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*Photograph by
Nancy Rosenblum,
Interview p.8*



Adriana Arienti (left), 24,
Wallpaper Hanger

Alexis Kotter (right), 35,
Wallpaper Hanger
1981

Feminism at CalArts: The Ideal Persists



ART AND DESIGN: A NEW DEAN:
THE CRITICAL SPECTRUM

Catherine Lord

interview by Tim Shea

CL: I'm curious about what you want from this interview.

TS: I think students want to know who you are, and I think they want to know what kind of ideas you're bringing to the program; something about your basic philosophy, what you'll be doing as dean, how you view artmaking, instruction in artmaking, art and education—things like that. I also think a function of the interview is to allow you to establish a communication line with the students, to let the students know what your ideas are, and what you want. Let me start off with this question: What do you feel your duties and responsibilities will be, or should be, as dean of the school?

CL: This sounds like a job interview, but what I look forward to most, and what I think *has* to be done, is getting this school to do more than run on its own momentum. As somebody who's new to this place, one of the things that sticks out about the Art and Design School is that it is pretty much three schools that function separately, and sometimes duplicate their efforts because of that, or don't use each other as well as they might. That's a concern of mine insofar as such divisions can get in the way of a school working as a school, or a community working as a community, or a structure of art education that fully uses the resources at hand.

TS: Do you plan to teach?

CL: Yes—to preserve my sanity.

TS: What are you going to teach?

CL: It's going to be called something like "Topics In...Contemporary Art," but it's going to be more about economic support systems for art and the ways in which values are injected. I

don't mean a "survival" course about how to get grants or befriend rich people or rob banks, but something that addresses the economics of art theoretically and broadly. That will involve some work for me and research work for the people in the course. It won't be structured as a lecture course. I don't teach on the entertainment system.

TS: What do you think an education in the visual arts should encompass? What kinds of things, specifically, should a student be getting here?

CL: My background, as you know, has a lot more to do with publishing than it does with education in a formal sense, which I hope will be an asset, but could also prove a difficulty sometimes. In some very idealistic way—and I am an idealist—my view of education is that it should encompass absolutely everything it possibly can. Now, more than ever, because we have a situation where art is getting pushed more and more into a corner, and seen more and more as a privilege and a luxury and something that "creative" people do. To buy into that, to narrow art education any more than it is already narrowed, or to narrow the definition of art any more than it is already narrowed, is silly. But then I have some basic problems with the notion of fine art.

TS: Do you think there is a such a thing as "fine art"?

CL: Something has to be found to fill museum walls.

TS: How would you define fine art?

CL: It would come out being rather perjorative. It's hardly that I think art doesn't exist or ought not to exist or that people aren't creative and shouldn't act on that. But I'm suspicious about pigeon holes, and I'm dubious about what you actually get as a person, by labelling what you do "fine art."

TS: In your article, *"Women in Photography..."*

CL: You went back a long way, didn't you?

TS: Yes. You mentioned the words "art" was a short catchall for a variety of ways of thinking rendered tangible. What is the difference between art and engineering, for instance? In essence I'm asking you to define art. It seems there are a number of ways that thinking can be

rendered tangible. Is there some specific way it's rendered tangible in art?

CL: I remember writing that phrase specifically to avoid restricting the scope of what could be called feminist art, given that the schisms between left politics and artists have been problematic. But don't you think that sort of definition is usually imposed on the object? People are forever rediscovering something or other, like a bridge, and labelling the person who did it an artist. Definition of art is bound to be so contingent that you can't pretend to get outside of the whole thing enough to produce a definition. I don't know about you, but I have an inordinate amount of trouble slogging through aesthetic theory. If you try to read Roger Fry... If you grant that definitions of art are tied to social and cultural circumstances that change it puts a different light on all those people who are forever proclaiming what is and isn't art, who generally look like fools in hindsight. And it is inevitable that there will be a succession of people setting up walls. The world will always have at least one Hilton Kramer. I think the point is, in this and many things, not to create a definition which restricts you.

TS: What role do you think instruction in craft, I mean the actual physical processes of an art form, should play here?

CL: I think it's absolutely essential that people know how to achieve what they want, or understand that what they want can be altered by the means that they realistically command. But: I'm not interested in craft for craft's sake. I'm not interested in the notion that everybody who wants to call themselves an artist photographer has to pay their dues and learn the zone system. I don't think that craft is something that should be mystified or mythologized. It shouldn't be a substitute for ideas. Still, methods and materials are things that are tools. You've got to respect them, because making art doesn't work by having a disembodied, pure idea and then shopping around for the perfect way to execute it. On the practical level, you don't make things that way. What you know how to do affects what you think of to do. It is a symbiotic relationship.

TS: In general, CalArts has espoused the philosophy that art is best taught by artists. You are not an artist, at least I assume you're not from the biographical information I have been able to get. Do you feel art should be taught primarily by artists?

CL: Well, there's a whole lot of rhetoric that's been produced on this question; I sense what you're trying to get at. I'd define myself as a critic in some very broad sense, and I write. It always bothers me when people set up that kind of opposition, because maybe in some way when everybody is at their best, everybody is both people—both an artist and a critic. Or I hope so. To split the world in half like that makes artists, that's with a capital "A", the ones who create and make and do. Critics become the parasites who feed off their creative hard work. They react, as opposed to produce, and do the absurd things that critics do. I think that's utterly unfair to critics, because although God knows art criticism is for the most part a horrible business, and there are scads of compromised, dreary, redundant essays that appear in art magazines under the label of art criticism, it can be something much more ambitious, and much more challenging and much more provocative. But what's implicit in your question is setting up a visual/verbal dichotomy which I think may just be a mistake.

TS: Some students are leary of being taught by someone who is not an artist.

CL: One of the things that I always find—well, there are a lot of things I find astonishing—one thing that always seems to happen is that in spite of the fact that people hasten to say "I'm an artist, I'm not a critic," people who are artists tend to be highly critical, as they should be. And when they open their mouths and talk, for artists can be highly verbal, sometimes what they say is indistinguishable from what the person who says "I'm a writer and I don't define myself as an artist" actually says. What interests me most though...what interests me and also saddens me is the fact that there is that line. Codifying roles like that cuts off a lot of possibilities. For some people there is no line and it doesn't make sense to establish it.

TS: How is that?

CL: There are various people who say that their writing constitutes part of their artwork. That's their stand on their work, or more accurately, the effective use of available methods. If you think about people like this...*Art and Language* obviously, or Martha Rosler, or Hans Haache, the stand is: "I choose to do all these things, and I am an artist." If you take it from the other side—critics being more like artists—to be perfectly honest, when I think about many of the critics I know, the idea is hilarious. But there are choices in the means by which you say something—the way you use a publication, the way you reach an audience. Some critics consider these choices, others don't. Those sorts of choices are related to the choices artists can use.

TS: Getting back to the student's point of view regarding the critic as teacher. In an art context, I think the student is worried because essentially it is someone teaching art who doesn't practice it. I think that's the basic concern.

CL: I know art critics get bad press, often richly deserved, for being loudmouthed, arrogant, influential ignoramuses who think that their role is to pass judgement about quality. I don't think that's what criticism has to be. You don't have to make that your model to call yourself a critic. I don't. And I don't see any reason to pretend, for either an artist or a critic, that you can give advice about things that you really don't know about. If you do that, then you have other problems. You *can* steer people to somebody else. You can tell people what you *think*, as opposed to making proclamations. You can tell people what you don't know. You can even learn and change your mind. If your writing appears in print, your doubts and changes and mistakes and confessed ignorances are public. This isn't easy and people often forget that. Anyway, I'd say that role definitions that are influential can be just as true of people who are artists. There are biases that come into teaching there, also.

TS: Can you elaborate on that?

CL: Some people teach best—I mean teach best by encourage most, and constructively affect most—the people whose work they feel the most affinity for. They cut off the people whose

work they don't feel very close to. That can all happen in very subtle ways. Some people blossom and thrive; other people back off. That's one of the classics about art school education. It's a real worry. In any educational situation—teachers who produce, by their own influence and their own enthusiasms and their own desires, not all of which have to be malevolently intended—students who are replicas of themselves. You can balance that off with somebody who is a more eclectic encourager, or conceivably, with somebody who'll produce *different* replicas.

TS: So the way you try to handle that is by having as large a spectrum as you can?

CL: That's my inclination. In retrospect, things I've done have been elaborately orchestrated schemes to get people to argue. *Afterimage* was very much that for me. It didn't start as many arguments as I thought there ought to have been or would have liked, but I wanted to make it a space where people could say things very clearly, with the room and resources they needed, and with the editorial backing behind them to make sure that they could do that without being censored or put down. That was very important to me. The idea of credible and fair critical writing is very important to me. When I took over *Afterimage*, I knew that ensuring a space for that kind of writing meant dissociating editorial decisions from my friendships and being willing to put *my* job on the line if what I'd decided to print wasn't seen to serve the best interests of the institution that published *Afterimage*. I didn't make big flap about those positions, but I'm saying this to convey that I hold some principles dear. I tried to put enough different people together to create a space people could see as a space for argument. I don't want to say "space for dialogue" because "dialogue" is horribly bland these days. I had something a bit more cantankerous in mind—but respectful. And I can't help but bring that kind of thinking here. A spectrum is more what it means to me: making sure that everybody can have a loud clear voice. This might be a little chaotic, but it is not boring.

TS: The art department doesn't have any permanent female faculty. It's been an issue with

students, especially students within the art department. What are your feelings and intentions, if any, in that regard?

CL: In the spectrum we were just talking about, the spectrum of options and opinions, *of course* women are important. The number of women who are hired in any institution is almost invariably an issue and it's a serious issue here. Nevertheless, I have met a lot of men who are permanent—well, "permanent" in a school that has no tenure—on the art faculty. So far, none of them seem monsters. What I'm trying to say is that the reasons might well be authentically complex, and I've not really heard from the students yet, beyond hearsay. I don't know their arguments and their evidence, beyond the obvious reason that hiring women is a political issue these days and it damn well should be a political issue these days.

TS: So, the solution is not as simple as hiring female faculty for the art department?

CL: In this ideal world where there's a spectrum of opinion where people are arguing and talking and instructing themselves and everybody else without killing each other—you know, that ideal world—part of it would naturally include women as not one voice but as varying kinds of voices in that spectrum. What I'm trying to say is that it is that spectrum which interests me. I don't think it's a simple statistical thing, by which I don't mean to fudge the issue one iota, but I'm a lot less interested in saying, "Okay gang, here's your woman," or "Here's your two women," than who is this person and what she does.

TS: The next time someone is hired, would you be looking exclusively for a female faculty member?

CL: That's a ways down the road. This year's faculty slots are set. I inherit a lot of things. A lot of things I'm glad to inherit. Anyway, women on the faculty is part—and an equal part—of a longer picture: where the curriculum is going, what people feel the priorities are, what they want to change, what they don't want to change. You can't solve one thing in isolation without creating another mess somewhere else.

TS: Your article in the January, 1980 issue of *Afterimage*, "Women in Photography," mentioned

there was a definite bias against women in the form of fewer grants and shows compared to men. You also cite attitudes of diapproval and indifference toward women's art, and when I say "women's art" I really don't know if that is art about women's issues or art by women.

CL: I meant then what people usually call women's art—art made by women about things that are seen to be only about women—personal, confessional, "pretty," etc.

TS: How do you see the current state of affairs regarding women in art? Has it changed since your article was published?

CL: That was in 1980. I don't think so, not in the lists of grants that I've added up lately. I'd even say that in some respects, particularly in terms of shows, that it's gotten worse.

TS: Is there anything in particular that you'd attribute that to?

CL: There's a backlash in all sorts of spheres and art isn't exempt. The right emerges full force these days. I also sense a smug sort of feeling, that women had their chance. They made a big fuss and they were given shows, some of them even got catalogs. So it's safer to swing back a bit. You thus find important group shows that include only men; jurying committees that are all men; nominating committees that are all men. Nobody really blinks. The idea seems to be that feminism is a dead issue. The *New York Times* recently announced the advent of *post-feminism*. Now that politics are out of art, everybody's happy talking about "quality" again—which is just what they used to talk about when the artworld was composed of men. I don't think that feminism will ever stop being an issue, which is depressing.

TS: The theme of this issue of *walt* is feminism and the arts. In light of this do you feel it would be more appropriate to be interviewed by a woman?

CL: It would probably make some things easier. Sometimes if you're talking to somebody you either agree or assume that you agree, so some things aren't made explicit. You asked a question about women's art and I explained what I meant. Maybe a woman wouldn't have asked that question and the whole thing

wouldn't have come up. It might have been easier, but so what?

TS: There's an analogous issue regarding women faculty members. I think some women students feel it's easier to relate to a woman faculty member.

CL: Yeah. And some men relate better to men. You try to give people the option.

TS: Which is the basic gripe of students in the art school. The option isn't there. Especially with a female faculty member who is here for a semester or a year. The option isn't there to develop an ongoing relationship.

CL: You can't develop, for certain students, something that makes sense in six months, or two weeks.

TS: How would you define feminism?

CL: This I knew you were going to ask.

TS: Don't you think it's a valid question?

CL: It's just one of those sticky questions. Well, I'd keep the definition short. It has something to do with improving the shitty state of affairs women find themselves in. For me it's something more concrete, and at the same time, more historical, than something romantic or spiritual, which are other ways in which feminism can be defined and used. I'm not that interested in great goddesses. I'm not that interested in great gods, either. Feminism is a political stance that I feel is necessary. At the same time it's also an intellectual stance. Life is more interesting if you don't cut off half your options.

There were a couple of things that really got me irrevocably "feministized," or radicalized or whatever. As an undergraduate, I took to wandering around in the stacks of the college library. I discovered in the basement a whole section on witchcraft: long shelves filled with rare old books that nobody had checked out for the last 150 years. I would stumble through the stuff, because most of the languages I couldn't read or read very well. It was horrifying. Real paranoia and systematic persecution. It was also horrifying that it was sort of buried in this library. The stuff wasn't being used and it wasn't being talked about.

TS: Let me make sure I understand this. The section on witchcraft—what struck you about

that was, I assume the books were...

CL: Inquisition manuals, basically. How to spot a witch and what to do with her. How to torture a woman to make her rationalize your paranoia.

CL: And witches were always defined as female?

CL: Most of the few million witches who got done in were definitely female.

TS: A few million of them? Throughout the last thousand years?

CL: No, no. 15th, 16th, 17th centuries. It's a part of history that at that time hadn't really been written about, or had been written about in terms of mass psychosis or superstition. That to me didn't seem to be the point. But I didn't immerse myself in studies of witchcraft or learn Old High German or anything like that. It was just a place that I would go to and try to slowly read these things, a place I visited. This was going on at the same time as a general upsurge of feminism, but those books stay more vivid.

The other thing was working on various women's history projects for three or four years. That gave me a good look at the last two centuries in this country in terms of what women have done, what fields they made it in, what fields they've been allowed to make it in, and what advances they make that then vanish into historical oblivion.

TS: What is the process? Is there some particular way that usually works?

CL: If you want a cynical description, women, like various other groups, get bought.

TS: How's that?

CL: They got bought out over the slavery issue, to cite a famous example. A lot of women who'd been working in the suffrage movement who explicitly dropped that to work as abolitionists on the tacit understanding that when the battle had been won the men would give them a helping hand in return. This did not prove to be the case.

TS: Feminism has been a basis for artmaking and it seems to have been a basis for artmaking in the last 15, 20 years, more so than before. What kind of progress has been made?

CL: I think that feminism was *the* art event of the 1970s. On various levels in various ways, through networking, and writing, and artists getting together...it had an impact all over this

country. It opened up a lot of ways of artmaking that hadn't been available before. It hadn't for example, been particularly chic to be, God forbid, autobiographical and personal. Feminism was one of the things that enabled that.

TS: Has feminism made your life harder or easier?

CL: I don't know. I guess it would be easier to be a stereotypical anything. But I seem to spend a lot of time fighting being put into some kind of pigeon hole. It's not only feminism. It's the same thing with artists versus writers. One of the things that's important to me about being a feminist is it opens up a lot more ways of reevaluating things, and using information, and understanding information.

TS: I want to ask you about technology. I read an article of yours, in which you mentioned that "information is becoming increasingly valuable and is therefore moving quite rapidly into private hands," becoming more difficult for the public to get at.

CL: One of the things that's "in" at the moment, a subject of conversation, is new imaging systems, new communication systems— instant this, instant that. There is a lot of rhetoric in the art world in support of new technologies; there are few people who do any kind of critique of who literally owns the technology, why they wanted it in the first place, and what they use it for. Expensive machinery does not get invented for artists. Much of it was first developed because it had military applications. Artists get their hands on things marginally, later on, but it's not made for them. Nobody's going to sink millions into inventing toys for artists. Really. They're not.

TS: Do you foresee changes in art as a result of changes in technology?

CL: Of course.

TS: How about at CalArts? Should we be trying to keep apace?

CL: It's important to be literate in the tools that are going around, and certain tools are important in the art world now. People have begged or borrowed access to certain machines, real expensive stuff, and used them. At the same time it would bother me a lot to leap into

acquiring machinery for its own sake without providing any kind of critique I was talking about.

TS: Do you operate with a definition of modernism in mind?

CL: I usually operate with a sloppy definition about media and form and purity of means.

TS: Do you want to tell me about that?

CL: I think I just gave you the definition (laughs), in a sort of sarcastic way. The more interesting part of it is post-modernism, to me, the way that post-modernism became popular artworld vernacular in the last six or seven years—boom. From the pages of *October* to the pages of the *New York Times* in two or three years is not bad.

TS: When we say post-modernism we associate that with a certain group, at least in the artworld.

CL: You mean *October*, Thomas Lawson, *Real Life*, and so on...

TS: Yeah. You mentioned in your article that when it hit the *New York Times*, that's when you felt it was over.

CL: I feel that specific incarnation started off as a directed radical argument with a few artists out in front, or being sometimes held out in front. I think that impetus dissipated with phenomenal speed. It's not just the *New York Times*, it's "post-modernism" hitting decent-sized contemporary art museums. There's been a spate of post-modernist shows which include the most extraordinary combinations of people. Post-modernism, any culturally referential art becomes style.

TS: Why was it originally called post-modernism? I guess I have to ask Douglas Crimp about that, but what can you tell me?

CL: It seems to me that the pressing need was the need to declare a break with modernism.

TS: Why was there such a need?

CL: Because things had been getting a bit stuffy, dead-ended. Think about *October's* role in terms of challenging the Museum of Modern Art as an institution. Never mind post-modernism.

TS: Appropriation is a major strategy of the post-modernists, it seems like everyone around here is doing it. How do you feel about appropriation as an art strategy now?

CL: I think it depends on how you use it. One of the problems I have with what at the moment called post-modernism is the whole business of the use of quotations, the distance you have from them. The basis issue in quotation is whether you strengthen what you quote, or critique it. What worries me is the risk of simply repeating what you quote, while you purport to be deconstructing it. I think it's interesting that a lot of that now expanding circle of work gets billed as political. I know I'm lumping a lot of people together, but people don't generally ask what's political about the art, what will it *do*? Who does it reach? Sometimes the political critique is very narrow. And I also think that there's a curious separation between the work that I'm lumping together as post-modernist, that calls itself political, and work done by artists that call themselves political and not post-modernist. I find it significant that these two camps don't go to each other's dinner parties (laughs).

TS: Deconstruction is a word that gets used a lot. How important is the role of deconstruction, or critical dismantling in artmaking? I'm assuming that's what were talking about when we say deconstruction.

CL: I think it's important. But then I think criticism is important.

TS: You say that because the two are synonymous? Is it a form of criticism embodied in art?

CL: It can be, yeah. I don't think they are synonymous.

TS: Analogous I guess is a better word.

CL: Yeah.

TS: What about the possibility of art that has nothing to do with deconstruction? Is that feasible as far as you're concerned?

CL: I'm the one who's interested in the range, remember? Not everybody should be deconstructing. Or maybe they should but they won't be in real life.

TS: Let me ask you something else at another end of the scale. "New expressionism"...How do you feel about it, to what degree do you feel it should affect the curriculum here?

CL: It makes me grit my teeth when you ask that question.

TS: Why is that?

CL: It's just too convenient right now. And too nostalgic and monumental, and too much of a reversion.

TS: What about its effect on the curriculum here?

CL: I would take a deep breath and say, "yeah, theoretically."

TS: Theoretically though, what does that mean?

CL: That means that even though there are kinds of work that give me and my intellect and my personal taste a lot of trouble, if I thought it would do something constructive in the curriculum, or that there was some real sense out of the faculty and students that they wanted a certain kind of option, then I would back that. It's like editing a magazine, you know? "This person is dead wrong," but I'll print the article anyway.

TS: Your background doesn't seem to involve too much graphic design.

CL: No, not formally.

TS: On what level would you hope to relate to the design students and faculty?

CL: I need to talk more to design students and faculty. To get a sense of what the goals in that area are and what the problems are.

TS: Do you feel you have a sense of what graphic design is?

CL: Well, if you have a sense of what feminism is, yeah.

TS: Hold on a second. What do you mean?

CL: Where's that question coming from? I'm not a graphic designer. And my training isn't in graphic design at all. At the same time it's something that, obviously, I have used. I think design is a part of the CalArts program that has a whole lot of potential in itself and in relation to art and photography.

TS: Where the question is coming from is that...you have an art background. Your concerns, the things that you've published have a lot to do with art and photography. I'm wondering how you feel about graphic design. It's often viewed as a "lesser art form."

CL: I'm pretty close to photography, too, which is always viewed as a lesser art form. I understand those emotions. I think April is very very good. The graphic design setup interests

me a lot. Some questions I seem to have found myself asking have a lot to do with how to use the design resources more, and how to integrate them more. I absolutely see no reason why design should be off in a corner by itself or looked down upon. One of the things that's really important to me, obviously, is publishing things. By which I don't mean vast editions, but printed multiples are, despite the talk about high tech, still an incredible tool—for people who use photography, people who come from the art school or people who go through the design school.

TS: Do you feel design as a subject is different mainly in the technical means which it uses, or is there...

CL: Well, it's different in its traditions, isn't it? It comes attached to a functional tradition.

TS: To what degree should the departments of art and graphic design maintain a distinct separation?

CL: You didn't put photography in there.

TS: I know. That's my next one. I thought we'd deal with two at a time.

CL: Oh, I see. In permutations. Like I said before, I'm not sure what purposes the separation serves. I'd like to see a lot more interchange between these three things.

TS: Let's talk about photography, too, then.

CL: Part of what I meant before when I was talking about one school, and it is a school and a community, had something to do with that kind of interchange. The three areas that make up this school are functioning so that I hear things like graphic design isn't treated seriously, or photography always has boring visiting artists, and on down the list of insults. And I don't know how many of these feelings are true. I'm struck by the fact that there are all of these sentiments floating around and there are these divisions.

TS: Your background includes a lot of photo experience. What are some of the concerns you bring to photography at CalArts?

CL: Photography as a field is in a pretty funny state these days. It had its heyday when quite a few people could sell things. There was a market and there were galleries: photo schools sprouted by the dozen all around the country. And then

the bottom dropped out. That's one part of the state of photography. The light at the end of the tunnel got a lot dimmer. The other thing about photo teaching is that photography has always had an extremely problematic relationship with the fine arts. In a lot of ways it's put itself, or let itself be put, in a defensive and isolationist position: photo-nationalism. That helped, in the sense of giving photographers some room, and photo schools some room to teach the medium separately without being treated as the kid brother. But it caused a lot of problems. I don't know what should be done about photo education. In pragmatic terms, decent photo education is in jeopardy. In art program cutbacks, photo teaching suffers first in the interdisciplinary setups. It was the last arrival. Yet photography in isolation is parochial.

TS: Was the Visual Studies Workshop mainly photo-oriented?

CL: Photo, video, artist's books. It was a funny place, half a graduate program, and half an alternative artist's space. There were classes, but there were also things like a sales gallery, a print shop, a working press, video facilities for community and student use that worked as a production outfit, and a newspaper.

TS: When you worked on *Afterimage* did you also help produce the paper?

CL: It was a pretty overworked, small staff. Basically, three people put out the paper. My end of it was in theory and in practice getting stuff to print—figuring out what should be printed, commissioning it, sending things back, editing, all the things editors do.

TS: What kind of things do you need from the students?

CL: Input about what they want this place to be. That I really need. A lot of healthy curiosity and a bit of stubbornness about working hard. And in human terms, remembering that even though I'm coming here as more or less a stranger, it's not something to be alarmed about, and that I'm basically on their side. This place is a school. It's *for* the students. I think the other thing I need is some patience, while I get the system and the academic thickets worked out. I have a lot of rules to pick up and understand, too.