

## Artistic Intensity: Redescribing Redundant Dualism

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### 1 Preamble

Offered from the perspective of a UK Professor of Art & Design, this essay is intent on encouraging you to think less about there being a clear and plausible distinction between theory and practice and to think more about the holistic world-constituting properties of what I posit as *artistic intensity*. This erosion of implausible distinction in favour of a distinctive holism I want you to see and apply to your understanding of and engagement with both the art academy context and to the *actuality* of art if you will. Indeed, one implicit polemical line of argument in this contribution advises of *no* salient distinction between theory and practice when one focuses on a particular reading of the ends of 'both' under the aegis of our newly-formed artistic intensity.

In order to support your reading of the new terminology, and to begin the act of persuasion for its adoption, a pause here to offer a preliminary definition of this vocabulary. To somewhat pre-empt conclusion, artistic intensity must be understood in the fullness of its integrative (creative [and grammatical]) form. It is at once the *act* of integrated critical analysis and the *impact* of the particular quality of that integrated act. It is a critical and creative verb and it is a critical and creative noun; artistic intensity is a holistic *voun*.

Artistic intensity is the *act* of that form of critical attention that holistically conjoins erstwhile theoretical understanding with practical transformation in a symbiosis that sees one become the other and both reappear as one in a new vocabulary and creative formation. Artistic intensity is the *impact* of the particular quality of cultural production born from that type of critical attention. Artistic intensity is all together a force that can remake that which is given in this world – with the remaking resident in the formations of the act, and in the reformations brought about by the impact of engagement with those formations.

The chapter intent is supported by ideas drawn from, in particular, Pragmatist thought, on this occasion from Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty. Pragmatist writing represents a body

of diverse work that has informative resonance with goals and ambitions that might be regarded as common across the Art & Design sector in Europe and North America.

Pragmatist ontologies are highly relevant to this debate and highly relevant to attempts to undermine the dualism resident in theory practice separation. Before Vattimo and Rorty, the work of Henk Borgdorff and James Elkins helps frame the persistent separation of theory and practice and points toward a Pragmatist endpoint for the particularities of artistic intensity.

The essay is concerned with, firstly, the actual conjoinedness of theory and practice, the two things too often held apart. Secondly, working on the argument for conjoinedness from the opposite direction so to speak, the essay is concerned with actively doubting the dubious but recognisable rationale for holding theory and practice apart. That rationale is prevalent still in the art academy and dubious for being more political than disciplinary and often dressed speciously as philosophical. From this second critical direction, the essay tries to discern the shadowy shape of something pernicious in the rationale that would maintain an unchallenged dichotomy for theory and practice, for that rationale might be seen as one that is bonded to an anachronistic conception of discipline specialism that says more about the political predilections of formative disciplines as manifested in institutions than the substantiveness of art and design, or how art and design is made, or what those makings might mean, or how those makings might be significant in ways occluded by the very dichotomy designed to preserve the standing of both components. In short, there might be a lingering disconnect between aspects of art academy formations and the theoretical and practical reality of practice in practice as it were.

Of course, given the opening sentence of the chapter, I can see the immediate paradox in maintaining the two concepts as distinct concepts even if only for as long as it takes to bring them 'back' together, but such is the demand of an academic preamble. Our community of Art & Design does indeed see, as do our distinguished editors, that, for better or for worse, there *is* a strand of Art & Design discourse that extends the two concepts like train tracks, having set off north from Hauptbahnhof Plato via Cartesian South to Coldstream UK Central, taking in a succession of intermediary stops of greater or lesser touristic academic interest en route. My chapter is, I hope, a mild provocation for

colleagues committed to that dualistic journey: a journey that masquerades as one with purpose by virtue of simple movement along those parallel tracks.

Artistic intensity is to be understood here not as a container of parts nor as an indicator of symbiosis of two discrete things in simultaneous, aporetic harmony but, rather, as a description of whole singularity; the singularity of that mode of creative enquiry that performs meaningfully to make the world perform meaningfully. Artistic intensity is predicated not upon passive reflection versus action but is grounded in the conception that it is only possible by a sophisticated endeavour of criticality which is as concerned with erstwhile theoretical apprehension as it is with practical manifestations and transformations, dependent as that attention is upon the needs of the inquiry and its object in the historical or contemporary world.

For this author, at least for this essay, any creative endeavour (practical or theoretical some might say) that imaginatively and memorably critiques, remakes and redescribes our given historical and contemporary world so that we might see it more clearly as it was and is, or so that we might shape it to protect itself from itself and from us in the future, is an endeavour of artistic intensity, on the part of artist and audience as agents united in remaking, as I return to in conclusion. First I wish to contend with some of the thinking familiar to us that would seek to journey along parallel lines.

## **2 Holding apart theory and practice**

Readers of this anthology will no doubt be familiar with the station stops through the history of ideas that add up to some kind of rationale for holding our two concepts theory and practice apart. I will not retrace what is a familiar route. I will, however, set down some of the salient points at issue with reference to key texts pertinent to our professional and intellectual discourse within Art & Design.

In the important book, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (2012),<sup>i</sup> Henk Borgdorff contextualises his wider address of artistic research by delineating two principal types of theory operative in the Art Academies and in the dichotomic theory-practice worldpicture: 1) *instrumental*, technical theory of production and technique, and 2) *interpretative*, reflective, distanced critical apprehension of the made works of artistic production. Those who know Borgdorff's

book will observe that I omit (for the time being) two additional Borgdorffian theory categories, *performative* and *immanent*, but I will come back to those two for I think they can in a certain sense direct us to what I mean by *artistic intensity*, and as such, can be seen to subsume the first two categories and serve for the whole.

Broadly speaking, in Borgdorff's schema instrumental theory is directed towards the accumulation of a body of knowledge and expertise used in the service of a specific artistic practice. It is a domain of 'instrumental knowledge specific to the craft, needed to practise the art form in question'.<sup>ii</sup> Interpretative theory is chiefly concerned with reflection and understanding of artistic practice, often with the feature of historical distance. It is a domain of 'reflection on artworks, or on the production or the reception of art, that rises above the level of the craft itself'.<sup>iii</sup>

Borgdorff can see emphasis being placed on the second type of theory in today's art academies. However, he attends to both types as salient elements of an art education delivered to students in discrete curricular ways that oftentimes belies their interdependence with the artistic practices that they serve adjacently in the normative academy model.

Borgdorff describes very plainly what we all know to be the case that practitioners can be, to say the least, sceptical about theory. That multiheaded entity *theory* is or represents something that has a high-definition self-identity superior to the unknowingness of practice, of practical production versus interpretative reflection. This condition is already invidious, and we recognise it in the academy and in the actuality of the artistic world, but it is amplified as seriously problematic when it translates into difficult-to-shift petty power dynamics, where specialist, interpretative theoretical reflection arrives to animate, so think the arrivistes at least, the mute practical artefact.

James Elkins has tabled a set of excellent explanatory analogies of the art academy critique that can help us see the theory practice dichotomy at work in our worlds, so too the distinction between instrumental and interpretative theory as detailed by Borgdorff.

Elkins in his now legendary, 'Why Art Cannot Be Taught' (2001), describes one confusing aspect of the studio art critique where the 'teachers waste time giving technical advice'.<sup>iv</sup> Identifying as does Borgdorff the presence and power dynamics of instrumental

and interpretative critique at work in the exchange between student and tutor, Elkins suggests that students often complain that their tutors spend too much time in crits talking about technical aspects of art produced as opposed to addressing resident meaning. The instrumental looms in studio for it is an easier common denominator to ground time-limited conversation for a one-to-one between student and (elusive) tutor.

Elkins can also see that tutors who have skills with interpretative theoretical reflection and who are comfortable with meaning-making with the practitioner present can hold power over a practitioner less adept with the vocabularies of interpretative meaning-making. For Elkins, the dynamics of such a scenario are akin to the power dynamics of lawyer and client. He gives colour indirectly to Borgdorff's sense of the overlordship of interpretative theory when he writes:

The legal metaphor is a very good way of thinking about the exercise of power in art critiques. A critique can be like the trials in Kafka's novel of that name: the defendant's attorney is either incompetent or absent, and either the jury is absent or the judges do double duty as jurors.<sup>v</sup>

Elkins can see an equalising prospect in such a scenario, whereby the meaning-free practitioner and the meaning-full interpretative theoriser might wander around together divining meaning gradually and equitably. Conversely, and more commonly, the holder of power through the *practice* (deliberately so described in this context) of interpretative theory in this studio context can position practice in parallel on the lesser side of the dichotomy by keeping his interpretative theorist's knowledge 'mostly secret' and his 'methods and rules [...] difficult to perceive'.<sup>vi</sup> The theorist meaning-maker is both judge and juror, potentially, and the cowed practitioner who has merely produced an object of silence seems at the mercy of their Cartesian, dichotomic other.

Art practitioners can be sceptical about theory, Borgdorff is undoubtedly right, but often the above interpretative theorist is also sceptical about practice, a psychological twist concealed commonly in the effusive expression of love by the self-appointed 'mere theorist' for the exotic products of the artist. The theorist clears her aversion for the silent aggression of much art by soothing the challenging dynamic with an interpretative theory poultice. She forces the *objét*, she thinks, to conform to normative meaning correspondence.

Those of us with enough experience of the workings of the art academy might look past the character actors in Elkins's situation drama to the shadowy shapes of the producers in the background. These are the agents whose rationale for holding our two concepts apart might better be described as operational rather than intellectual, more political than philosophical. These producers are academic dramatists, often trained in the Modernist atelier, dramatists whose stagecraft (or is that institutional statecraft) is concerned with the invented purity of *performing and making versus reflecting and interpreting*. Their will for separation is fuelled by the organisational niceties arising from grouping certain components and methods of academy provision in certain areas of the academy's estate; an ergonomic and formative-political act of dichotomy creation that underscores the overriding dualism with affiliated subsets: wet versus dry; dirty versus clean; hot versus cold; proactive versus reactive...and so on. Like a set of judges and jurors in Elkins's sense, these producers (who have much more in common in the production than their given roles would suggest) reserve the right to bamboozle the student with methods and meanings difficult to perceive, and how could they be wrong if the very structure of the location of study seems built upon those methods and meanings.

This is shadowy rationale for dualism that arises often tacitly from the combined (even if antagonistic) interests of the self-appointed practice purist and the self-appointed theorist meaning-maker. Ideology can play its part here, sometimes, but very often merely political, petty interests weigh in to maintain and sustain an organisational and operational dualism that requires the art academy student to produce messy (visual) and clean (textual) things during a course of study to satisfy the producers' twin tracks of educational travel.

Alongside the persistence of holding our two concepts apart we see lingering evidence of what might be described as 'the spirit of Cartesianism' in keeping with the Pragmatist critique of dualism of Charles Sanders Peirce. As explained by American academic, Richard Bernstein, this spirit for Peirce was all about the (unhelpful) continuation of 'a framework of thinking that had come to dominate much of modern philosophy – where sharp dichotomies are drawn between what is mental and physical, as well as subject and object'.<sup>vii</sup> Peirce's critique functions as a cornerstone of a great deal of Pragmatist thought and contextualises this offering in useful ways.

In our context the preservation of the theory practice divide is motivated by this spirit or attitude whereby the physical production of the art object is tempered or even justified by the mental practice of theory-subject. This is redolent of a Cartesian spectator worldview wherein the reflective mentalism of theory renders the artefacts of our world increasingly distant (ironically) in the attempt to render them more truthfully as they are in the world. Or is that sense of distance only felt by those for whom theory is not obtainable or practicable as a bridge from the obdurate physical to the sophisticated mental? If so, does not that worldview become political in an instant?

Enough rhetoric: suffice to say for now, Elkins expertly describes the reality of the Cartesian split within the art academy studio and plays out for us something of the first two types of theory as intimated by Borgdorff. As noted, however, Borgdorff's continuation of the typology of theory in the art academy points to a way out of the dichotomic bind and towards a Pragmatist conception of the two as an intense and singular whole.

### **3 Artistic intensity**

As easily as we can recognise the two types of theory described by Borgdorff and enlivened by Elkins as well as the dichotomic standoff and power dynamics of theory versus practice dualism, we should all know, despite our academy niceties dear reader, that all of that is all-too-simple for the actuality of all of that.

Borgdorff's latter two categories of art academy theory are useful from this point to see past this conventional dichotomic thinking. The categories are: *performative* and *immanent*. Performative and immanent in 'Conflict of the Faculties' allow the author to point out that, contra the rationale for dualism, 'theory is itself a practice' and that 'every practice, every human action, is infused with theory'.<sup>viii</sup> And it is at this stage that Borgdorff alights upon the two components as in effect common elements in the singular endeavour of creative redescription. In his exploration of the performative nature of theory, Borgdorff puts this quintessentially Pragmatist thinking in this way, and paves the way for my inclusion shortly of Vattimo and Rorty:

Whether we are dealing with the theory of linear perspective, classical rhetoric, the twelve-tone technique, set theory in serial music, or insights into the cultural

meanings and societal functions of art, the performative power of theory not only alters the way we look at art and the world, but it also makes these into what they are.<sup>ix</sup>

This is a tricky argument to posit, and Borgdorff sees that, for he does not wish, usefully for me, to privilege theory as the last resort in the production of meaning. The problem is that in addressing ontological and practical similarity between theory and practice, one unavoidably keeps a wedge between action and reflection, between doing and thinking, if one asserts that both are infused with theory. The point at issue is to assert that the knowledge produced by way of artistic intensity is a product of thinking *and* doing, *necessarily* and *recursively*, as part and parcel of the definition of artistic intensity. As Borgdorff puts it, economically, both sides of the Cartesian binary ‘show a limited understanding of the interaction and reciprocal influence of theory and practice’.<sup>x</sup>

The essential reciprocity of theory and practice is surely of such an order that the dualistic distinction is redundant. My developing view here is that persistent dualism is literally and figuratively divisive, and not a simple, benign redundancy. If that view is justified, it is not quite right to blithely see one influencing the other: the holistic presence of both results in creative influence *beyond* the intricacies of the genesis of the work. In an intense meld of causation, ‘both’ are indispensable to the project of creatively constituting the world of art and the world in which art finds itself as Borgdorff’s combination of *performative* and *immanent* exhorts.

Notwithstanding concerted effort from many, including commentators in this anthology, unfortunately the Cartesian spirit persists. As hinted, the persistence is in (large) part attributable to the persistence of institutional arrangements in Higher Education. The speed with which organisational formations do not change has shored up Cartesian conceptions of theory and practice as students have been shepherded through degree programmes where the two concepts are reified by departments, by money, by people, by status, by course materials, by assurance regimes, by reporting formalities - and by difficult-to-eradicate attitudes towards the practical as somehow the manifestation of the uneducable and incorrigible expressionist trip-switch that would hold an individual separate from theory, reason, learning and transmissible knowledge.

In another publication seminal to these debates, and à la Peirce, Swedish academic Mats Rosengren expressed persuasively his impatience with the 'barren dichotomies such as theory *or* practice, form *or* content, and discursive *or* intuitive knowledge'<sup>xi</sup> Knowledge and insight is produced for Rosengren by thinking, doing, acting and producing in and through these Modernist dichotomic nodes in the manner of a Derridean bricolage. This bricolage is the kind of integrated creative practice that Borgdorff can see in putative form shaping and expanding the horizons of the existing world. This type of creative endeavour is indeed constitutive of the world, no less, as Rosengren hails, and central to my conception of the programme of artistic intensity. Bricolage as a strategy for analysis as well as meaning production is of the same ilk as Pragmatist redescription. An invocation of the thinking of Italian intellectual Gianni Vattimo can assist this brief sketch and move us to a summary of artistic intensity as a contribution to a refreshed vocabulary for tackling the unhelpful and stubborn dualism.

In his, 'Art's Claim to Truth' (1985), Vattimo addresses the significant stake that art has in the constitution of the world. This proposition he arrives at by identifying a dichotomy of the kind to frustrate Rosengren in the history of aesthetics. Contemplating art's relationship with representationalism and formalism, Vattimo observes:

If the question of truth is not posed radically, when attempting to state it philosophically, and instead continues to be conceived in terms of correspondence with a 'given' state of affairs or (a variation of the correspondence theory) of syntactic and formal correctness, it will always necessarily oscillate between representationalism and formalism.<sup>xii</sup>

Like Peirce, like Borgdorff, like Rosengren, Vattimo is tired of barren dichotomy and sees for art and prospectively for artistic intensity a more nuanced and more potent role in bringing meaning into the world. Vattimo's brilliantly persuasive argument makes clear that creative endeavour is hobbled if it is tied to the instrumental programme of supplying information about the 'state of things', either the state of the world as observed from the perspective of the Cartesian spectator, or the state of the aesthetic as observed from the perspective of the reflective theorist.

Instead, and through the power of artistic intensity to redescribe that which is normative and expected, the artwork (following Heidegger) has the potential *as an artwork* to 'shock

or quake' to suspend in the reader 'all natural relationships, making strange everything that until that moment had appeared obvious and familiar'.<sup>xiii</sup>

That both of our erstwhile elements have functioned in the appearance in the world of such a *quake* is so easily registered we can take it as read. The intensive and affective admixture that makes an artwork that radically re-proposes the world is one that evidences by default the mutual influence of our two-becoming-one components.

#### **4 Redescribing the dualism: 'revisiting the rituals'**

Back to Elkins before meeting Richard Rorty in conclusion. In the closing paragraph of 'Why Art Cannot Be Taught' Elkins invokes the heart of Pragmatist redescription in calling for a revisiting of the rituals that have become commonplace in the art academy in part because of the lingering parallelism of theory and practice. Lucidly, simply and yet expansively, Elkins pinpoints the Pragmatist enterprise with the following:

What may appear to be unproblematic or inevitable ways of dealing with artworks can begin to seem like restrictive rituals; and then you're free to ask whether or not other rituals might be better.<sup>xiv</sup>

Elkins has expressed the Rortyan principle *par excellence* of *redescription*; we must redescribe our rituals, find new ones, and make new ones from there. The ritual expression of theory-practice dualism is tired and redundant, by applying the theory of artistic intensity in practice to the issue of theory-practice parallelism we might arrive at artistic intensity as a component of a new vocabulary to establish a new set of rituals to challenge and replace redundant dualism.

Rorty's abiding suspicion of those dualisms littering conventions of Western thought offers a great deal here to the thinking of Borgdorff and Vattimo (and Rosengren) and Rorty's work undergirds my own artistic intensity such as it is and such as it might be applied to the redescription of the art academy.

Rorty's guiding principle of redescription mooted throughout this piece is predicated upon the ineluctable and universally valid idea that the world is changed through our active

interpretation of it. Our active interpretation of it cannot be either a normative description of the 'state of things' through either theory or practice, it has to be an engaged, intensive and active endeavour. After all, at the heart of Rorty's thinking is the holistic idea that interpretation is both at once an academic, theoretical act and a physical and social impact – Rorty does not believe in the world and language, in practice and theory, as separate things, and neither, now, do we

The vision of artistic intensity is to see and make the world as not fixed but transformable through imaginative and persuasive individual and collaborative creative production. To borrow from Rorty's exposition of intellectual pragmatism, the vision is for artistic intensity to insist that we never reach a final vocabulary in our apprehension of a historical, contemporary and future world shared.

Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli add further detail to Rorty's programme as an educator and set down, I'd like to maintain, a guiding tenet for Pragmatist artistic intensity and in so doing map the purpose of Art & Design in holistic form. A role for education and artistic production is 'the creation of metaphors', but, in keeping with Vattimo's determination to avoid offering 'art' that only reflects the state of things either representationally or formatively, 'these metaphors cannot be understood as different forms of literal expressions'. As Peters and Ghiraldelli make clear:

(Creative metaphors [born of artistic intensity]) must be understood as creative expressions that make people stop their old conversations and begin new ones. With luck, these novel expressions and new vocabularies will encourage in us a form of political maturity defined by the fact that it does not require anything external to us – the moral authority of a god – to secure our democratic institutions or to anchor our democratic processes.<sup>xv</sup>

At this level we are, productively, some distance from politicised theory/practice antagonism in the art academy, and we are some distance from the dualistic parallelism that would seek to ground the disingenuous theory/practice separation on an academic footing. We face in conclusion a Pragmatist end goal for creative endeavour in holistic form that gives a life and purpose to artistic intensity. The art academy should make every effort to engage the vitality of the imagination in the creation and dissemination of things that can resist dualism, literalism, things that can exist instead in diverse and open creative ways

that might then coalesce and serve our redescribing with originary potential for the holistic apprehension of new worlds.

Artistic intensity is all together an act and impact that can remake that which is given in this world: that remaking being resident in the formations of the act of artistic intensity, and in the reformations precipitated by the impact of artistic intensity experienced through widespread engagement with those formations.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, Henk Borgdorff, Leiden University Press: Leiden, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Borgdorff, p.18.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Borgdorff, p.19.

<sup>iv</sup> *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, James Elkins, Champaign, Il.: University of Illinois, 2001, p. 148.

<sup>v</sup> *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, Elkins, p.146.

<sup>vi</sup> *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, Elkins, p.146.

<sup>vii</sup> *The Pragmatic Turn*, Richard J. Bernstein, Cambridge: Polity, 2010, p.ix.

<sup>viii</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Borgdorff, p.21.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Borgdorff, p.20.

<sup>x</sup> *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Borgdorff, p.20.

<sup>xi</sup> *Art and Artistic Research*, Corina Caduff, Fiona Siegenthaler, Tan Walchh (eds.), Zurich: Zurich University of the Arts, Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009, p.107.

<sup>xii</sup> *Art's Claim to Truth*, Gianni Vattimo, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p.152.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Art's Claim to Truth*, Vattimo, p.152.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, Elkins, p.187.

<sup>xv</sup> *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics*, Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr (eds.), New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, p.11.