Phyllida Barlow talks about her career as an artist and a teacher, and the past, present and future state of art schools in Britain

Professor of Fine Art at the Slade School of Art in London, Phyllida Barlow has taught art since the late 1960s. Her former students include Rachel Whiteread, Bill Woodrow, Steven Pippin, Melanie Counsell, Keith Wilson, Douglas Gordon, Tacita Dean, Conrad Shawcross, Tomoko Takahashi and Angela De la Cruz. Barlow's recent work emerges from a 40-year practice in which she has explored many of the inquiries of post-Minimalism: the effect of gravity on materials, the relation of the sculpture to the viewing space, the impact of added colour on our perception of a structure, the push-and-pull between total abstraction and a work's ability to evoke the body. In the past three years her sculpture has achieved a new visibility with the publication of the monograph Objects For ... And Other Things (Black Dog, 2005) and solo exhibitions at Baltic, Gateshead, the Bloomberg Space in London and Spacex in Exeter. Barlow makes her work from a range of materials, such as felt sheets, wooden pallets, polystyrene, red masking tape and foam boards. The sculptures are abstract and often absurd, and after construction many are painted in industrial and synthetic colours. Barlow tends not to preserve work once it is shown, instead recycling her materials to make the next set of sculptures.

I have been a colleague of Phyllida Barlow's for five years at the Slade School of Art, and in this interview we discussed her approaches to teaching in art schools.

Mark Godfrey: Can you tell me about your experience of art school as a student at Chelsea College of Art and Design and the Slade?

Phyllida Barlow: I was at Chelsea from 1960 to 1963 and the Slade from 1963 to 1966. I had no qualification from Chelsea because it was changing from the academic National Diploma in Design award to a fine art diploma. It was a very exciting time. Then I came to the Slade, and it was a three-year diploma course. In terms of today's art education I don't have any qualification that equals the current BA, MA
or MFA. When I arrived at Chelsea, Lawrence Gowing was bringing in a lot of young successful artists, such as Patrick Caulfield, Ian Stephenson and John Hoyland. Henry Moore had been teaching sculpture, and when he left, Gowing brought in the sculptor George Fullard, who’d been badly wounded in World War II, which had an enormous impact on his own work and on his ideas about art education. He was a brilliant visionary. Within days of arriving he’d stirred up a hornets’ nest of intrigue, asking what a sculpture course, such as it was at Chelsea, might be.

MG? How had it been before he arrived there?

PB? We worked on the figure in clay, and the welding room was forbidden to women. Stone carving was taught in a very traditional way, as were all the sculpture skills; it was a skill-based school, which Fullard radically changed.

MG? In what way?

PB? He got rid of the life figure from the two sculpture studios and encouraged the use of salvaged materials. The King’s Road at that time was going through a radical transformation. All the leases came to an end some time in 1960 and ’61. Many of the old shops were being gutted to make way for the new boutiques like Mary Quant and Tuffin and Foale, so there was all this raw material just lying around. For Fullard the only use for a life class was if it was part of a process for thinking and examining what observation meant, not for creating a facsimile of what was in front of you.

MG? How were things when you arrived at the Slade?

PB? There was a feud going on between William Coldstream and the Head of Sculpture, Professor A. H. Gerard – both remarkable men in their own way. Gerard was very much about formal structures that could be discovered and visualized from nature. He was probably a very skilled carver, but I was in no mood for any of that.

MG? Were conservative pedagogical methods of any use to you?

PB? No they were not. At the Slade, we were told to work from the figure, it was compulsory. I wanted to re-invent what sculpture could be, to experiment with weird, non-sculptural materials. It would have been easier to have made a complete break with sculpture altogether, in the way that Terry Atkinson was doing with his Fine Artz group, in relationship to painting. Because I was still working within the discipline of sculpture I was expected to comply rather than explore beyond the given formal and material boundaries of
sculpture. So my first year at the Slade was depressing, but then the atmosphere became lively and rebellious. Larry Rivers did a residency, and Robert Rauschenberg visited. Thorold Dickinson, who was running the film course, was bringing in films that were completely ahead of their time and so different from the rigid language of sculpture and painting that was being taught. When I started teaching, it was film which inspired me most.

MG? When did you begin to teach?

PB? I got a job in 1966 at the Bristol School of Art and then went to Chelsea from 1967 to 1978. From the mid-to late 1960s to the early 1970s every art school was employing young tutors straight from art college. It was very exciting; groups like Art & Language were bubbling away, and lots of different art school models were being developed. By 1978 my work was idiosyncratic and unfashionable and I felt isolated. I had three children, so I left Chelsea and returned to teaching in 1983, now with five children, so I needed regular income. I got a job at Brighton with Alison Wilding, Edward Allington, Peter Randal-Page and Eric Bainbridge. It was the most brilliant year I’ve ever had teaching.

MG? What made it so brilliant?

PB? We believed that the course should be based on a critical presence – nothing new in that, but we emphasized scrutinizing the work as a group, where different points of view could flourish. From my point of view, I was also being educated by my colleagues, who were exhibiting internationally. I was surprised to get the job because I was completely unknown, 40 years old and at a fragile stage in my artistic development. The opportunity to work with these astonishing artists was beyond my wildest dreams and they have remained great friends and hugely important to me.

MG? Who were your students during that year at Brighton?

PB? They included Rachel Whiteread, Stephen Pippin and Lee Andrews who all went on to have fantastic success with their work.

MG? Where did you go then?

PB? I went to do a shared post at Camberwell in sculpture with a well-known artist, Brian Catling. The invitation was to change the content of the sculpture course, which we took very literally. Paul de Monchaux, the head of the sculpture course, had established an incredible course and was leaving. Our input seemed to rock the boat, in conjunction with Wendy Smith and John Hilliard running the painting area; and then Tony Carter joined and Stephen Johnson. We all
injected completely new approaches into Camberwell, questioning what the subject, content and form of sculpture could be.

MG? So then you went to teach at the Slade, and it was divided into sculpture, painting and fine art media. It still is. How do you defend such a structure in a post-medium age?

PB? I can only defend it so long as those three disciplines come together as a debate, to explore why somebody is able to define their activity, for example, as painting, and to relate that to sculpture, film, video, photography, performance, etc. Artists borrow and steal from each other left, right and centre, and that’s what makes the debates come alive. Practical reasons can also make distinctions important because some processes require clean spaces, others require spaces where a mess can be made, some require walls, some require an open space, etc. Most students work on the cusp between disciplines. That is the most exciting place to be, conceptually and in practical terms: where painting comes off the wall, where sculpture becomes a projection, such as a film, video or slide, where projection becomes an object.

MG? What are the dangers for you of the art school courses that are not structured around mediums?

PB? In the past 20 years, many art schools have changed to courses that are not medium/discipline-specific. I think this departure gave way to an emphasis on subject-led work. Form has definitely been a non-starter. There has been a loss of understanding of the relationship between the work and the space it occupies. A kind of homogeneity has evolved where there can be an indifference to what the status of the work is once it has left the studio, or its place of manufacture, and to how and why and with what the work relates to within the space it occupies. The exhibiting space can become a conventional backdrop, rather than a potential for challenging the work and the viewer. In courses organised around medium or disciplines, discussions about the use of space are promoted, and these raise many other issues, including the contentious issue of art as commodity. The all-in-one fine art courses probably make sense, but might miss out on debates which the medium specific courses can shake up more effectively because issues are more blatantly exposed, less disguised.

MG? Do you think medium-based art degrees risk producing students who consider formal questions at the expense of attention to subject matter?

PB? Subject matter has dominated over form and content for some time, whatever the chosen discipline or medium. Knowing the subject of the work has been in the ascendance
since the late 1980s. But things are changing. There is a surge of interest in making work in order to discover a subject.

MG? What do you regard as the role of the tutor in a one-on-one situation?

PB? It is essential to give myself up wholly to what the student has to say about the position they find themselves in, in relationship to their work, physically, emotionally, psychologically, socially, politically. It’s important that the student is encouraged to articulate their creative position. This is very different from group teaching which is becoming increasingly important in the form of group tutorials and seminars.

MG? What do you think is the role of the group tutorial?

PB? To enable students as a group to take on the formal and aesthetic issues of presentation, to understand its intentions and to question the status of the work: is it finished or a work in progress? Is it political? What are the implications of the work being placed, located in a particular way? And of course, who is the work for? A group offers up a diversity of responses which come from the students, where disagreements can open up the complexity of the discussion and not close it down with a single point of view. Also, I think group teaching can disrupt moral judgments, for example about hard work, or political correctness, as well as creative judgments, and develop a more investigatory approach.

MG? What do you do with students who can’t or won’t address the questions you just mentioned? I’ve heard you talk about the right of the artist not to write about their work.

PB? I think that if somebody comes on a fine art course, it has to be very clear that they’re part of a group, even if they want to operate as a loner. I don’t think everybody is able to articulate what they’re doing, but I think the ones who really find it difficult are very different from the ones who don’t want to or refuse and you have to find out why: it might be the beginning of developing a position, for example, where the work has to speak for itself. And then the question is: well, does the work speak for itself, or is this refusal to speak just defensive?

MG? When you see work in the studio that resembles work the student doesn’t know about, at what point is it appropriate for you to inform them?

PB? Straight away, because what they’re doing is contextualizing their work, and there should be as few nasty shocks when they leave art school as possible, such as realizing that their work is an unintentional pastiche of an
artist’s work they never knew about. As tutors we must inform in all kinds of ways. But you have to be open to getting it wrong. Perhaps you thought the work looked like a John Bock or a Peter Doig, and then you realize, through discussion, that the student has been engaged with a totally different kind of process, with totally different references.

MG? At what point do you remember students having to take art history and theory seminars and writing essays?

PB? It was about 1969. But it was in a very different form to what is usually taught now. Stuart Morgan, that remarkable critic and observer of 20th-century art, spoke about being taught liberal studies – which is what history and theory courses were called then – in Brighton in the 1970s. One of the first student essays I remember seeing was delivered in a suitcase on wheels with a drawing of Donald Duck on it; when you opened the suitcase, it was like a jack-in-the-box, and the whole essay sprang out; it was a complete re-enactment of a Donald Duck cartoon, done as a critical work.

MG? So liberal studies were a component of the fine arts course, and the students were writing essays?

PB? Yes, but not just on the history of art, which was rather despised.

MG? Now we have a history and theory component at Slade. Do you see this as a necessary part of art school education?

PB? On the one hand I think that students need a history and theory component whether they are naturally good at it or not. But there are students whose interests lie in questioning the state of contemporary art, who might be better served presenting their critical processes in a different form: as a lecture, forum, seminar, performance, recording or documentary with greater emphasis on images than words. I think it is easy for academicism to creep in and yet, clearly, not all art students have this ability and they can become disadvantaged by the very system they have elected to join.

MG? How do you guard against that kind of establishment of orthodoxy among your students?

PB? Years ago I invited Richard Wentworth in to give the crit of the postgraduate course final exhibition. He sent all the students a postcard asking them to ‘name the orthodoxies that have influenced your work and your final exhibition’, and not a single student understood the question. At the time, the work of the YBAs was taken as an orthodoxy, but Richard suggested that the students had the opportunity to examine and challenge the very orthodoxies that the YBA
phenomenon had created. Now slacker art seems to appeal to a lot of students, perhaps because it signals a very quick way of doing things, and it is economically viable, and do-able under all sorts of conditions including the bed-sit! But you can guard against orthodoxies by encouraging students to really interrogate what’s actually in front of them.

MG? Do you find students are increasingly directing their work towards commercially successful careers?

PB? By the early 1990s, the emergence of YBAs became a model for a certain kind of career ambition. These artists proved that you could make money out of your art, which of course other generations had not been able to do to that extent. At degree shows now, paintings and other wall-based work always sell quite well, but students have begun to assess and rigorously debate the limitations of commercialism. Degree shows are still filled with projections, performances, installations, which don’t tend to sell. Students also realize that financial success can be isolating and can remove an artist from knowing what is going on at a grass roots level, and there might be many surprises there with new ways of questioning and resourcing how to be an artist. Having said all this, it would be churlish not to celebrate a sale of work, and the possibility for students to recuperate the huge overdrafts they accrue. As someone who hasn’t made money commercially from my work, I encourage students to address questions relating to their futures outside art school. ‘Do you actually need a studio, because studios are expensive? Are you self-sufficient enough to actually get on with producing work in an economically viable way, and does this involve doing some God-awful job for three days a week?’ Economically it’s so tough to live in London and support yourself as an artist. There should be no snobbery at all about going on a teacher training course or something like that, which will give you an income to survive while you make your own work, albeit, in the little spare time you have.

MG? Are fewer artists going into teaching because they can be more easily supported by sales?

PB? When I started to teach, art schools were seen as a form of patronage. There was less emphasis on whether you showed your work or not: it was about having the space and time to make work within your own studio, and teaching afforded the means to do that. That whole culture of art schools being patrons has virtually disappeared without trace. A lot of artists who emerged at the YBA time said, ‘We’re not teaching; we’re going to sell’. But I think some of them have had to come back to teaching. The financial success they had in the early years has not sustained itself, and they are looking for jobs in art schools and bring a wealth
of experience from that time, which is fascinating.

MG? One reason to teach is to replenish your ideas about art-making. Are there any particular instances you can tell us about of the impact of teaching on the development of your practice?

PB? I think the evolution of the physical has influenced me, and I think being wrong-footed always intrigues me. I once made the mistake of referring to Bruce Nauman’s work as pure sculpture and a student, Jasper Joseph Lester, went ballistic and said that you must never use the word ‘pure’ in relationship to the visual arts – it has fascistic connotations. I attempted to justify what I had said: in Nauman’s sculptures of the 1980s, there is no single, ultimate viewing position; they prompt you to keep on moving around, under and across them. But Jasper was right to challenge my use of the word and he made me think more clearly.

MG? What do you predict will happen to fine arts degree courses?

PB? One way I hope fine art degree courses might change is to be more inclusive, less didactic about what is good and what is bad art and to take risks with the applicants who could be offered places on fine art courses. Also, it is now critical and crucial to represent the cosmopolitan nature of a country like the UK within the student intake. Can a broader cross-section of society, culturally and economically, be tempted to apply to art schools? And what is meant by ‘non-western’? These are now very important issues, not just for art schools but for art as a whole.

MG? You’ve been worried about fine arts degree courses becoming too academic. What do you perceive as the problems with this?

PB? There’s a pressure on fine art courses to include PhD courses and that can emphasize an over-theoretical approach to art supported by the economical fact that PhDs are the cheapest courses to fund as they require the least support ... a supervisor and two or three meetings per year, and funding raised by the student in question. Very different from the much more expensive BA courses which require a lot of support: tutors, technical advisors, studios, workshops etc. Too much emphasis on the theoretical can change the culture of fine art courses by the influence from the PhD culture. It’s seen hierarchically as though the PhD is the top with the BA or the foundation courses at the bottom. If there has got to be a hierarchy then it should be about how work is made, how it is to be shown, what it is examining, what questions it is provoking, what the nature of the experiment might be ... these are issues which can be either adventurous or banal at
any level. A PhD does not mean better art. In fact, it is often the opposite.

MG? If you were the head of an art school or the founder of a new art school where you didn’t have to answer to any university requirements yet had to award a degree, how would you assess a three-year BA course?

PB? Maybe by simply granting students a pass or fail for their degree result. Perhaps to get rid of degrees altogether and place greater importance on being able to fail, to understand that as a crucial and critical part of making work. An imaginative, challenging, politicized and contentious awareness of how to present work, not just as an exhibition but as particular to the requirements of the work, would, and is, a key issue of the art school process. If some students elected to be silent, I think that would have to be accommodated, and, as mentioned before, to be understood as a statement in its own right, or as a protest, an act of repudiation ... a rare event in art schools now because the financial stakes are high and parents are implicated in the funding of their children’s higher education, which has put the brakes on single-minded acts of rebellion, so to speak. Parents are more likely to complain about their children’s degree result than the student. It is a bizarre situation with students terrified of failure. But an art school has a responsibility to enable students to become articulate and confident about what they are presenting, because that’s what they’ll need when they leave.

MG Do you think that in the UK and internationally there are too many fine arts degrees creating too many artists?

PB There’s a ‘stack ‘em high, sell ‘em cheap’ educational ethos being nudged into place. It probably has something to do with government statistics, trying to drive down the unemployment figures by keeping as many young people as possible in education for as long as possible. However, what is interesting is that, however remote and economically up against it a fine art course might be, you will still find exceptionally talented students on that course. Also, fine art courses have the potential to prepare students for more than a life as a visual artist. Traditionally art schools were, and perhaps still are, the seed-beds for all kinds of creative promise, for writers, musicians, film directors, performers, organizers, administrators, curators, critics, educationalists, teachers etc. It should not be under estimated what a rich resource an art school education can be.

Mark Godfrey teaches at the Slade School of Art, University College, London and is writing a book, Abstraction and the Holocaust, for Yale University Press.