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Why Do Colleges Have So Much Art?

Campus museums are home to prodigious exhibits and installations that blur the line between academics and civics.



Students at Colby College's Museum of Art

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JACOBA URIST | NOV 1, 2016 | EDUCATION

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Look up at the University of California, San Diego, and there may be a small blue house teetering on the roof of a building—a dramatic piece of contemporary artwork. In Austin, the University of Texas raised nearly \$22 million for a one-of-a-kind Ellsworth Kelley chapel, while a bold, new 41,000-square-foot contemporary-art institute is underway at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond. Public or private, rural or urban, college museums are tackling ambitious projects like never before, promoting academic curators—who were once part of a sleepier, insular art world—to be lead actors on the cultural stage.

But not everyone agrees that school museums should compete with their mainstream counterparts or that students necessarily benefit more from having art of such magnitude as opposed to more modest collections. The ongoing art wave raises questions about whether college museums have outlived their primary purpose as educational institutions and perhaps now serve a different function in both academic and art circles. The historian Dominic Green recently [critiqued](#) the “worldwide arms race among museums,” with each trying to outdo the other. Green was referring to the “grandiosity” of the Tate Modern in London and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, but the same sentiment applies to campus art: How much is too much?

Historically, college museums have called themselves “[teaching museums](#)”—in other words, places where students can experience objects and artifacts first-hand, as opposed to merely studying them in textbooks or online. [Campus collections](#) were meant to push conversations not only in art-history courses, but across disciplines and departments, too. And

often, they still do—while filling a cultural gap in college towns. A recent exhibit at the University of Virginia’s Fralin Museum of Art titled [Andy Warhol: Icons](#), for instance, showed, as the interim co-director Jordan Love described, numerous, epic Warhol silkscreens of figures from Saint Apollonia (the patron saint of dentistry) to Annie Oakley, Liza Minnelli, and Marilyn Monroe, tracing the historical concept of the celebrity. “The Fralin is one of two fine-art museums in Charlottesville,” Love said. “We take pride in providing visitors with the opportunity to view works by world-renowned artists, without having to go to Richmond or D.C.” As a teaching tool, this show asked the university’s sociology, English, history, and media students: From medieval times to the age of Instagram, how do icons gain their status?



“Fallen Star,” 2012, by Do Ho Suh in UC San Diego’s Stuart Collection (Philipp Scholz-Rittermann)

On a more practical level, Virginia’s [Clinician’s Eye program](#) uses art to

teach medical students visual analysis and pattern recognition, while other med schools use paintings to help students better empathize with patients. Pamela Franks, the Yale Art Gallery's acting director, describes how future physicians study pieces in the Ivy League institution's collection through a program called [Making the Invisible Visible: Art, Identity, and Hierarchies of Power](#), which is required for incoming medical students. Duane Hanson's "[Drug Addict](#)" (a hyper-real, fiberglass sculpture of a young guy with a rubber tourniquet and needles at Yale's museum), for example, prompts students to discuss their preconceptions about drug addiction. Made in 1974, the "man" still looks surprisingly current, which is one of the reasons it works so well in this educational context.

In some ways, the race to popularize campus art reflects a new kind of literacy. In [Magic And Loss: The Internet As Art](#), Virginia Hefferenan observes how the influence of visual media has, fundamentally, changed what it means to be literate: People now communicate in graphics, images, and video more than they do in text. By extension, the writer Amy Whitaker's new book [Art Thinking](#) describes how creativity writ large teaches science, engineering, and business students to engage in open-ended exploration and rethink what's possible in their fields—areas of study not typically associated with college museums. After all, inventions from the iPhone to the [first self-contained mechanical heart](#) rely on aesthetics and a unique kind of technological artistry.

In another facet of the arts race, college museums often seek a big name, a "[starchitect](#)," so the building competes with some of the world's premier cultural centers—and is as much a work of art as the items inside. In Waterville, Maine, Colby College boasts a collection of nearly 900 works by the acclaimed figurative painter Alex Katz, who's currently showcased in the year-long [Alex Katz at the Met](#) exhibit. Colby has a dedicated Katz

curator (whose position is endowed by the artist) and a [permanent wing](#) featuring his work that was designed by the prominent gallery architect Max Gordon. VCU's Institute for Contemporary Art was designed by acclaimed museum architect, [Steven Holl](#), and the newly integrated Harvard Museums by Renzo Piano (known for the Whitney and Centre Pompidou). While Piano's renovation received [mixed reviews](#), Harvard now enjoys a collection of 250,000 objects under one roof. And staggering campus art is hardly contained to museum construction and gallery exhibitions.

Schools are increasingly commissioning site-specific work from edgier artists, too, for campus libraries, quads and buildings not associated with art education. Take UC San Diego's "Fallen Star"—a blue house on the edge of a roof—by the sculptor Do Ho Suh, a work financed by private donations and a National Endowment for the Arts grant. One of 19 pieces in the campus's [Stuart Collection](#), "Fallen Star" teeters atop the main engineering building—a technical feat that easily makes it one of the most riveting sculptures in southern California.

And encapsulating both aspects of the current art climate in higher education: Bard College's [Hessel Museum](#) in Dutchess County, New York, commissioned "The Parliament of Reality"—a 135-foot art pond with an island in the middle—beside the school's Frank Ghery-designed Center for Performing Arts. The artist, Olafur Eliasson, is known for critically acclaimed work that temporarily resided at the [Tate Modern](#) and the [Palace of Versailles](#), but Bard students get to experience daily his first public, permanent installation in the U.S.

Indeed, colleges are becoming art-tourist destinations. Last fall, the University of Texas broke ground on Ellsworth Kelly's kaleidoscopic

chapel, “Austin,” the overall design plans for which the legendary painter gifted the school’s Blanton Museum of Art just before his death. Scheduled to open in early 2018, “Austin”—and by extension, the Blanton—is [destined](#) to attract art connoisseurs from all over the world: No doubt contemporary-art buffs will make special trips to the campus just to see this structure. From the renderings, it appears the University of Texas and its donors are creating a place of grand, artistic novelty and personal reflection in the tradition of Matisse’s “[Chapelle du Rosaire](#)” in southern France and the “[Rothko Chapel](#)” in Houston.



Ellsworth Kelly's "Austin" at the University of Texas (Tessa Krieger-Carlisle)

For some critics, though, this overall approach to art feels too art-worldy for universities. Indeed, educators have [accused](#) colleges of catering to art critics and wealthy patrons at the expense of the academic community. A recent *New York Times* fine-arts section, for example, had an ad for the Yale Art Gallery's Rhode Island Furniture exhibit, as well as a Botticelli show at the College of William and Mary.

But visitor traffic, [at least traditionally](#), is a standard [metric of success](#) for "recreational" museums. And fostering an engaging, challenging, or wide-ranging art experience for the largest number of visitors is typically not a university's mission nor is it how campus curators justify projects within their parent universities. As Rudolph Weingartner, the former Northwestern dean of arts and sciences, wrote in 2009 for [Inside Higher Ed](#), the central premise of the college museum is that it's unlike a city one. He's argued for the reclassification of many college museums as multi-use art centers or galleries that host rotating exhibits for students and faculty rather than large quasi-public spaces.

On the dedication of Harvard's Piano building, *The Washington Post*'s chief art critic, Philip Kennicott, struggled with the difference between "teaching" and "education." Unlike museum education departments, [he wrote](#), "a teaching museum conceives of the process [of viewing art] more actively, led by authoritative experts who are comfortable with the structural inequities of the student-teacher dynamic." In many ways, this characterization reflects a broader debate in higher education about authority in the classroom versus the idea that students should be active in the construction of knowledge—that their courses are a form of guided participation. Café and gift shop aside, Kennicott argues that the Harvard

Museums foster “active” and “focused curiosity” versus the “general, free floating curiosity of the usual museum visitor.”

Yet these days, the line between campus museums and their civic counterparts is often more blurry than that. Indeed, encyclopedic museums have sophisticated educational departments, too. Some offer lectures, [symposia](#), and [classes](#) that rival (if not surpass) those at universities—and for good reason. Directors and curators regularly move between academic and non-academic posts, bringing their scholarship and perspective with them. And the hazier the line gets between academic and nonacademic museums, the harder it may be to justify them based on curricular impact of college art alone.

Two recent exhibits, whose art is drawn from city collections, illustrate the problem with the “teaching museum” as a campus distinction per se. Over the last decade, contemporary shows have grown more complex, to the point that even “tourist” museums often demand a more studious viewer. For its inaugural show, which closed in September, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s annex the Met Breuer presented [Unfinished: Thoughts Less Visible](#), a display of incomplete artwork—either accidentally (say, a subject died before a painting’s completion) or by the artist’s design. The show ranged from more classic works by Rembrandt and Cézanne to Félix González-Torres’s pile of [interactive candy](#) and Janine Antoni’s “[Lick and Lather](#)” (molds of the artist’s head—one chocolate, the other soap—that she licked and bathed with to erode their features). A visitor can’t just stroll through Unfinished and appreciate the flow of these masterpieces in context like one might casually enjoy a room of chronological Monet paintings or the eye-popping survey of contemporary art at L.A.’s latest museum, The Broad.



Duane Hanson's "Drug Addict," 1974, at Yale University's Jane and Richard Levin Study Gallery (Jessica Smolinski)

To apply Kennicott's commentary on teaching museums, Unfinished puts one "in the position of being a student of art, rather than simply an audience member or passive spectator." [Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney's Collection](#), on view through February, similarly demands an absorbed, generous viewer, asking patrons: Is likeness essential to portraiture? Can you have a portrait without a person? Urs Fischer's [giant wax statue](#) of his friend, the artist Julian Schnabel, will burn down through the course of the show. (My last visit, only a trace of Julian's melted head remained on the floor.)

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In today's art world, the role of the college museum or campus art institute appears more as an experimental institution than a teaching one—and

therein may lie their unique educational value. Massachusetts Institute of Technology's art museum, the [List Visual Arts Center](#), for example, considers itself a research lab, engaged in a form of scientific inquiry, according to its director, Paul C. Ha. College curators can explore untested artists and mediums, free from museum-board pressures to increase annual turnstile numbers with blockbuster shows. But, Ha explained, some exhibits at List—such as [Rosa Barba's "film sculptures"](#) and videos of MIT professor, [Joan Jonas's](#) performance art—have resonated strongly with the public, too.

On its [website](#), VCU's coming Institute of Contemporary Art calls itself "an incubator for interdisciplinary experimentation." At the University of California, Los Angeles, the Hammer Museum similarly serves as a research lab for art and learning, but in this case with a global following well beyond its campus. Hammer's third biennial, [Made In L.A. 2016](#), featured work by some the city's best emerging artists, such as Rafa Esparza's large adobe brick installation, "tierra," on which he placed a series of objects, including an arm chair with a cactus and a mailbox, which he had buried at Elysian Park in [Chavez Ravine](#). The area is known for having been home to generations of Mexican Americans. But, according to the [Los Angeles Times](#), more than 1,000 families were forced from the neighborhood to make way for Dodger Stadium; those who experienced the displacement call themselves "los desterrados" (the uprooted). "Like the university, we are a laboratory for the research and discovery of the art and ideas that define and redefine our culture today," said Hammer's director, Ann Philbin.

As university scientists [partner](#) with the outside world, art research and development is increasingly expanding beyond the ivory tower, too. Academic curators include neighbors and local arts organizations, making

college museums centers of broader social advances.



Olafur Eliasson's "The Parliament of Reality," 2009, at Bard College (Chris Kendall)

In 2012, for the design of its [Logan Center for the Arts](#), the University of Chicago created two main entrances: one for the campus, and the other facing the city's Woodlawn neighborhood on the South Side. Bill Michel, the executive director of [UChicago Arts](#) and the Logan Center, describes these as architectural representations of the school's ambitions, citing a piece of music by Mwata Bowden, [director of the University of Chicago's jazz ensemble](#). Bowden composed "[Maze Factor Suite, Two Front Doors](#)," which he performed at the 2012 opening at the Logan Center, telling the audience "there's no back door"—a moment, according to Michel, manifesting all the university set out to accomplish.

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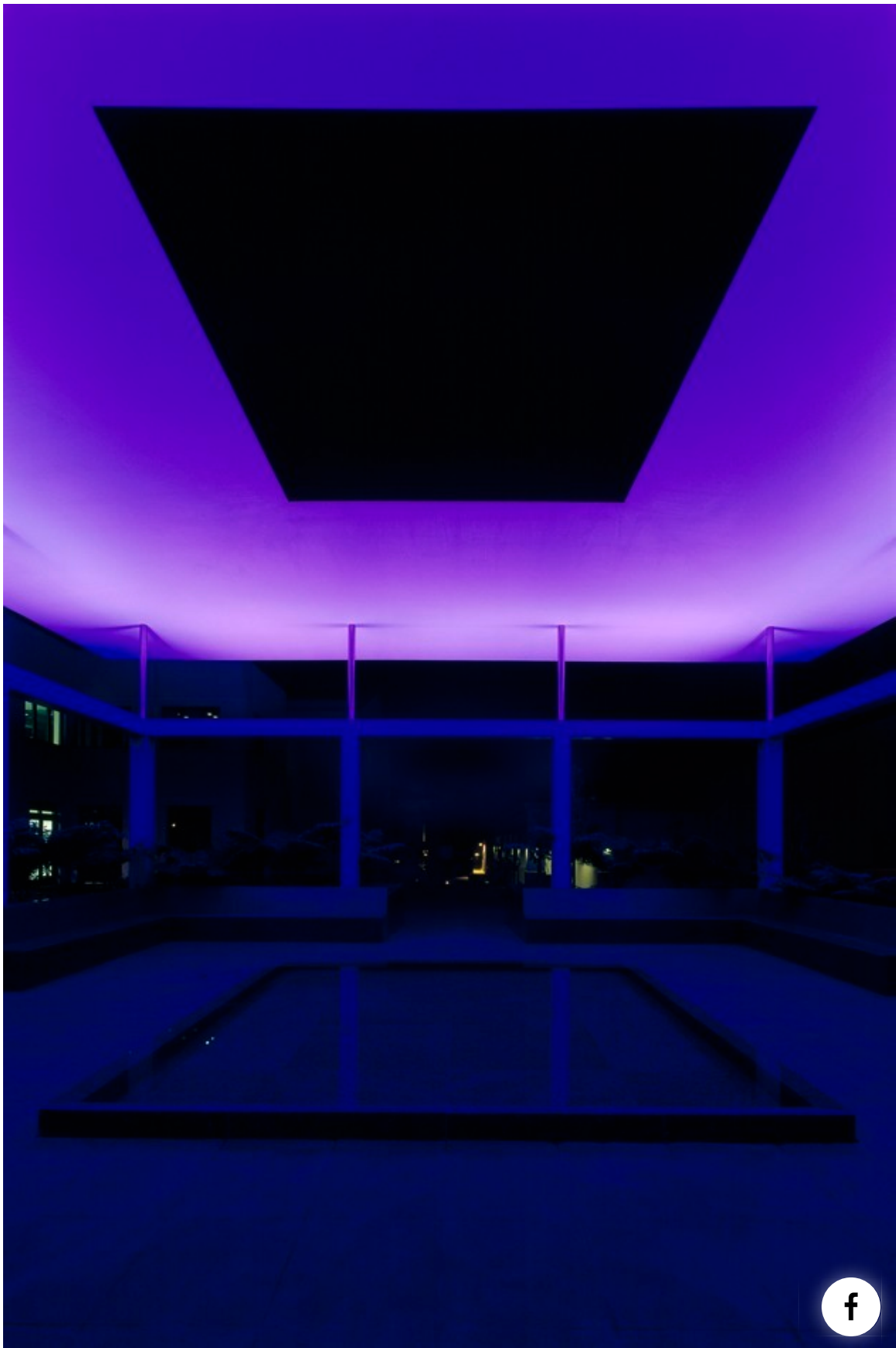
But students have criticized curatorial choices for being too aggressive. Art-as-experimentation on campus presents its own challenges. In 2014, pockets of Wellesley's community blasted its Davis Museum for placing Tony Matelli's "[Sleepwalker](#)"—a hyper-real sculpture of a bald man in sagging Hanes—outdoors, in the snow, on a women's college campus. Lisa Fischman, the director of the museum, posted on the school's website: "I love the idea of art escaping the museum and muddling the line between what we expect to be inside (art) and what we expect to be outside (life)."

But as [I wrote](#) that winter, for hundreds of Wellesley women, "Sleepwalker" wasn't simply a piece of contemporary sculpture or an exploratory exercise. According to their petition to remove "Sleepwalker," it was a source of fear, a trigger for victims of sexual assault at Wellesley. Two years later, "Sleepwalker" now roams [Manhattan's High-Line](#) as part of Wanderlust, a group exploring themes of walking and pilgrimage—so far, [without controversy](#). It is an ironic twist: The sculpture may have been too experimental for a college campus but not for the general public in an outdoor park.

On the one hand, unlike other classroom topics, pieces like "Sleepwalker," can spur not only political and social debate but also particularly personal associations. As the contemporary painter Vincent Desiderio [observed](#), art goes to dangerous places and successful art can spark deep emotion. At the same time, colleges are not just a setting for public or academic exhibits; they're home to millions of students, implying at least a certain degree of sanctuary.

This summer, Peter Salovey, the president of Yale, grappled with this issue after a black [cafeteria worker smashed](#) a slavery-themed, stained-glass window in Yale's Calhoun dorm (named after the anti-abolitionist [John C.](#)

Calhoun). “Certain images across our campus may be more appropriately studied in a gallery or museum” as part of an exhibit with historic context rather than in residences or workplaces, Salovey [emailed](#) the Yale community.



James Turrell's "Dividing the Light," 2007, at Pomona College (Florian Holzherr)

But if any school's experience represents a referendum on whether colleges still need art museums, it is that of Brandeis, now hailed as a kind of Phoenix rising from the art ashes. In 2009, [reeling from the financial crisis](#), university trustees voted unanimously to close its Rose Art Museum and sell pieces from the collection of over 7,000 pieces, worth more than \$500 million. With a potential \$79 million deficit, Brandeis trustees saw Rose's paintings as available, liquid assets to close university budget gaps. But museum supporters fundamentally view art in a different—nearly intangible—way, with strict [ethical guidelines](#) about artwork sales: The potential monetary value of an object, campus-art advocates argue, shouldn't determine whether or not to sell it.

Brandeis students, alumni, and faculty mounted [protests](#), but the art world vehemently [rallied](#) around Rose, too. *The New York Times* art critic [Roberta Smith](#) called the Brandeis trustees' vote "a raid on a museum that supports itself." The controversy continued for over two years, until the university settled a lawsuit, brought by a group of donors and alumni in an effort to stop Brandeis from selling Rose's art. Today, the museum has achieved one the highest accolades in the world of contemporary art. Under the leadership of then-director Christopher Bedford (who in August became the head of Baltimore's Museum of Art), Brandeis was selected by the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural affairs to represent the U.S. with abstract-collage painter, Mark Bradford, at [the 2017 Venice Biennale](#), known as the "art Olympics."

Last June, on a cold evening, I sat beneath Pomona's public installation, "[Dividing the Light](#)," one of the sculptor James Turrell's famous Skyscapes. Turrell, who studied [perceptual psychology and mathematics](#)

as a Pomona undergraduate, is known for using light projections that change in hue and intensity to create optical illusions. Every day, at dusk, visitors quietly gather under a floating metal canopy in the Draper Courtyard, open to the public, for a [lighting program](#) that seemingly alters the color of the sky as it transitions from twilight to full night. One minute the clouds look lavender, the next pitch black—an apt metaphor for the impact grand, contemporary art can have on campus. Overall, the mission of college art may have evolved from strictly a teaching tool to something much more exploratory. But when students perceive their world differently, they become more imaginative and inventive thinkers.

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