

## Service—"Don't Teach Art"<sup>1</sup>

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"The best thing about sculpture is that it doesn't necessarily have to have a right way up; it also doesn't necessarily have to have an idea in order for it to come into existence; also it doesn't have to have a subject in fact, it doesn't have to have a lot of things so why bother?"

I mean, why bother to make sculpture? the world is already full of stuff, natural and human-made, useful and useless, so why add to this?

Unlike the question for which mountaineers have a ready answer—why climb that mountain? Answer: because it's there. Sculpture is the opposite; why make? Answer: because there is nothing there."

— Phyllida Barlow, from her essay in *Folds in the Field: Essays in Honour of Anthony Caro* (2012)

It was in April 2017 in Venice when Tang Da Wu pointed me toward the British Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale (La Biennale di Venezia), where Phyllida Barlow was exhibiting. This was typical of Tang—always pointing toward artists, always sharing his keen observations. His enthusiasm for art, and for the work of others, was as generous as it was infectious.

When we met in London, we saw countless exhibitions together—Caravaggio and his peers at a private collection gallery, Wolfgang Tillmans' solo show at the Serpentine, a fleeting glimpse of an Antony Caro sculpture being installed through a rooftop window. We visited student graduation shows, wandered through emerging practices, Tang always holding onto a notebook and exclaiming that he has learnt something new—*an epiphany for the day!* For Tang, the act of looking was never passive—it was a form of care, of deep listening, of discovering new things. It was part of his ethos as an artist-educator, as a lifelong student of art and its possibilities.

In Venice, he told me that Barlow was one of the great art teachers of her generation. He spoke of her students—Rachel Whiteread, Tacita Dean, Steven Pippin amongst many accomplished artists—with quiet reverence. That moment stayed with me. It offered a way to think about this essay—not just as a reflection on Barlow, but as an exploration of the connections between artists and educators born of the same era, shaped by the same cultural forces: both Tang and Barlow lived and worked in London for much of their lives. Both were influenced by the

<sup>1</sup> This title is extracted from an exhibition proposal by Tang Da Wu. The full exhibition title is *The Seminar –Don't Teach Art*, and it is planned to run from 7 September 2025 to 1 February 2026 at Jendela, The Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay, Singapore.

punk spirit of resistance, by the austerity and tensions of the Thatcher years. As an entry point into this essay, I'm drawn to the role of art – and especially of art teachers – as a kind of beacon for perseverance through times of unrest and uncertainty. Through Tang's words, Barlow emerged not only as an artist, but as someone who had lived a life in service—to her students, to the often-invisible labour of mentorship, to the long arc of artistic dialogue and guidance.

This idea of service—quiet, enduring, and deeply human—led me to a larger question, one that feels especially urgent now. In an era where knowledge, particularly in the arts, is increasingly commodified, we are prompted to ask: what does it truly mean to serve as an art educator? Art education is not simply the teaching of technique, nor is it about transmitting fixed modes of thought. Rather, it demands presence, empathy, and an ethical commitment to nurturing artistic inquiry. The work lies not in providing answers, but in supporting a critical, open-ended process—helping students to navigate uncertainty, complexity, and contradiction.

To teach art is to embrace experimentation and ambiguity. It is to foster discovery, not dictate outcomes. It is to make space—for risk, for failure, for reflection. It is to help students develop their own capacity to ask questions through material and form.

This kind of service extends far beyond the confines of the studio or classroom. Art educators today must navigate the tensions between institutional expectations, creative autonomy, and the broader social role of art. They are not only equipping students with the skills to make and think—they are fostering resilience, agency, and artistic consciousness. And yet, we must ask: is this work truly recognised for what it is? Or is art education still too often dismissed as marginal, ancillary, or “non-essential”? The dissonance between its societal value and its institutional standing invites critical reflection on how we support and sustain the work of art educators.

What remains clear is that those who teach art are not merely instructors—they are facilitators of voice, provocateurs of thought, and stewards of imagination. Their work, though often under-acknowledged, is central to shaping the conditions in which art can flourish.

We return, then, to Phyllida Barlow. A remarkable artist, yes—but just as importantly, a remarkable teacher. Her pedagogical approach championed experimentation, criticality, and material intuition over convention. She herself had been shaped by her teacher, George Fullard, who encouraged her to break from formal sculptural traditions and embrace everyday, salvaged materials. For more than fifty years, Barlow created works that were imposing yet playful, emotionally charged yet physically fragile. Her sculptures bore the marks of process—visible joins, uneven surfaces, unpolished edges—honouring the labour of making and the beauty of incompleteness. Barlow's approach reminds us of the unique potential of art education to cultivate ambiguity, rather than eliminate it. Re-thinking the audiences, the publics or ignoring them, and not apologetically so. Over-explaining art risks diminishing its power; when interpretation becomes fixed, something essential is lost—its capacity to provoke, to

unsettle, to open. Her work invited viewers to engage on their own terms, to dwell in uncertainty, and to feel their way through a work rather than solve it. In this way, she modelled an art education rooted not in answers but in sensation, intuition, and dialogue.

While critical analysis is important, it should not overshadow the embodied and affective dimensions of artistic experience. Art can stir joy, grief, wonder, and resistance. It can mirror our contradictions. An art education that acknowledges this—one that embraces intuition alongside critical thought—can cultivate more than just technical skill; it fosters an awareness of complexity, an attunement to process, and a deeper sense of the self in relation to the world.

In this light, Barlow's legacy is not only visible in her sculptures, but in the students or artists she nurtured, and the pedagogical spaces she helped shape. Her life in art was a life of service—quiet, generous, and radical in its refusal to separate making from teaching.

In parallel, I had the opportunity to interview Tang Da Wu a couple of times over the years and more intently for this essay in February 2025. With his recent works for the past decade, he paid tribute to the many figures in Singapore who have played key roles in shaping art education: Chng Seok Tin<sup>2</sup> and the institutional legacies of Lim Hak Tai, Brother Joseph McNally<sup>3</sup> and more recently, he highlighted a deep respect for the theatre practitioner and educator T. Sasitharan of Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI). Each of them, in their own ways, represent a commitment to art education as a space of resilience, risk-taking, and care.

Yet still, we return to the question: how should art education be approached?

Perhaps, the most crucial stance we can adopt is one of resistance – resisting the urge to over-define, to categorise, to confine the boundless potential of art. Art thrives on ambiguity, on the open-endedness that allows for multiple interpretations and evolving understandings. By preserving this ambiguity in how we approach and teach art, we safeguard its vital capacity to challenge our assumptions, inspire new ways of seeing, and ultimately transform our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Its inherent uncertainty is not a flaw to be rectified, but rather a fundamental condition of its enduring vitality and power. The unbound form of art, in its refusal to be defined, remains a potent force for exploration and discovery.

This ethos is deeply embedded in Tang's own practice, which merges provocation, social critique, and poetic gesture. His work has consistently questioned dominant narratives—not only in content, but through form, process, and in the ways art might be taught and shared. His *Sculpture Seminar* series at the then-National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) Singapore in the late 1980s was one such experiment in alternative pedagogy, reimagining how art education could function beyond the classroom. In 1995, during a period of increased state control over performance art, Tang responded with the quietly subversive work *Don't Give Money to the Arts*—a disarming protest wrapped in irony. More recently, exhibitions such as 3, 4, 5, *I Do Not*

<sup>2</sup> Chng Seok Tin (1946–2019) was a prominent Singaporean artist and educator, best known for her contributions to printmaking. A friend of Tang Da Wu, Chng played a significant role in shaping the local art scene through both her artistic practice and her dedication to teaching. Her works often reflected deeply personal and philosophical themes, and she remained an active and influential figure in the arts despite losing her sight later in life. As an educator, she inspired generations of young artists, leaving behind a lasting legacy in Singapore's visual arts landscape. In my (unpublished) interview with Tang in 2020, he said: "If you look at Seok Tin, she did not waste her life at all. Her life is compact. She is a source of inspiration. I want to use her as a case study for my students." Subsequently, Tang continued to pay tribute to her—and to artists Juliana Yasin and Lee Wen—in the exhibition *Cunxin Cuntie Cunxin* at Comma Space, Singapore, in January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Tang has also paid tribute to the founders of art schools, Lim Hak Tai and Brother Joseph McNally, in various exhibitions, as documented in the catalogue *On This Stone, We Will Build An Art School*, published by the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 2021. The inspiration stemmed from a stone Tang found in the greenery near the late Brother McNally's former art studio, which once housed the school he founded, LASALLE College of the Arts, at Goodman Road. Another stone, carved by Tang, bears the inscription *DE ESTA PIEDRA CONSTRUIMOS UNA IGLESIA*—"With this stone, we build a church." A third stone, also created by Tang, accompanies the second and reads *Y UNA ESCUELA DE ARTE*—"And an art school." The work *Brother's Pool* serves as a sentimental tribute to McNally's legacy: from humble beginnings,

*Like Fine Art, Reminder – I Don't Do Exhibitions, Art School SG: Artists See Colours Differently, and This One is Dangerous* continue to challenge conventions of artistic presentation and challenge the institutional frameworks that surround and contain art.<sup>4</sup>

In February this year, I spoke with Tang about his philosophy of art education. His reflections were intimate and vulnerable: Tang sees the artist not as someone who declares, “I am making art,” but as someone who begins with uncertainty: *I work because I do not know*. In this view, art—and by extension, art education—is not about mastery, but process. Doubt becomes material. Vulnerability becomes method.<sup>5</sup>

“My works are evidence of my thoughts. My works are evidence of my doubts.”

This is the true generosity of the artist-educator, who would prefer to be fore-fronted as an educator: not only to share what they know, but also what they don't. To teach not certainty, but the courage to persist in unknowing.

Tang views art education as a space of possibility—where form and content are in constant flux, where teaching and making are inseparable, and where ambiguity is not something to be resolved, but held. Even cherished.

In an era obsessed with outcomes—rubrics, metrics, measurable success—how might educators resist this pressure, quietly but deliberately? Perhaps the answer lies in embracing the slow, the unresolved, the not-yet-formed. To centre process over product is not to reject rigour, but to redefine it. It is to honour a kind of learning that resists quantification: the intuitive leap, the hesitant pause, the shift in perspective that might not appear on paper but changes everything. This quiet resistance is an act of care. It involves creating space for students to dwell in uncertainty without fear of failure; to stay inside the messy middle of making, where clarity hasn't yet arrived. It's in the decision not to over-structure, not to over-direct, but to trust that something meaningful can emerge from ambiguity. It's in offering feedback that deepens inquiry rather than closes it off. It's in protecting the studio as a space of slowness, doubt, and idiosyncrasy. To teach art in this way is to make a subtle but radical claim: that the worth of learning cannot always be seen, measured, or pinned to a timeline. That the most important transformations are often internal, incremental, and provisional. It is to insist—that art education is not a performance, but a practice. In conversation, Tang did not speak with certainty, but with a quiet clarity that could only be plausible with years of sitting with doubt, reflection, toil, worry and discomfort. What follows is an excerpt from our conversation on 4 February 2025, where more of his worldview unfolded:

I have many problems of my own.  
I work in outside spaces. I clean up after.  
And I accept these as my circumstances, my life.  
So I pack up my mess after I have worked.  
I do not work for exhibitions.  
I am ready for a show anytime.

he went on to build an altar, then a church, a community, and finally, an art school—what is today LASALLE College of the Arts.

<sup>4</sup>Exhibitions mentioned here from 2022 to 2025 include: 3, 4, 5, *I Don't Like Fine Art* at ShanghART Gallery in 2023; *Reminder—I Don't Do Exhibitions* in December 2024; *Art School SG: Artists See Colours Differently*; and *This One is Dangerous*, which reflects Tang's ongoing engagement with and critique of art education.

<sup>5</sup>In my (unpublished) interview with Tang Da Wu in 2020 at Goodman Arts Centre, he remarked that he still does not consider himself an artist: “I did not become an artist (yet). My interest is art education—I find it very rewarding.”

My works are evidence of my thoughts.  
My works are evidence of my doubts.  
I clarify them as I work.  
I said: I need to teach myself first. Only then can I share what I've learned.  
Why do parents teach their children?  
I once saw two white mice wandering the streets at midday, in the heat. I thought: their parents must be dead. If their parents were alive, they wouldn't have let them wander like this.  
Education starts from home.

There's an old saying: do not do to others what you do not want done to you.  
How to cultivate motivation via education. And how to do that?  
First, don't smother it with rules. Allow space.

Critical thinking and motivation go hand in hand. When students question your teaching—even express doubt—it isn't a sign of disrespect. It's a sign that they're engaged. That's motivation.

Freedom.  
What stifles it?  
Fear.  
Too many rules. The silencing of questions.

A constant pressure to obey without understanding.

When inquiry is replaced by instruction, and curiosity is met with control, freedom begins to fade.

Students retreat—not because they lack ability, but because the space to explore has been closed off.

There's something powerful when a student learns something on their own. When learning is paired with discovery, motivation follows. It becomes self-sustaining.

In art school, the “how to” matters. *How to draw a figure. How to ask questions. How not to rob students of their critical freedom.* The teacher's role is to give space—to protect, not to prescribe.

When I was at St. Martin's, my tutor Barry Flanagan gave me space. He encouraged me in a quiet but special way. He simply said, “You're talented.” That was enough. He never prescribed how to make work. He gave me room to decide.

Artists are craftsmen. Through the act of making, they refine not only their skills but their thinking. The hands lead the mind. Ideas emerge through process, through repetition, through doubt. And then—often unexpectedly—the craft meets the right moment: a shift in context, a change in time, an encounter with an audience. That convergence is when it becomes art. What do I mean by “the right moment”? It could be an audience, a critic, a shift in time, or personal maturity. These are the conditions that allow work to transform into art.

At the beginning, we don't say, "I'm making art." We say: *I work because I do not know*. Craft comes first. Understanding comes later—if it comes at all.

Even now, speaking to you, I know I can contradict myself. I say things I believe deeply. I also say things I'm still working through. But that's how art works. It's born from uncertainty. That uncertainty is necessary—and beautiful.

Sometimes you lose an argument. You "lose face." But even that is a gift. There is value in being wrong, in being open.

So, how is art school different? A good professor might say, "*I don't know what art is*." And that's not ironic—it's honest. It reflects the nature of art itself: shifting, subjective, unresolved. An art professor does not hold all the answers. In fact, they shouldn't. Their role is not to define what art is, but to create a space where students can ask their own questions and explore what art might be for them. That space—rooted in uncertainty rather than instruction—is where learning begins. Not with certainty, but with permission to search.

Hans Ulrich Obrist once said he wanted to borrow something I said: *Do not make art. Make questions*. That resonated with him. Art is not an answer—it's a question.

A thesis, by definition, seeks to conclude—it aims to resolve, to summarise, to produce a finished product. But art resists that. A thesis is not art. Its very structure—designed to reach an endpoint—runs counter to the ongoing, uncertain, and unresolved nature of art.

For instance, a student had recently asked me to critique his completed work. Because it had reached its completeness, perfect. I have nothing to say. What could I say? There's no room for me to add anything. I merely pointed him to my previous statement that I uphold truly: *Do not make art, make questions*.



Tang Da Wu showing a fold-out of his catalogue from a previous exhibition at Nanyang Academy of Fine Art displaying the words "Don't Make Art, Make Questions." 2025. Photo by Tamares Goh.

Similarly, in 1971, I casted a bronze cup. It was solid and full. When a cup is full, no other knowledge can enter. It becomes a useless cup; redundant.



*Untitled (Bronze Cup Cast—Cup from School Canteen in Birmingham School of Art). 1971.*  
Contact print. Photo by Tang Da Wu. Courtesy of the artist.

Artists learn from other artists. They admire them. Some might call it copying—but it's not. It's a form of acknowledgement. It's how knowledge travels.

Picasso's *Guernica* is one of the most powerful anti-war works of the 20th century. Pictorially, it can be traced to the past. You can trace the lineage from Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, you can see Salvador Dali's influence in the work, you can see the influence of the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Parajanov, proof of ideas and inspiration passing from peers to another generation—art honours those who came before. Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* inspired Picasso to make many paintings. And Picasso learnt indirectly from Cezanne for instance. Velázquez has alone inspired many generations of artists.<sup>6</sup>

This is why art history matters—learning from others. Today, we can access anything online, instantly. But the internet is overwhelming. But if we have little time and can only focus on some key moments—I'd say study those born from movements stemmed from revolutions:

In 1968, students took to the streets. From this unrest emerged the Situationist movement. A culture rose up—art, fashion, Punk, politics—all bleeding into daily life, from office spaces to sidewalks. Evasive. Transformative.

In the U.S., there was Fluxus, started by George Maciunas, 1961. Fluxus was not a style, but a spirit. It encouraged artists to question everything. It blurred disciplines. Artists like John Cage, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, Andy Warhol alongside many great artists, carried that questioning forward.

Art is already out there. Robert Rauschenberg once said that art exists in everyday life. Artists don't create it from nothing—they find it. I'm not sure what to make of the word "creative". To create suggests making something out of nothing. But I believe art is already out there, waiting to be noticed. What I do is simply

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Tang has paid homage to many artists. *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix was a recurring reference in his teachings and artwork—one notable example featured in the exhibition *Situationist Bon-Gun* by Tang at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, in March 2013.



*Cunxin Cuntie Cunxin* at Comma Space. 2021. Photograph. Photo by Ken Cheong. Courtesy of Comma Space.

introduce that art to others—to my friends, to those who might not have seen it yet. It's the same with Wolfgang Laib's work—his use of yellow pollen, or milk on stone: *Milkstone*, 1978. Beautiful, quiet gestures that reveal something already present in the world.

Education often happens in unexpected ways. Sometimes an epiphany that someone, somehow, has taught us something, even if indirectly. That's why it's not absurd to say that Caravaggio was our photography teacher—I found myself thinking to myself: Caravaggio was already teaching photography back in 1557—long before the word “photography” existed, or the camera was invented. He understood light and shadow, reflection and perspective. He explored composition, contrast, and focus—concepts that are central to photography today. His work continues to teach us how to look.

I think artists have a special sensitivity—a gift. They're able to draw out what others might overlook. They move something from an unconscious state into awareness. From something hidden, to something seen.

And before all of this—there was Dada.

Marcel Duchamp's act of putting the urinal, *Fountain*, in a gallery space, he did not say that the urinal is art. He merely asked the question—can this be art?

Dada is not dead.  
In 2025, it is still very much alive.  
Dada was, and remains, anti-art.  
And anti-art is generative.  
Anti-art is found space.  
That space is beautiful.  
Anti-art is futurist thinking.



I believe modern art didn't begin at the turn of the 20th century, but earlier—around 1850, with realism. Artists were told: paint the world as it is. Gustave Courbet once said, "If you show me an angel, I'll paint one." That marked a shift. Although that said, hyperrealists shunned away from mythology and mythmaking, and totally abolishing myths is not a good thing – myths give rise to imagination, and imagination stems from myths. Myths and real life, they are co-existing.

In my recent work—and in the way I've been thinking—you might notice the presence of skylight in my drawings. It's my way of expressing that while I live on Earth, Earth is not the only world. The skylight isn't just about clouds or atmosphere; it's a window into the cosmos, into something far larger and infinite. Through that window, I feel as though I'm having a quiet, ongoing conversation with the universe.



Detail of Performance *In Broad Daylight, I Do* by Tang Da Wu at Comma Space. 2024. Photograph. Photo by Wang Ruobing. Courtesy of Comma Space.

Dreams are another important element for me. They return often, like reminders—messages from somewhere beyond the conscious mind.

In this same body of work, I've also been painting mangrove swamps—the trees and their roots. To me, they hold a similar weight to van Gogh's sunflowers. They represent a turning toward Nature, a reverence for its presence and its teachings. Nature has always been there—quietly guiding, patiently offering lessons.

I look at the mangrove trees and wish I had their character. To me, they are like gods. They filter the waters, support life, hold ecosystems together. They reach for the sunlight while grounding themselves deeply in the muddy openings of rivers. I am learning from them.



Detail of *Tian Chuang Ni Ku*. 2025. Photograph. Photo by Tang Da Wu.  
Courtesy of the artist.

And if that's not education, what is? Learning from Nature, and teaching myself through that relationship, is education. To cultivate this kind of learning within ourselves before we can truly teach others.

When it comes to teaching or sharing, my attitude is simple: never lecture. Instead, meet other artists. Listen to how they think, observe how they work. Visit museums. Learn by encountering, by experiencing. There is no single method, no fixed style. Each encounter is its own kind of lesson.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching art the way Tang advocates makes a quiet yet firm statement: the true value of learning cannot always be confined by rigid timelines or fixed outcomes. The most meaningful growth is often internal and reflexive—flourishing in the open spaces of ambiguity and process. Tang's approach unsettles conventions, introducing discomfort and uncertainty, and creating room for new perspectives to emerge—both in viewers and in the wider cultural conversation. His work is not just a personal reflection but an ongoing dialogue—within himself and with the world. It challenges us to take responsibility for crafting a more equitable and compassionate future—one where doubt is

welcomed, and vulnerability is seen not as a weakness but as a strength that engenders care.

Teaching and making in this way become acts of service. To hold space for uncertainty, to prioritise process over product, and to invite rather than instruct—these are gestures of generosity. Tang believes that the most important lessons are not those that offer definitive answers, but those that spark ongoing questions and personal discoveries. As he puts it, “I work because I do not know,” and it is this humility—this service to inquiry rather than mastery—that forms the bedrock of his teaching philosophy.

His idea of “making work for future generations to do” reflects a belief in the enduring power of open-endedness. In a world where resolutions often feel elusive and to be able to leave space for others to continue the dialogue is a gift—an offering of continuity, a service to time itself. By creating work that remains unresolved, that raises more questions than it answers, we entrust future generations with the challenge of uncovering new meanings, forging fresh paths, and defining their own ways forward. In this way, art becomes a living process—a shared space that nurtures resilience, deepens collective thought, and honours the unknown.

This ethos resonates with Phyllida Barlow’s reflection on sculpture in the opening quote: “...why bother? Sculpture answers the question ‘Why make?’ because there is nothing there.” Much like Barlow’s sculpture, Tang’s art emerges from absence—not to fill it with certainty, but to offer a space where something new might take root. It does not impose meaning but invites it. And in that invitation lies a quiet provision: to others, to the present, and to futures we may never see.

Perhaps this is the deeper rhetoric Tang proposes—not a declaration, but a provocation: What would it mean to create not for gratification, but for continuity? Not to conclude, but to leave space? Not to teach answers, but to teach the courage to keep asking? In this way, his work becomes not just art, but an enduring form of concern—one that questions, sustains, and listens.

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