



At the Intersection of Art and Science

by Andrew Allan

As a teenager, Christa Robbins began her college career intent on becoming a painter. But after a few years toiling in oils on canvas and earning her bachelor of fine arts degree in painting and printmaking, she realized she was more interested in studying art than in making it. So Robbins left the studio behind to become an art historian—a rare transition for someone in her shoes. “I made the conscious decision to stop making art,” she says.

Three years later, she landed at the University of Chicago, studying under art and media theorist W. J. T. Mitchell; she focused on modern abstract painting and criticism and earned her PhD in 2010. After teach-

ing appointments at the University of Illinois, Chicago; Cornell College; and Texas Christian University, Robbins came to Caltech in 2013 as the Mellon Caltech-Huntington Postdoctoral Instructor in Art History, a position created by John Brewer, Caltech's Eli and Edye Broad Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences and professor of history and literature.

Even though she says she "fits in by not fitting in" at Caltech, the flexibility and freedom that the Institute gives its researchers, as well as the region's cultural resources, were a real draw for Robbins.

Her research focuses mainly on 20th-century abstract painting, but, according to Robbins, she doesn't just write about paintings and provide a biographical account of what an artist does and how he or she goes about making objects.

"My work distinguishes itself by focusing on the art object as rhetorical—an object that's capable of making arguments and intervening in theoretical, philosophical, and political discourse," she notes. "I think of the objects as discursive, meaning they intervene in conversations and thinking processes that are unfolding around them."

For example, Robbins is currently working on a book that deals with how midcentury—late 1940s to mid 1970s—American paintings offer arguments about the definition of self and how that definition figures into legal, psychological, and philosophical contexts.

"I write about painting in the postwar period because it was the dominant art form at that time—it's what a work of art was for the majority of people," she says. "As such, it is where important arguments were made in the cultural sphere that were simultaneously being made in the social sphere."

She translates her research not only into the written word, but also into her teaching practices at Caltech. During the last academic year, she taught three courses: an introduction to modern art, a survey of West Coast

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art since the 1960s, and an exploration of collaborations between artists and scientists from the 1960s to the present.

"I like to look at artists and scholars who have attempted to do something where these two disciplines—art and science—are brought together," she says. "My work is inspired by trying to figure out how we can make science more accessible to a larger body so that people can make better informed decisions when it comes to dealing with scientific issues, like genetically modified foods, vaccines—items you see in the news all the time."

So she uses her time in the classroom to expose a new generation of students to artists working at the intersection of science and art, shining a light on people like Steve Kurtz, one of the founders of the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), an artist-activist group concerned with corporate and state uses of the sciences.

"The CAE wants to put knowledge in people's hands," says Robbins. "They want to mitigate the lack of conversation that we have in the public about legislation or corporate decisions that direct where research goes, or how science enters our lives. That was at the heart of my wanting to do the collaborations class."

Robbins adds that she feels strongly that those creating advances in technology need to be responsible

to the public, especially because scientific and technological research is trending toward privatization. To that end, she explores topics—both in her research and in the classroom—that include data sharing, data use, and "hacktivism," or artists who take a more activist stance in relation to the sciences.

"I am interested in contemporary art that claims to be participatory or relational—works that are research based and are more about an artist going out into a community and enacting some sort of program or some research project that results not in an object, but rather in a situation or an experience," says Robbins.

In her collaborations class, she and her students discuss artists such as Eduardo Kac, who performs his own genetic experiments in a creative manner and brings conversation about genetic manipulation to the public in a new way, she says. They end the quarter on the topic of electronic disturbance, looking at artists who actively intervene in scientific practice for political and cultural reasons.

Exposing Caltech students to such topics is of critical importance to Robbins because she wants to see future scientists effectively navigate their cultural and social worlds.

"If you don't have access to all the disciplines that shape our world, then you can't be an active citizen," she says. "The conversations we're having in my classes are very much about not just whether science can talk across disciplines, but what its obligation is to a larger public. A lot of the artists we talk about try not to take a stance on what science should do, but rather take a stance on how scientists should speak to us about what they're doing." [E&S](#)

Christa Robbins is the Mellon Caltech-Huntington Postdoctoral Instructor in Art History. Her book on midcentury American paintings and the definition of self is slated to be published in 2015.