effective it is always really questionable anyway. I don't think Guernica affected the course of the Spanish Civil War. And what are the ways that artists can get together and persuade or coerce or threaten or whatever, to help change the society in a way that artists can work in the society? I know as well as the next guy what's wrong with the present society. I suspect I might be too hooked on elitism and have a fear of what happens to quality in art. For example, the relationship of the counterculture in general to high art has been disastrous. What do you end up with? Fillmore posters? Jeweled brooch clips? I mean, you know, it hasn't made anything. Maybe the best art of the 20th century is irretrievably bourgeois. I don't know. These are interesting questions. When we started the school, we started to believe our own rhetoric that there was some hope that we could create a kind of community in which to make art, etc. But you know, when one member of the community has to pay \$2,500 to belong to the community and another person is paid \$15,000 for being part of the community, the rhetoric gets very confused. So it is a school, and it has professors, and it has students. We don't call them professors, we don't have various grades, etc., but we are now wondering about what maximum and minimum teaching hours should be. It's going to be a very good, a very, very lively, terrific art school. But to talk community of the arts, with its communitarian implications, I think is a metaphor. We're a very good school with first-class possibilities.

BS: But a school?

PB: And relatively little hierarchy between faculty and students, relatively little. It's still faculty to faculty and students to students. And in the end if I have to decide who gets the scholarships and who can come, well, then we are a community, but we are an authoritarian community in which I have the authority, or I and three other people, a committee.

BS: Have there been any attempts to bring students in on most of the decision-making processes?

PB: Yes, the major committees of the Institute are made up of members of the student body, the faculty, the trustees, and the staff. So that is important. I have students on all my admission committees. I do not have students on the hiring of faculty because I don't think they know enough of who is available. We put aside x amount of course-support money, several

thousand dollars, and there are students and faculty together on a Special Projects Committee so the students would apply, like, to get a grant. So we run our own little Guggenheims within the department if somebody wants to do something that can't be done out of their own money. And they have to make plans, models, write up the proposals to learn how to play those games. I think we have students in on decisions in the art school, at least, more than certainly the University of California. How could it be less?

BS: Do you find there's a resistance on the part of really professional artists to give of their time teaching?

PB: Yes. Not all. Some people think of teaching, as I did for many years in New York, as something you do to help make a living and as soon as you make it you stop teaching. But I also think that there are some artist/teachers who simply need students.

BS: Young people?

PB: Yes, there are certain people who are interested in ideas that need to move away from manufacturing objects. Allan Kaprow is a good example. Allan needs students. He needs to have them. There are other people who like to use students to try out ideas, you know, you sort of promiscuously infect people with an idea. That's not cynical either. I mean some people are turn-on people. And then there are some people who never go into schools and are fantastic teachers. The whole American Abstract Expressionist movement has Matta as a teacher. Gorky would have been nowhere without Matta and Bob Motherwell. And Matta just went around like a Typhoid Mary of Surrealism, infecting everybody.

But there is something terrible about the whole teaching thing, and I want to get into this. We New Yorkers tend to think of the art world as a group of professional artists, some of whom teach, some of whom have wives who have jobs, some of whom have other kinds of jobs, some of whom sell their work, some of whom do this, that and the other thing, and divided into many little Mafias and bigger Mafias, all of which relate to each other. In a city like New York, there must be ten thousand or more people who consider themselves to be professional artists, from Washington Square painters to de Kooning. And that's the art world. But the art world in America is not that. The art world in America is the college art world, which is one of the most depressing and depressed situations in the world in which, in order to survive, people do the master of fine arts route, until the jobs disappeared two years ago. But all the time from World War II on, it became tradition that you'd send your best students into that life. And then they end up in Yehookeestville, you know, East Podunk Tech Teachers College, Baptist Teachers College. I stopped going to the College Art Association meetings for this reason. Behind their little bravados of their cowboy boots here, a beard, they're a bunch of little scared guys in narrow-lapel suits. The art historians at least share a learned profession. I've watched the fellows I went to school with—I say "the fellows" because college art is so male chauvinist that the number of girls teaching is just infinitesimal; they let them teach crafts or something. Anyway, I've watched these fellows shrivel every year. And the resentment. They've started talking to me again because they see I'm back in the shit of college art.

And, okay, so I got to be a dean. The dean is really chairman of the art department. I am now a dean. Hooray. Here I'm the head of the art school. I'm a dean, so all these guys are hitting me up for jobs because we're the hottest thing around. I mean, we are going to be the most lively and most interesting art school next year. When I was a kid I used to ask my

grandma to take me to the movies, and she'd say, "If I live, Wednesday. If not, Thursday." So if not the hottest art school, the second hottest, or whatever it is. I mean, a good, lively, energy-exchange place, not a miracle, not the new culture, not some marvelous idyllic situation.

BS: Not a total solution.

PB: Yes, not a total solution. We're having money problems like every other school, and we're having to pull back from some of our more idealistic things and spread things a little further. And the hardware doesn't make the solution. We're in a very hostile environment up here. If the vote from this valley, the valley north of the San Fernando Valley, had been the national vote, Wallace would be president. It's a bad place. They moved up here to get away from the hippies and the black people. We don't have too many blacks, but we've got a lot of hippies, or a lot of kids who look like hippies. The sheriff arrests longhairs on sight. So we're going to have our own little war here. It's not anything that the Disneys could have thought about when they decided on this land. They got a good deal. There were other things going on.

This is an edited version of a much longer oral history interview in the public domain. To read the entire transcript [click here](#).