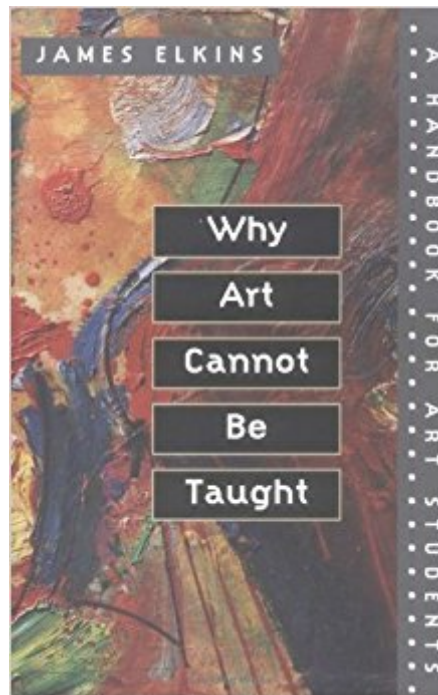




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# Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook For Art Students



## 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. He also addresses the phenomenon of art critiques as a microcosm for teaching 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. His incisive commentary illuminates the experience of learning art for those involved in it, while opening an intriguing window for those outside the discipline.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students*, James Elkins (The Object Stares Back), professor of art history, theory and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, paints a nasty picture of what goes on in art schools. Critiques of students' art are comparable to "psychodramas," with the usual result of the criticized artist breaking down into tears. The chapter "Teaching and Learning Mediocre Art" begins from a sour premise, that "most artists do not make interesting art." Art students and teachers might find a grim sort of gallows accuracy in this deadly portrait of their activities. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Instead of proposing drastic changes in the way that art is instructed, Elkins asks that schools and art departments try to understand what they are already doingâ | He advises students to use a chain of questions process to try to uncover the teachers' reasoning and unexamined assumptionsâ | Whether you're an artist, a teacher, an administrator, or a student, I encourage you to explore your own questions through *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*."--Teaching Artist Journal Â

Elkins is right. Even we, in a small art and design school at the ends of the earth, cannot agree on what it is we teach. Good. Its when people pretend that they know, that the trouble starts, and the discourse thickens, and the students glaze over etc etc. Beware of lecturers for whom the students and their work are the subject-object of a discourse they, the lecturers, are practicing on themselves. The question then becomes, what constitutes a lecturer, and what is a lecture, or a crit, or whatever? I tell my students that I am here to make noises around things that usually don't make noises. They say and do the the things that count.Elkins, as usual, clears the air around art.

Great read

I was required to buy his book for a class. Never underestimate the things your art professor requires you to read! I wish I had read this years ago...Fantastic.

Good book with some good points but I like other Elkins' books MUCH better.

good book

WE ARE LIVING THE WORST PERIOD IN ART.....ALL WE SEE EVERYWHERE IS GARBAGE.....A WONDERFULL BOOK ...EVERYBODY INVOLVED IN THE ART WORLD MUST READ...

I read this book as an Art Education student, and I feel like there is some value to this book as long as you take it with a grain of salt. Elkins asks a lot of questions about education and the arts that are good to have in mind as you prepare lesson plans. They challenge you to think critically and to try to understand exactly what you are teaching. Often certain ideas in the visual arts are hard to describe, and so as a teacher you should be able to simplify an idea into its most basic form. He discusses the idea that certain elements of creating art cannot be learned without a lot of practice, and simply making art, and therefore cannot be taught. While the student artist needs to do the work to learn the process or to develop their personal style, it does not negate the efforts of a teacher who instructed the student on how to develop those skills. There are several reviews that criticize Elkins as being an art theorist, and therefore he cannot write about how to teach art, as he isn't an artist. Again, as long as you are careful not to take everything literally, you can take ideas from this book and use it to supplement your lesson plans and it will be of value.

Chatty and irresistible, rather than being the harsh polemic that the title might suggest, this volume is a multifaceted discussion of the issues involved in teaching and studying art in a studio environment. Anyone who has ever lived through a studio critique will find the book hard to put down. Like Elkin's earlier work, "What Painting Is," it will make any art-student readers wish that they could study with him at the Art Institute of Chicago. Despite the provocative title, Elkins has very little interest in transforming arts education. Rather, he wants to point to both the virtues and the pitfalls of critique-based evaluation, and to get both teachers and students to appreciate just what a mysterious and irrational process it is to attempt to teach/learn the studio arts. The author is an insider speaking candidly for other insiders -- the audience for this valuable and intelligent essay may not be huge, but within that group, it will stimulate many electrifying conversations.

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