

Authority and Pragmatism in the 21stC Art School

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VIEW 1

Introduction – thanks to Richard and to Elisabetta for inviting the GSA to participate in the event, we’re very pleased to be helping out and contributing, and it’s been a good early opportunity to work with my new colleague Dr Florian Urban, I wish Florian all the very best with his new post.

Two things to say quickly before I begin:

- + the camera is here because Lyn and I are testing a couple of methods of capturing lectures for upload and future use – so I’m a guinea pig – once again.**
- + secondly, I’m testing some new presentation software – the quality of the images is not super fine, warning in advance – and the transitions might make you nauseous – but hopefully it will work without a hitch.**

This presentation comes from a general research interest in the current state and history of creative education – and it is informed in an immanent way by my own recent professional work, if you will, reviewing and reshaping the Department of Historical and Critical Studies in The Glasgow School of Art – a review which was the pressing thing to undertake on joining the GSA at the end of 2006 - and which is now in its implementation phase as I speak – there might be some time during questions to touch on the Review, and therefore on what we are hoping to achieve through the Forum for Critical Inquiry.

The full paper will follow in due course, but for now, I want to try and get across something of what I was beginning to think through yesterday following Branco’s paper – namely, broadly – that the disciplines of art and design history, because of the obvious proximity to *making*, have had - and continue to have - a particular life in the context of the school of art. The construction and modification of the discipline within the art school context is, I think, especially interesting at the moment because of the legacy of poststructuralism (and the rise of optimism in arts graduates as enterprising creative agents, which I will very very briefly mention) – so my paper today is a snapshot of this context – and is designed to get us thinking about the role which, the discipline of history of art and complementary studies might approximate in the art academy.

Fatally, I’ve got five sections to move through this afternoon, each framed by these black rectangles and each to receive only five minutes!

- 1) References a contemporary art and design project from the RCA which seems to tap into a zeitgeist, and I situate that project in some ideas of a couple of Stanford University academics
- 2) The second section moves back to quickly check in with Coldstream and Summerson and reminds us of the infrastructure and hierarchy which predated and emerged in schools of art from that busy period of policy and practice in the 1960s. There's a brief 'special focus' on the authority of the lecture in this section.
- 3) From there I look to summarise some of the counter-epistemologies, if you will, which are current, and have been for some time, which are current and in contrast to the Coldstream model of art and design history in schools of art
- 4) The fourth section introduces some antagonism and optimism from James Elkins in respect of art education in particular, and I want to borrow from Elkins a metaphor for talking about HACS provision in the contemporary school of art
- 5) Which leads to the last section, and a brief look at the type of policy document which nods in the direction of section three's counter-epistemologies, and which influences the contemporary history of the discipline, and I close by arguing for a productive pragmatist approach to complementary studies, with reference to Richard Rorty.

VIEW 2 - EMPTY

VIEW 3

In the Autumn publication of 'Networks', the magazine from the HEA-funded Art, Design and Media Subject Centre, there is an interesting article about 'a student led experiment in interdisciplinary learning'. It seems to me to confirm a turn in creative education which can be read as a product of and a driver for, approaches to the critical validation of this context, or to a contemporary historiography of sorts if you will.

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'Department 21', was a student experiment which came about 'from a desire to create space between conventional disciplinary departments in the institution' – 'a studio floor was freed up' in the college, made available to the participants of Department 21 for 6 weeks at the beginning of this year.

The temporary space, intriguingly, came about from 'the relocation of one department and the arrival of another', and it was exploited by participants to explore 'alternative models of education and to create a new kind of conceptual and social space'.

Persuasively to my mind, the project was not intended as a one-directional exercise in theoretical deconstruction, rather, 'Department 21 empowered students to initiate and sustain a dialogue with the College regarding traditions of pedagogy perpetuated through existing departmental structures' and academic categories.

Now, leaving to one side the particularities of what took place over the 6 weeks, and staying at the level of manifesto, Department 21 is one of a number of contemporary 'open' practices which wrestle in more than anarchic ways with discipline boundaries which have been passed down the line from, well the mid-nineteenth century, with reference to my own institution – traditions which are inscribed in the history of art and design and in the institutional histories of these institutions, intertwined as these two things are of course.

Bethany Wells, an MA Architecture student who participated in Department 21, poetically summed up the sentiment behind Department 21 and which underpins much contemporary pedagogic experimentation:

'We let it go

Picked up a freedom; at liberty; to come and go

Alone; as one; together, in pairs, separate, in groups, dispersed, all-together, altogether as we needed to be.

Distilling, dissolving, re-forming, trust the process, TRUST THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE SPACE

I FELT, I LEFT, WE LEFT IT OPEN.'

VIEW 5

The designer/teacher Robert Feo was cited by the students as a useful mentor – Feo is a founder of design practice, 'El Ultimo Grito' (The Last Shout) – Feo is something of an inspiration for he terms his design studio – POST-DISCIPLINARY – a term which his students readily understand to be a radical determination to resist categorisation by either the academy or the market.

Feo, and others, and the Department 21 students, and others, the Glasgow Open School to name only one example, are intent on removing and/or reconfiguring conventional institutional, disciplinary boundaries, in such a way as to allow a generation of content and critique from the student body themselves – to state the obvious, the authority of the discipline is not a foregone conclusion, indeed, in the minds of some of the Department 21 protagonists, to be between disciplines is the only way to avoid an unethical complicity in disciplinarity *full-stop*.

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Steven Henry Madoff has captured a good deal of this anti-disciplinarity in his anthology of stimulating essays – 'Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century', MIT Press 2009.

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One essay is particularly relevant here. In 'Artereaity', Stanford academics Jeffrey Schnapp and Michael Shanks, rethink craft in a knowledge economy, and use their term 'artereaity' to describe the 'design and production of art objects and goods in a more discipline-dynamic context, shifting the focus away from pure creation toward the management of networks, links, flows, translations, and mediations – in short, rethinking creation in terms of arteries and nodes'

Stick that to wall for a second – and let me quickly refer to a touchstone comment in Madoff's book by Thierry De Duve – a comment which underlines this 'arteries and nodes' conception – De Duve licenses Department 21, El Ultimo Grito, and Artereaity, when he writes 'Art schools have not always existed, and nothing says that they must always exist. In a way, they already no longer exist. Their proliferation is perhaps a trompe l'oeil, masking the fact that the transmission of art today from artist to artist is very far from occurring directly in schools. On the contrary, it travels through extremely complex channels that end up implicating the collective as a whole.

Shanks and Schnapp are on the same page as De Duve for their 'artreality' concept is founded upon the rise of postprint scholarship and the rise of institutional critique, such as that of Feo and Department 21.

They wish us to understand 'artreality' as a practice which is related in a close way to Aristotle's *phronesis* – namely, 'knowledge integrated with practical reasoning'. Tellingly for me, come my third section, Shanks and Schnapp define things this way – 'artreality represents a rethinking of arts education as just such a phronetic practice within the framework of a *digitally inflected humanistic production*.

(pragmatist fungibility in the 21st century school of art)

With this they are their strongest suit – artreality must recognise, they advocate, the age of digital mediation and compilation – 'at the heart of digital mediation is *fungibility*. Digitization allows the gathering of moving image, still image, music, text, 3-D design, database, geological survey, graphic detail, architectural plan, virtual walk-through, into a single environment.'

The ways in which these elements can be reworked and reworked constitute a 'game-changing fluidity' which can take on speculative, investigative, critical, or creative characteristics.

Artreality imagines a new quality of commitment to research and interdisciplinary depth. The answer, for Schnapp and Shanks, lies in part in the 'PhD by creative practice, based on high level pairings between studio or post-studio work and advanced inquiry into other fields of study or both. The aim is to revise the notion of craft and design in keeping with the current demands of the networked knowledge economy.

Artreality, begins to speak of a formation of a discipline from the raw material of typically open practices represented by Department 21 – Artreality, Department 21 and the practice of Robert Feo taken together indicate, along with many many other examples, a groundswell which seems to be shaping the nature of the disciplinary context in art and design.

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What a far cry all of that is from the discipline prescriptions of earlier instantiations of the art school– and so to part 2

VIEW 9

Here we see a turn of the century - 19th to 20th – lecture on historic ornament in Liverpool School of Art. This is utterly objectionable to the Department 21ers, but it reminds us, of course, that the discipline demarcations of yesteryear were very clear, and very clearly supported by pedagogic methods which underscored the authority of the demarcation in the first place and also the legitimacy of the qualified lecturer in a close second place.

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(The South Kensington model enshrined some of these discipline demarcations, and put everything in its place in a template which was of widespread influence as we know.)

Historically, critical studies departments in schools of art have experienced an often tense relationship with established studio specialisms. In the last twenty years or so, especially as a result of debates about the authority of canons in humanities teaching and the relationship between theory and practice, the intellectual foundations of 'H&C' have changed. Many learning and teaching methods have been modified in the light of these topical debates, and much good work has been done to address dislocation between history, theory and criticism and studio domains. Arguably, a part of any lingering sense of dislocation can be attributed to that period in the history of creative education when governmental dictates brought about formalised 'H&C' as academic reassurance for stakeholders in the Diploma structures – and it's worth a quick recap.

The National Advisory Council on Art Education published a report in 1961 (now referred to as the Coldstream Report) that contained recommendations to Government as to the constituent parts of the new Diploma in Art and Design which was to replace to a higher standard the existing National Diploma in Design. One recommendation was the inclusion in all Dip.A.D.-awarding programmes of 'history of art and complementary studies' or HACS.

Coldstream, who chaired the Advisory Council, made the recommendation that an independent body should be established to scrutinise the content and structure of those institutions seeking to validate their provision at Dip.A.D. Level. Following Coldstream's guidance, the Ministry of Education set up the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design, chaired by Sir John Summerson.

While it can be said that the recommendations of the Coldstream Report saw traditional academic standards rise in keeping with the ambition of the new Dip.A.D., it is also true to say that the Report contributed in a significant way to a trajectory for history of art and complementary studies which ended up, in many HEIs, with a separation, both operational and psychological, between the disciplines of history & theory and studio. An unfortunate - although predictable - upshot of the strategic work in the 1960s was the authoritarian adoption by History of Art and Complementary Studies faculty members of the mantle of protector of academic standards, which served to establish and/or reinforce an ontological distinction between theoretical and conceptual work on the one hand, and practical and technical work on the other.

VIEW 11

My examples from part 1 of the talk modify and challenge both the discipline boundaries of art and design education *as well as the mode of delivery*, I want to spend a couple of minutes on the primary mode of delivery of HACS – the lecture - that authoritative mode which is often overlooked as a central cog in the machinations of the history of the discipline.

The lecture is, of course, still a highly prevalent mode in art and design in Higher Education, and whether one is a fan of experiments like Department 21, one cannot deny that the lecture format is now highly contested.

On the one hand the lecture is a device which is employed by a select few who exploit the traditional authority of the expository lecture format to exercise control in a system of discourse which is inevitably problematic. On the other hand, the lecture is an economical format for teaching with a long shelf-life, one which realistically exemplifies the uneven power dynamic between student and lecturer, current thinking on nodes and diminished centres notwithstanding.

In fact, the pressure which the 'chalk and talk' delivery is under due to contemporary critical currents should not lead us to think that the contestation is entirely new. In an essay from 1975 in which Canadian academic, Robert Voth bemoans the dearth of constructive writing on the lecture, concluding that the lack is a direct result of his peers (at least those who bother to comment) having given up on the lecture as the primary learning and teaching approach. His remarks: 'the few educators who have written on lecturing in recent years either condemn it, question it, or are halfhearted (sic) in their support for it. None argue (sic) boldly, unequivocally for it' (Voth, 1975: 247).

Voth's essay is useful for me in this section, as his evaluation of the lack of support for the lecture, despite its predominance, suggests that this issue is likely more a *problem* than an issue for educators – especially so now. Voth perceptively observes:

The lack of support [for lecturing] suggests that[...]there is professional hypocrisy since a popular method is condemned or ignored or there is a vast silent majority of teachers who are not noticeably bothered by neglect and criticism of their daily routines. (Voth, 1975: 247)

Similarly, my colleagues in Historical and Critical Studies are not unaware of a general lack of support for the lecture, compounded as that lack is by critical discourse which asserts the dubiety of a teaching format which persists with normative structures of power and authority. However, we still roll along with the lecture as the predominant teaching tactic, and seem unable at times to exercise the same kind of critical evaluation of hegemonic discourse on pedagogy that we would insist was practiced by our students. In other words, the persistence of the lecture, with our compliance in a way, is at odds with the ethic of what might be understood as the anti-patriarchal network society – to borrow from postmodern vocabularies - and most critical studies staff in art schools nowadays regard patriarchal authority as utterly retrograde.

VIEW 12

So what lies behind some of the Department 21 thinking which is so set against the institutional models of last century and the pedagogic strategies of deployed by those models?

For many cultural commentators, humankind as witnessed a gradual change in the individual and collective conceptions of what or who constitutes authority. Needless to say, that's all incredibly complex - for conciseness, Manuel Castells can help.

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For a thinker like Castells, the networked nature of society is instrumental in shifting paradigms and conceptions of authority. Looking back to the 1970s, Castells sets out the three big socio-political reasons for the rise of, his described, network society:

These three processes were: the crisis and restructuring of industrialism and its two associated modes of production, capitalism and statism; the freedom-orientated, cultural and social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s; and the revolution in information and communication technologies.

The processes identified by Castells have caused a lessening of the grip on the individual by the forces, demands and authority of, in his explication: heavy industrial production; the state; dominant ideology, religious or political; and by the limitations of access to information and knowledge in a pre-technological age. These aspects have seen cultural transformation by way of a 'challenge to patriarchalism...to cultural uniformity, and, ultimately, to state power'.

As normative hegemonic influence wanes, Castells sees the network society emerge as a conglomeration 'of interconnected nodes...A network has no centre, just nodes' (Castells, 2004: 3). He characterises our networked society by stressing the demise of the 'big centre' in the nodal model.

The decline of the metanarrative as we all know, was explained in part by Lyotard in terms similar to Castells's:

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at "nodal points" of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. (Lyotard, 1979: 25)

Castells and Lyotard make vivid for us the networked structure of contemporary society, a structure which sees individuals located at nodal points, acting as switching centres for their own information and knowledge generation, according to their needs locally expressed. This is a conception of society and culture at odds in many crucial respects with industrial modernist instantiations whereby the individual would piously attend to the big centre and its consistent and repeated pronouncements, and not always by choice.

This worldview is mirrored and embroidered in much writing on postmodernism, in cultural studies and also in educational theory. Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) summed up the multi-disciplinary impact of postmodernity by identifying its core outlooks. With reference to the thinking of Lyotard, Foucault, Vattimo and Derrida, she wrote: 'In the broadest

possible terms, these all share a view of discourse as problematic and of ordering systems as suspect (and as humanly constructed)' (Hutcheon, 1989: 23).

Many drivers for educational change are identified and developed with the network society and putative absence of metanarrative as foundational concepts, and with Hutcheon's core tenets of postmodernity in mind in some shape or form.

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Now, the high level theorising of Castells and everybody else, has help to write unsurprisingly some core texts which have great influence in the construction of the disciplines which populate this kind of place.

For example, in his 'Learning for an unknown future' (2004), Ronald Barnett taps into the zeitgeist as felt by those like Castells and Lyotard, and sees particular challenges for HE in this contemporary age. Fielding the accusation that, 'well, Ron, the future has always been unknown...' Barnett presents four interesting counterarguments. For speed, his fourth is, that in actual fact, 'the world has by no means always been one that has been saturated by change and uncertainty' (Barnett, 2004: 247). He goes on:

It could be argued that, seen from an anthropological perspective, what characterized society until quite recently was precisely a sense of order, of stability, of relentless predictability. For the primitive mind, the universe was largely unchanging and, too, man's place in the universe. One's ancestors and one's successors would experience largely the same world. (Barnett, 2004: 248)

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Barnett's appeal is compelling, I think. Today's HE is configuring itself in many different ways to contend with and collaborate with the networked complexity of the here and now; it is increasingly cognisant, quite rightly, of the capacity of the individual to generate his own information and discourse; and it is aware of the difficulty it faces, not without considerable anxiety, in persisting with the idea of the institution as the patriarchal big central authority with its guaranteed string of dependants, who queue to obtain stable and uncontested knowledge.

A new kind of university is possible only if its predecessor is disavowed. The premodern university was an inward-looking community, whereas the modern university is a collection of disparate units

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Much of this sentiment is found within works like this – which seek to chart pathways for the university in the networked age Castells defines. Taylor, Barr and Steele, although, and I call Branco's presentation to mind, they are less sanguine about the consequences of a Department 21 society so-to-speak, and they offer this ballast, with some help from Terry Eagleton –

'We do not maintain that Postmodernism is wholly misguided, that it is without intellectual appeal or foundation. However, we believe that postmodernism represents essentially a counsel of despair. There are alternative analyses which this book attempts to delineate and which offer a politics that will avoid relinquishing 'the vision of a just society' and that will avoid acquiescing in the appalling mess that is the contemporary world.'

And this is where I was roaming yesterday – if we can register the dissent in the history of the discipline of art and design and hacs – and if we can understand and appreciate some of the context – and if we can appreciate the positive lines of light created by academics like these – what is it instead that the student of art, or indeed the artist proper, is to do in this climate and culture? Elkins might help – so to the fourth section.

VIEW 17

James Elkins work constitutes a very important influence on art education in particular in recent years – many of his offerings are scathing of complacency in contemporary art tuition, and he frequently doubts the credibility and efficacy of normative modes of instruction. But I want to bring to bear today one analogy which he deploys at the end of 'Why Art Cannot Be Taught' – because it might give some guidance to the discipline of history of art and complementary studies in the art academy.

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These two images are of a colossal cave chamber in Sarawak – and here's Elkins's use of it – 'When it was first discovered, the cavers had no idea what to expect – they were walking up an underground stream when the walls diverged and left them staring into the darkness. The room is so large their headlamps could not pick out the ceiling or walls, and they spent the next sixteen hours working their way around the room, keeping close to the right hand wall.

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Pictures taken on later surveying expeditions, he goes on, show the spelunkers' lights like little fireflies against a measureless darkness'.

'I think of this book in the same way – like the people on that first exploration, we are not about to figure out very much of what takes place in art classes.....

'the cave will certainly be less interesting when it has electric lights and ramps for tourists (can we understand these elements in this context as the disciplines which brought about the institutional order of the South Kensington regime?). Isn't the cave best as it is, Elkins goes on – nearly inaccessible, unlit, dangerous, and utterly seductive?'

Here Elkins's evocations match those of Barnett, with Barnett's cosmic supercomplexity rivalling the unconquerable volume of the Sarawak cave....

But, as we were toying with yesterday, what of that space which is vacated of discipline and regimentation and the illuminating authority of didacticism? What can be recuperated without going as far as to reconstitute restrictive discipline definitions and thus return to something retrograde?

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My concluding section –

At present the history of art and design education is changing needless to say, and revisionist thinking in respect of conventions of disciplines and normative manifestations of institutional authority is a major driver in this process.

Something to mention in passing and with some concern as promised. A second writer of history as it were is a body of sector-generated work which places emphasis not on the acquisition of specific discipline skills and attributes, but instead on the mobile and transferrable skills which will see a graduate into employment, and which will also see a graduate capable of moving, along networks from node to node, from job to job, with ease. Their skills of *facilitation* and neo-liberal *stamina* standing them in good stead.

Richard Rorty might offer some comfort to us in the Sarawak cave – for the ironist skills which he proposes as vital to a new progress would help us contend with the expanse of unknowingness...

‘The ironist is not in the business of supplying himself and his fellow ironists with a method, a platform, or a rationale. He is just doing the same thing which all ironists do – attempting autonomy. He is trying to *get out from under inherited contingencies and make his own contingencies, get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own.*’

All any ironist can measure success against is the past – not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his terms – thereby becoming able to say, ‘THUS I WILLED IT’.

I want to close by saying that a practical version of Rorty’s liberal utopian statement is to be found in David Schwartz’s excellent essay on the efficacy of art as an arena in which the discussion and redescription of contingencies can be played out, with beneficial consequences for a society’s democratic credentials. And here we meet again the language and redescription of Artreality as noted -

Citing Aristotle’s analysis of *phronesis*, Schwartz argues for the arts through Aristotle –

‘things that are universal and necessary and whose originative causes are invariable...practical wisdom on the other hand is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate; NO ONE DELIBERATES ABOUT THAT which CANNOT BE OTHER THAN it is

(Nicomachean ethics) from the work of WD Ross

SO, WHAT DO WE HAVE? Can we think of HACS in 2010 as playing the role of the ironist in Rorty's terms in order to provide some anchor points for students navigating the supercomplex and vast expanse of the 21stC cave – but not in a way which takes recourse to the retrograde authority of the didacticism of post-Coldstream models?

Maybe the task of the area is to redescribe and keep fluid discourse, between the pessimistic and now formulaic positions of postmodernism, and the discipline rigidity of canonical treatments of the discipline. Innovate projects and tasks which accommodate the needs of collective development, in the vein of the QAA documents, but without losing the sense of the individual as an entity who can rightly muse upon and take seriously their particular contingencies and possibilities –

So the intellectual method of the area can come close to being disciplinary, but which is forever profaned by its own ironist logic..