



Rethinking Academic Formalism: Artist-Pedagogues and the Making of Alternative Art Education Models

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines the historical formation of modern art education through the lens of practising artists who simultaneously functioned as pedagogues. It argues that the most consequential transformations in art education did not emerge from institutional reform or policy directives, but from artist-led pedagogical interventions that reconfigured the relationship between practice and teaching. Focusing on four influential institutional contexts—Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, Kala Bhavana, and Art Students League of New York—the study demonstrates how artist-pedagogues dismantled academic formalism by introducing experimental, experiential, and context-sensitive modes of learning. Drawing on theoretical insights from experiential education and critical pedagogy, the paper proposes that pedagogy itself operates as a form of artistic practice. By situating these institutions within a comparative framework, the study reveals parallel yet culturally distinct trajectories of pedagogical innovation. It concludes by reflecting on the implications of these models for contemporary art education, particularly in contexts where bureaucratic standardisation continues to dominate.



1. Introduction

The history of art education has often been narrated through the evolution of institutions, curricula, and stylistic movements. Such narratives tend to privilege formal structures while underestimating the role of individual agents who fundamentally altered pedagogical paradigms. This paper proposes a shift in emphasis: from institutional frameworks to the practising artist as pedagogue. It contends that many of the most significant transformations in modern art education emerged from artists who reconceptualised teaching as an extension of their creative practice.

Academic formalism, characterised by hierarchical instruction, rigid curricula, and the replication of canonical models, dominated art education across Europe and its colonial extensions well into the early twentieth century (Elkins, 2001). Within this framework, teaching functioned as transmission rather than inquiry, and creativity was often subordinated to technique. However, this paradigm began to fracture through the interventions of artist-pedagogues who challenged its assumptions from within.

Institutions such as the Bauhaus and Kala Bhavana did not merely reform curricula; they redefined the epistemological basis of art education. Similarly, Black Mountain College and the Art Students League of New York foregrounded autonomy, experimentation, and lived experience as pedagogical principles. Across these diverse contexts, teaching was no longer conceived as instruction in established forms but as a process of discovery, dialogue, and material engagement.

This paper argues that these artist-led pedagogical models share a common impulse: the rejection of academic formalism in favour of alternative modes of learning grounded in practice. At the same time, they diverge significantly in their cultural orientations and institutional structures. By examining these convergences and divergences, the study aims to construct a comparative framework for understanding how artist-pedagogues reshaped the landscape of modern art education.

The discussion proceeds in four stages. First, it outlines a theoretical framework drawing on experiential learning and critical pedagogy. Second, it analyses four institutional case studies, each representing a distinct pedagogical model. Third, it develops a comparative analysis that highlights structural and philosophical differences. Finally, it reflects on the relevance of these models for contemporary art education, particularly in contexts marked by increasing standardisation and bureaucratisation.



2. Theoretical Framework: Pedagogy as Practice

The reconceptualisation of pedagogy as an active, experiential, and dialogic process finds its intellectual grounding in the work of educational theorists such as John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Dewey's proposition that learning occurs through experience rather than passive reception provides a foundational premise for artist-led pedagogy (Dewey, 1934). In this view, knowledge is not transmitted but constructed through interaction with materials, environments, and social contexts.

Freire extends this argument by critiquing what he terms the “banking model” of education, in which students are treated as passive recipients of information (Freire, 1970). Instead, he advocates for a dialogic model that emphasises critical engagement and mutual learning. Although Freire's work emerges from a different disciplinary context, its implications resonate strongly with experimental art education, where hierarchical distinctions between teacher and student are frequently destabilised.

Within the field of art education, scholars such as Sullivan (2010) have further developed the notion of practice-based research, arguing that artistic practice itself constitutes a form of knowledge production. This perspective challenges conventional distinctions between making and thinking, positioning the studio as a site of inquiry. Similarly, Elkins (2001) questions the possibility of teaching art within rigid institutional frameworks, suggesting that artistic knowledge resists standardisation.

Taken together, these theoretical positions support a redefinition of pedagogy as an open-ended, process-oriented activity. In the context of the present study, they provide a conceptual lens through which the work of artist-pedagogues can be understood not merely as teaching, but as a form of practice that generates new modes of knowledge.

3. Case Study I: The Bauhaus and the Reconfiguration of Foundational Pedagogy

Founded in 1919 under the leadership of Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus represents one of the most decisive ruptures with academic formalism in twentieth century art education. Its pedagogical model emerged not as an incremental reform but as a structural reorganisation of how artistic knowledge was conceived and transmitted.

At the centre of this transformation was the *Vorkurs* or preliminary course, initially developed by Johannes Itten and later refined by Josef Albers. Rather than training students in established techniques, the course introduced them to the intrinsic properties of materials, colour, and form through direct

experimentation (Wick, 2000). This shift from imitation to investigation marked a fundamental departure from academic conventions.

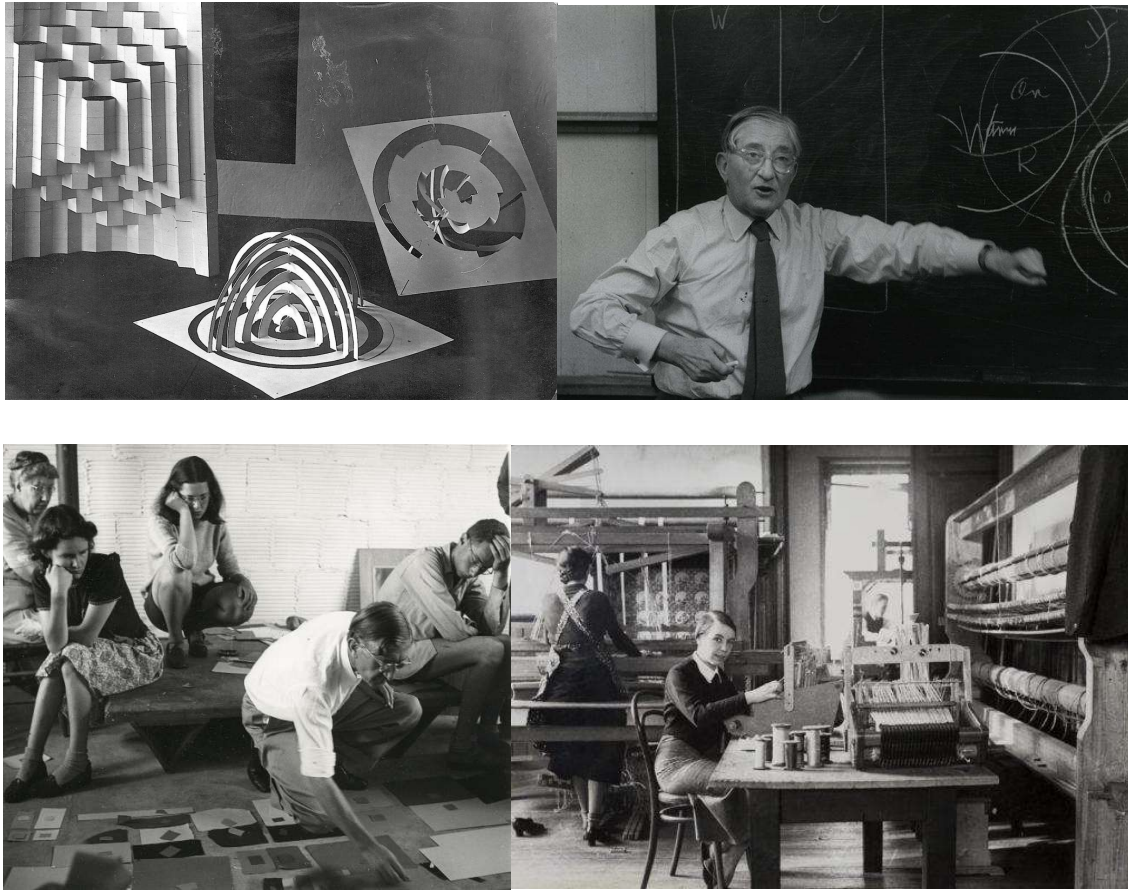


Figure 1. Bauhaus preliminary course (Vorkurs) exercises demonstrating material experimentation, colour interaction, and workshop-based learning under Johannes Itten and Josef Albers.

Albers' pedagogical approach is particularly instructive. His exercises in colour interaction did not aim to produce finished works but to cultivate perceptual awareness. Students were encouraged to discover how colours behave relationally rather than absolutely, an insight later formalised in *Interaction of Color* (Albers, 1963/2006). Teaching, in this sense, became a process of guided discovery rather than authoritative instruction.

Equally significant was the integration of craft and design within the curriculum. Under figures such as Anni Albers, weaving was repositioned from a marginalised craft to a site of formal and conceptual innovation (Smith, 2014). This dismantling of disciplinary hierarchies reflected a broader commitment to dissolving the distinction between fine and applied arts.



The closure of the Bauhaus in 1933 under political pressure did not curtail its influence. Instead, the migration of its faculty to the United States facilitated the global dissemination of its pedagogical principles. At institutions such as Black Mountain College and Yale University, Bauhaus-trained artists continued to propagate an experimental, process-oriented model of teaching (Droste, 2002).

The Bauhaus thus exemplifies a pedagogical paradigm in which the artist-teacher functions as an orchestrator of conditions for experimentation. Its legacy lies not only in stylistic innovations but in the redefinition of education as a laboratory of perception and material inquiry.

4. Case Study II: Black Mountain College and the Pedagogy of Lived Experience



Figure 2. Interdisciplinary and communal learning at Black Mountain College, including agricultural labour, experimental performance, and collaborative studio practices.

Established in 1933 in North Carolina, Black Mountain College extended and radicalised the pedagogical experiments initiated at the Bauhaus. However, its most distinctive contribution lay in its reconfiguration of education as a total environment in which art, life, and community were inseparably intertwined.



The presence of Bauhaus émigrés such as Josef Albers ensured continuity with earlier experimental models, yet the institutional ethos of Black Mountain diverged significantly from its European predecessor. Under the influence of progressive educational philosophies, particularly those associated with Dewey, the college rejected conventional grading systems and hierarchical structures (Duberman, 1972).

Teaching at Black Mountain was not confined to the classroom. Faculty and students participated collectively in agricultural labour, construction, and communal governance. This integration of manual work and intellectual activity reflected a pedagogical commitment to experiential learning in its most expansive sense.

The interdisciplinary nature of the college is evident in the work of figures such as John Cage and Merce Cunningham, whose collaborations at Black Mountain gave rise to new forms of performance. Cage's 1952 event, often described as the first "Happening", exemplifies the dissolution of boundaries between artistic disciplines and between performer and audience (Katz, 2002).

Visual artists associated with the college, including Willem de Kooning, contributed to a pedagogical environment that prioritised process over product. Students were encouraged to engage critically with their own work and that of their peers, fostering a culture of dialogue and experimentation.

Black Mountain College thus represents a model in which pedagogy is inseparable from lived experience. The artist-teacher operates not as an authority figure but as a participant within a community of inquiry. This reconfiguration of roles challenges conventional distinctions between teaching and learning, suggesting a more fluid and reciprocal relationship.

5. Case Study III: Kala Bhavana and Contextual Modernism



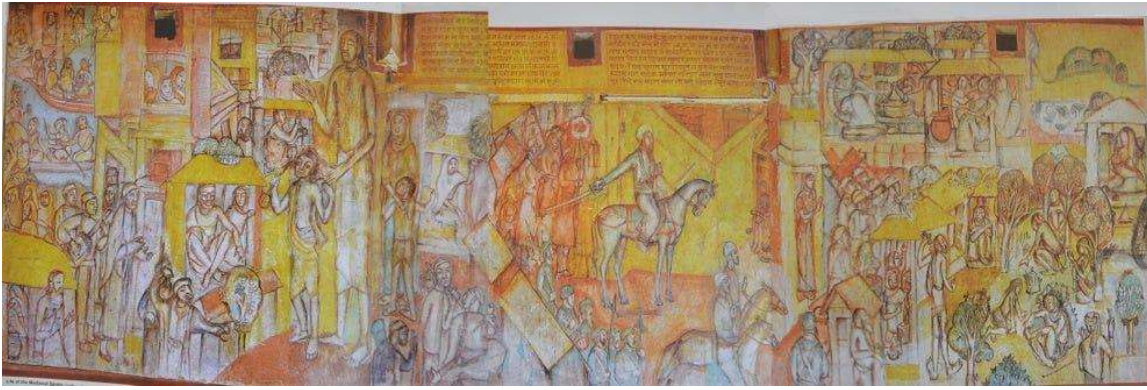


Figure 3. Open-air teaching, mural practices, and sculptural experimentation at Kala Bhavana, reflecting a synthesis of indigenous traditions and modernist approaches.

Founded in 1919 within the broader intellectual milieu of Santiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore, Kala Bhavana offers a distinct counterpoint to Western models of art education. While contemporaneous with the Bauhaus, its pedagogical orientation emerged from a different set of cultural and philosophical concerns.

Tagore envisioned Santiniketan as an alternative to colonial education systems, which he regarded as alienating and overly rigid. In Kala Bhavana, this vision translated into a pedagogical model that emphasised learning in relation to nature, community, and indigenous traditions (Kumar, 1997). Classes were often conducted outdoors, fostering a direct engagement with the environment.

Artist-pedagogues such as Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij played a central role in shaping this ethos. Their teaching practices resisted the imposition of European academic realism, instead encouraging students to draw upon local artistic traditions, including folk and craft forms (Mitter, 2007).

The concept of “contextual modernism”, articulated by Kumar (1997), provides a useful framework for understanding Kala Bhavana’s contribution. Rather than adopting modernism as a universal style, the institution reinterpreted it through the lens of Indian cultural contexts. This approach enabled a synthesis of tradition and innovation that was neither derivative nor insular.

Pedagogy at Kala Bhavana thus functioned as a process of cultural negotiation. The artist-teacher mediated between historical traditions and contemporary practices, guiding students towards a mode of expression that was both locally grounded and globally conversant.

6. Case Study IV: The Art Students League and the Pedagogy of Autonomy



Figure 4. Studio-based pedagogy at the Art Students League of New York, highlighting life drawing sessions, mentorship practices, and early training of Abstract Expressionist artists.

Established in 1875, the Art Students League of New York represents a sustained alternative to formal academic institutions. Unlike state-sponsored academies, the League operated as an independent, artist-run organisation that prioritised accessibility and flexibility.

One of its defining features was the absence of a fixed curriculum. Students were free to select their instructors and determine the duration and focus of their studies. This model fostered a high degree of autonomy, allowing for diverse pedagogical approaches to coexist within a single institution (Searl, 2000).

The influence of Robert Henri is particularly significant in this context. As a leading figure of the Ashcan School, Henri advocated for an art grounded in lived experience rather than academic convention. His teaching emphasised individuality and direct engagement with contemporary life, principles articulated in *The Art Spirit* (Henri, 1923/2007).



The League's impact on twentieth century art is evident in the careers of artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, who would later become central figures in Abstract Expressionism. While their stylistic trajectories diverged, both benefited from an environment that encouraged experimentation and personal expression.

The pedagogical model of the League can thus be characterised as one of mentorship rather than instruction. The artist-teacher provides guidance and critique, but the direction of learning remains largely self-determined. This emphasis on autonomy distinguishes the League from more structured experimental institutions such as the Bauhaus.

7. Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences in Artist-Led Pedagogy

The four institutional formations examined—Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, Kala Bhavana, and Art Students League of New York—may initially appear historically and geographically distinct. However, a closer analysis reveals a set of shared pedagogical impulses that collectively challenge the dominance of academic formalism.

At a structural level, all four institutions reject the primacy of fixed curricula. Instead, they foreground open-ended processes in which learning emerges through experimentation, dialogue, and material engagement. This shift aligns with Deweyan experiential learning, yet in these contexts it is operationalised through artistic practice rather than abstract theory (Dewey, 1934).

A second point of convergence lies in the repositioning of the teacher. In each case, the artist-pedagogue functions not as an authoritative transmitter of knowledge but as a facilitator or co-participant. Whether in the workshop model of the Bauhaus, the communal environment of Black Mountain College, the nature-oriented pedagogy of Kala Bhavana, or the mentorship system of the Art Students League, teaching is reconfigured as a relational process.

Despite these commonalities, important differences remain. The Bauhaus is characterised by a systematic approach to experimentation, particularly through the preliminary course. Black Mountain College extends this experimentation into the domain of lived experience, dissolving boundaries between art and everyday life. Kala Bhavana introduces a culturally specific dimension, embedding pedagogy within local traditions and anti-colonial thought. The Art Students League, by contrast, emphasises individual autonomy within a loosely structured institutional framework.

These distinctions can be summarised as follows:

Institution	Pedagogical Orientation	Key Principle
Bauhaus	Experimental foundation	Material and perceptual inquiry
Black Mountain College	Experiential community	Art as lived practice
Kala Bhavana	Contextual modernism	Cultural synthesis
Art Students League	Open mentorship	Individual autonomy

Figure 5. Comparative model of artist-led pedagogical approaches across four institutions, highlighting relative emphasis on experimentation, community engagement, cultural context, and learner autonomy.

Taken together, these models suggest that the transformation of art education in the twentieth century did not follow a singular trajectory. Rather, it unfolded through multiple, overlapping experiments led by practising artists who reimagined pedagogy as a dynamic and context-sensitive practice.

8. Contemporary Relevance: Against Standardisation

The historical models discussed above acquire renewed significance when situated within the contemporary landscape of art education. Across many institutional contexts, including India, art education is increasingly shaped by bureaucratic frameworks, credit systems, and standardised evaluation mechanisms. While such structures aim to ensure accountability, they often constrain the experimental and process-oriented dimensions that have historically defined artistic learning.

Scholars have noted that the institutionalisation of art education risks reducing creative practice to measurable outcomes, thereby marginalising forms of knowledge that resist quantification (Sullivan, 2010). This tendency is particularly evident in systems where policy-driven metrics overshadow pedagogical innovation.

In contrast, the models developed at the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, Kala Bhavana, and the Art Students League foreground forms of learning that are inherently open-ended. They prioritise process over product, collaboration over competition, and context over standardisation. Importantly, they also position the practising artist as central to pedagogical transformation.

For contemporary educators, these models offer not templates to be replicated but principles to be reinterpreted. The challenge lies in adapting their insights to present conditions without reducing them to historical precedents. This requires a renewed emphasis on studio-based inquiry, interdisciplinary engagement, and culturally situated practices.



9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the reconfiguration of modern art education cannot be adequately understood through institutional histories alone. Instead, it must be examined through the practices of artist-pedagogues who challenged academic formalism and introduced alternative modes of learning.

Through the case studies of the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, Kala Bhavana, and the Art Students League of New York, the study has demonstrated that pedagogy can function as a form of artistic practice. In each context, teaching becomes a site of experimentation, dialogue, and cultural negotiation.

While these models differ in their specific orientations, they share a commitment to rethinking the relationship between making and learning. Their relevance persists in contemporary debates on art education, particularly in contexts where standardisation threatens to limit creative inquiry.

The figure of the artist-pedagogue thus emerges not as a marginal actor but as a central agent in the transformation of art education. Recognising this role is essential for any effort to reimagine pedagogical practices in the present.

Endnotes

1. The term “academic formalism” is used here to denote pedagogical systems grounded in replication, hierarchy, and canonical instruction, particularly those associated with nineteenth century European academies.
2. The concept of “contextual modernism” is drawn from Kumar (1997), who situates Santiniketan within a non-Western modernist trajectory.

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Wingler, H. M. (1969). *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin*. MIT Press.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Bauhaus preliminary course and workshop pedagogy

Source:

Droste, M. (2002). *Bauhaus, 1919–1933*. Taschen.

Wingler, H. M. (1969). *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin*. MIT Press.

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Figure 2. Black Mountain College: community and experimental practice

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Figure 3. Kala Bhavana: contextual and environmental pedagogy

Source:

Kumar, R. S. (1997). *Santiniketan: The making of a contextual modernism*. National Gallery of Modern Art.

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Figure 4. Art Students League: studio-based mentorship model

Source:

Searl, M. B. (2000). *The Art Students League of New York: A history*. Hudson Hills Press.

Henri, R. (2007). *The art spirit*. Basic Books.

O'Connor, F. V. (1967). *Jackson Pollock*. Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 5. Comparative model of artist-led pedagogical transformation

Source: Author's conceptual framework based on Dewey (1934), Freire (1970), Kumar (1997), and Sullivan (2010).