

## Contemporary Visual Arts Education, the Moral Minority, and Freedom of Expression

### Biography:

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Sydney College of the Arts is a Faculty of the University of Sydney and an art school that trains students to become contemporary artists. The first year of study is named 'Foundation', when students ranging in age from eighteen to sixty, undertake common studio projects, experiment with processes and materials, and research the theoretical terrains of contemporary international art.

In 2004, eighty Foundation students were surveyed for their evaluation of a core theory unit of study titled 'Contemporary Art: a critical perspective'. The majority of students found the content stimulating but two responded very differently, expressing views unprecedented in the last fifteen years of student evaluation for this course. Their comments are presented in this paragraph in exact form. One student remarked that 'often the works on slide were disturbing & offending', and when asked about overall satisfaction with the quality of the unit of study responded negatively 'because the works that were chosen by the lecturers were sometimes too shocking & very offending especially the religious & racial issues', and 'because the type of work that were shown is just too contemporary and they aren't the type of work that I go for nor interested in'. The second respondent marked the box 'disagree' when asked to confirm satisfaction with the course, because 'what affects me more is the feeling left inside me after these lectures. The artworks are mostly disturbing, hence most of the time I'm left feeling depressed and filled with anxiety, some-times anger. This really affects me this past 3 months'.<sup>1</sup>

What follows is an analysis of the moral issues surrounding this case-study. It is a disquisition on the subject of the competing moral responsibilities of educators, students and university institutions, to the principle of art's right to have freedom of expression, in a time of change for tertiary education in Australia. This change is characterised by government reforms to higher education, withdrawal of government funding and greater accountability for curricula and research, a changing student demographic with greater diversity, greater vocalisation of minority opinion, and greater demands for customer value. Connections are made between Australian, British and American educational contexts, not to compare government policy, curricula, community engagement with the arts, and the

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<sup>1</sup> anonymous responses by two Foundation students at Sydney College of the Arts, semester 1, 2004, for unit of study titled "Contemporary Art: a critical perspective".

demographics of teachers and learners - all of which generate their own cross-cultural issues - but to engage with common questions of moralism. This is possible because Australia, Britain and the United States share a common Western philosophical tradition. In the context of this paper, moralism is taken to mean 'the strength with which a belief about the rightness of some action is held'.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the paper considers the competing beliefs of the 'rightness' of action and responsibilities as understood by educators, students, and the University of Sydney, to the curricula, the discipline, and university policies designed to support its ideal graduate attributes and strategic goals.

It is the contention of this discussion that beneath both students' claims of feeling shocked, offended, depressed and disturbed in the presence of slides of contemporary art, is a subtext: an implicit request for the censorship of lecture material and, by association, the censorship of contemporary art. But a request for censorship of course content is in direct conflict with the discipline's philosophy of the ethical rights of artists to freedom of expression, and with universities' philosophies of academic freedom and autonomy. This case is instructive because here are two students who appear to want their teachers to act as moral guardians and adopt Plato's philosophy that it is the responsibility of authority to regulate and censor the arts, for the sake of the good.<sup>3</sup> Here is evidence that art schools are populated by students who want an orthodox education, and an orthodox representation of works of art within that education. Paradoxically, many educators within the discipline would agree that the selection of work shown in lectures at Sydney College of the Arts in 2004, was orthodox. The images most likely to offend or disgust were those that have a track-record of offending or disgusting the public: photographs from the *X Portfolio* by Robert Mapplethorpe, *Piss Christ* (1989) by Andres Serrano, and the photographic records of Orlan's plastic surgery. There was a representation of the works of the exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* including *Tragic Anatomies* (1996) by Jake & Dinos Chapman, *Self* (1991) by Marc Quinn, and *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) by Chris Ofili. In New York Mayor Giuliani tried to close *Sensation* and in London the Royal Academy restricted people under eighteen from viewing the Chapman brothers' sculptures. However, it is difficult to imagine how this selection of work is in any way comparable, in terms of affect, to the abject and harrowing nature of media broadcasts showing the violation of hostages, corpses, war, dismemberment, disfiguration, death, and torture.

There is an uncanny similarity between recent neo-conservative criticism of the exhibition *Sensation* and the expression of psychological distress articulated by the two students at Sydney College of the Arts. It suggests that the media coverage of recent contemporary art has had a very strong influence on public opinion. When *Sensation* was shown in New York the public was warned that it might cause 'vomiting, confusion and panic'.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was supported and then cancelled by the National Gallery of Australia confirming the claim made in the *Sensation* catalogue that some things are 'too

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<sup>2</sup> Ray, J, 'Moralism and Politics', in J.J.Ray (ed) *Conservatism as Heresy*, Sydney, A.N.Z Book Co, 1974

<sup>3</sup> Beardsley, M, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, New York, Macmillan and the University of Alabama Press, 1991, p50

<sup>4</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, March 4, 2000, Spectrum, p.5, cited by Bernal, K, 'YBAs Rule! Ok?', *Artwrite*, on-line issue, School of Art History and Theory, the College of Fine Arts, the University of New South Wales, <http://www.artwrite.cofa.unsw.edu.au/0019/2019-pages/gleeson-letters.html>, accessed 23/12/04

willingly swept under the proverbial carpet in our endless search for that elusive thing called beauty'.<sup>5</sup> In Britain, the impact of media coverage of *Sensation* has been the subject of speculation about the responsibilities of teachers at secondary level. In answering the question 'Contemporary Art in schools: Why Bother?', Lesley Burgess and Nicholas Addison discuss the hostility shown to contemporary art by the media in Britain, in particular to the Young British Artists, and the influence of the media on public perceptions of contemporary art, which in turn affects students and teachers.<sup>6</sup> It is their contention that there needs to be a partnership between art education and what is being practiced in the visual arts, so that in the context of secondary schools, contemporary art must not be taught as something problematic or inappropriate.<sup>7</sup>

In the State of New South Wales, the Higher School Certificate syllabus for final year students, and the Board of Studies, encourage high school principals and teachers to select examples of contemporary art appropriate to the racial and religious sensitivities of the student cohort. High School teachers work under the Child Protection legislation that protects individuals under the age of eighteen. This makes teachers of the Visual Arts syllabus very conscious of the types of examples of visual arts practice they expose the pupils to. Whenever a work of art is inflammatory, controversial or offensive, the reasons why are discussed by students.<sup>8</sup> But the Higher School Certificate graduate has only been out of a child's education system for three months before they arrive at University. Some students will arrive into first year of University with the expectation that their tertiary teachers will also manage their learning as a moral guardian, and many students will arrive at University, without a good grasp of contemporary art, or without any insight into the potentially challenging nature of it.

However, within the adult visual arts community of Australia, which comprises artists, critics, educators, curators, and the viewing public, when the right of the artist to freedom of expression is under public criticism through acts, or threatened acts, of censorship, the sense of the 'right' course of action is to defend the artist and the work. The type of moral leadership that is most admired in the professional community is that which protects freedom of expression, and it is exemplified by author David Malouf's 1988 impassioned defence of the photography of Bill Henson.

they affect us not as pre-existing reality, nor as illustrations of some held view, but with the immediate otherness and mystery, and powerful if puzzling reality, of objects from another Nature: that is, as works of art.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rosenthal, N, 'The Blood Must Continue to Flow', in *Sensation: young British artists from the Saatchi collection*, catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1997, pp.11-12

<sup>6</sup> Burgess, L and Addison, N, 'Contemporary Art in Schools: Why Bother?' in *arteducation 11-18*, Hickman, R (ed), London and New York, Continuum, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2004, pp.15-16

<sup>7</sup> Lee Emery interviewed British secondary teachers and found that 'leaving art works out of the art program is the most common form of censorship operating in art education'. See Emery, L, 'Censorship in Contemporary Art Education', *Journal of Art and Design Education*, volume 21, issue 1, February 2002, p.9

<sup>8</sup> 'Visual Arts Stage 6 Support Document', in *Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus*, Sydney, Board of Studies of New South Wales, 1999, p.26

<sup>9</sup> Malouf, D, 'Introduction', in *Bill Henson, Photographs*, Sydney Picador and Pan Books, 1988, p.9

Every attempt to censor the rights of artists to freedom of expression in Australia in the last twenty years, including complaints about the exploitation of adolescents in Bill Henson's work, the cancellation of *Sensation* by the Australian National Gallery, the removal of Juan Davilla's painting *Stupid as a Painter* from the 1982 Biennale of Sydney by the police after moral outrage at its sexual references, is evidence that contemporary art can be confronting on grounds of sex, religion, gender and race. But it is the negative social and artistic impact of public pressure to make contemporary art conform to conventional public levels of acceptability that motivated film-maker Dennis O'Rourke to state recently that 'any artist, if they're not controversial, they're not doing their job',<sup>10</sup> and accounts for art critic, Peter Hill, commenting that 'one of the greatest problems artists face is how to remain subversive while all around them critics, curators and dealers are trying to make them orthodox'.<sup>11</sup>

The view that art's role, and the educator's role, must be imbricated to maintain the ethical rights of artists to freedom of expression is a basic premise of visual arts education at tertiary level. However, the events at Sydney College of the Arts are evidence that there are now pressures being brought to bear by the 'shocked' student, to separate the practice of contemporary art from the content of courses. The case-study presents evidence that art school is now populated by individuals who identify less as student-artists, and more as members of the moral viewing public. They do not think of the University as a cloistered world in which there is relative freedom of thought and discussion, but rather as a continuation of a world in which censorship is a way of regulating what is undesirable. This attitude conforms with the politics of the current Liberal Government whose objective with reforms to higher education is to figuratively remove the 'sandstone walls' and force universities to become part of the world beyond their borders. The Australian media regularly feature interviews with students and staff to impress the public with how much universities, and students, have changed since the sixties and seventies, and that one of the positive changes is the collapsing of universities' elitism.

Those on the inside lived 'more of a fantasy life that was cut off and we regarded ourselves as quite different to everyone else in town; certainly thinking differently' he recalls. 'Nowadays, the difference in ideas between what's in the university and what's in the wider community is not so great.'<sup>12</sup>

It is true that the pedagogical principal of freedom and autonomy which is at the heart of visual arts education, and which is still upheld by the majority of students, is strongly connected with the politics of the sixties. In many cases students at Sydney College of the Arts are the children of those who were students in those decades. In the sixties Harold Taylor published 'Art and the Intellect: moral values and the Experiencing of Art' for the National Committee on Art Education in the U.S.A. A copy of Taylor's book can be found on the shelf in the library at Sydney College of the Arts. It is based in the philosophy that through art, 'we can gain an insight into what it means to be free in emotional

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<sup>10</sup> Keenan, C, 'Through a Lens Darkly', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 23-24, 2005, Spectrum, p.6

<sup>11</sup> Hill, P, 'What Issues do Contemporary Art and Artists Face?', quoted from 1995 on VCEART site, <http://www.vceart.com/explore/ideas/page.4.html>, accessed 20/03/05

<sup>12</sup> Stephenson, A and Thompson, M, 'Scholars for Dollars', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February, 2005, quoting Keith Windschuttle, full text reproduced online in *Say No to VSU*, COFA Student Association updates, <http://www.cofasa.unsw.edu.au/2005/features/vsu/news/february05.php>, p.1, accessed 9/05/05

response and free in the choice of ideas'.<sup>13</sup> A very similar conviction can be found today in the U.S.A in the educational philosophies and highly influential writing of bell hooks. The concept of artistic freedom is crucial to hook's conviction of transgressing boundaries for the sake of emancipation from institutionalised racism and sexism.<sup>14</sup> However, recent Australian media coverage suggests that such a liberal pedagogical ethos is no longer in step with the changing demographic of the student body. In 'The New Campus Ideology', Eliza Blue describes the growing presence of the Evangelical Union on the Sydney University campus and the growing difference in Australian society and university life in the past forty years, 'a reality that defies the public stereotype of uni as a zone of youthful rebellion, free love and political activism'.<sup>15</sup> And much press is now given to the new generation of university student in Australia, many of whom are international enrolments who struggle with language and cultural differences, and others who have many part-time jobs and much less time for existential deliberations.<sup>16</sup>

Students may have less time to reflect on intellectual matters, but the case at Sydney College of the Arts shows the importance of encouraging them to justify their views. Lawrence Kohlberg's theories on moral development concentrate on the education of children and adolescents, but his ideas are helpful at tertiary level too. He believes that a skilled educator will avoid dealing with the emotive opinions of students, and focus 'exclusively on the individual's judgments about moral right and wrong and the justifications used to support those judgments'.<sup>17</sup> How an attitude is justified or held then becomes the object of scrutiny by peers. Kohlberg is an advocate of freedom of expression and conceives of it as a considered, ethically-based concept of the right to speak. Another course of action is to create 'disequilibrium' for students. This term has been used by art critic Donald Kuspit when discussing Sean Scully's paintings, and refers to art works that unsettle because they exhibit an unsolvable problem.<sup>18</sup> It is also a term used in social psychology, and in education, where it is argued that moral development in individuals can be stimulated by the creation of conflicts in thinking.<sup>19</sup> In their book, *Teaching Moral Reasoning: theory and practice*, Jack Arbuthnot and David Faust stress that disequilibrium is not about creating stress for students but to allow students to be curious and to stretch their thinking.<sup>20</sup> In relation to the case study at Sydney College of the Arts, their ideas are resonant because they claim that successful education is not free of conflict and that 'it may be a

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<sup>13</sup>Taylor, H, *Art and the Intellect; moral values and the experience of art*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1960, p60

<sup>14</sup> see hooks, b, 'Workers of Artistic Freedom', in *Art on My Mind: visual politics*, New York, New Press, 1995

<sup>15</sup> Blue, E, 'The Fundamental Question', in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Weekend Edition, (*Spectrum*) February 26-27, 2005, p.9

<sup>16</sup> Stephenson, A and Thompson, M, 'Scholars for Dollars', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February, 2005, quoting Keith Windschuttle, full text reproduced online in *Say No to VSU*, COFA Student Association updates, <http://www.cofasa.unsw.edu.au/2005/features/vsu/news/february05.php>, p.1, accessed 9/05/05

<sup>17</sup> Colby, A, 'Foreward' in Arbuthnot, J.B and Faust, D, *Teaching Moral Reasoning: theory and practice*, New York, Harper and Row, 1981, p.viii

<sup>18</sup> Kuspit, D, 'Nuance and Intensity in Sean Scully: Humanism in abstract disguise', <http://www.nga.gov.au/Exhibition/Scully/Default.cfm?MnuID=4&Essay=4>. Accessed 4/05/05

<sup>19</sup> Arbuthnot, J.B and Faust, D, *Teaching Moral Reasoning: theory and practice*, New York, Harper and Row, p.141

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p.141

major error to shelter them from any conflict'.<sup>21</sup> One reason to maintain a firm position on the rights of educators to resist students' requests for a review or censorship of course content is the claim that the conflict is important and integral to their education. But the media view this attitude negatively. Miranda Devine made an analysis of the *Graduate Attributes* of the Faculty of Arts, at the University of Sydney. She concluded that the desirability of graduates to work collaboratively is code for enforcing the prevailing view and 'rather than opening students' minds to new knowledge the Arts Faculty of Sydney seems intent on closing them to all but discredited leftist/postmodernist thinking'.<sup>22</sup>

However, it may be unreasonable to expect a student who is 'shocked' by contemporary art on racial, sexual, gender, or religious grounds, to relate rationally about what is abhorrent to them. It may be unreasonable to expect a student to get to understand the object by openly discussing it in a tutorial because the object presents too much of a moral dilemma. The question of being adversely affected by material within one's own discipline is the subject of a paper by Paul Zawadzki who asks 'what are we doing when we work as 'scholars' with objects that we do not like and that fill us with outrage, repulsion, fear, disgust: in short with objects we find abhorrent'?<sup>23</sup> While his essay is centred on scholars who devote research to abhorrent historical events on massive scale and in particular the extermination of the Jews, his general point is that no-one necessarily needs to *understand* something that is abhorrent to them.

The question of ethical relativism is the subject of vigorous debates in the field of education. It is described in the foreword to Jack Arbuthnot and David Faust's text *Teaching Moral Reasoning: theory and practice*, as 'a particular ethical position and one which does not stand up under scrutiny'.<sup>24</sup> From the University's point of view it would be morally wrong for any educator to ignore a student's claim of psychological distress, especially since one of the key principles of conduct at the University of Sydney is to offer equity and access in education to the diversity of its student population. But while the University of Sydney expects a duty of care to be exhibited to every student, it makes it very clear that students must assume responsibility for their own intellectual development in order to graduate with 'an informed respect for the principles, methods, standards, values and boundaries of their discipline and the capacity to question these'.<sup>25</sup> Likewise Sydney College of the Arts expects graduates to 'develop a coherent understanding of contemporary art practice and be able to identify and articulate their own processes of creativity as visual artists'.<sup>26</sup> At the same time the institution accepts that students struggle in the context of mass higher education, and because minority groups

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p.141

<sup>22</sup> Devine, M, 'More like a leaking reactor than a liberal arts faculty', *The Sun-Herald*, January 30, 2005, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2005/02/23/1109046990700.html?oneclick=true> accessed 28/02/05

<sup>23</sup> Zawadzki, P, 'Working with abhorrent objects: some moral and epistemological considerations' *International Social Science Journal*, Blackwell, December 2002, vol.54, no.174, pp.519

<sup>24</sup> Colby, A, 'Foreword' in Arbuthnot, J.B and Faust, D, *Teaching Moral Reasoning: theory and practice*, Harper and Row, New York, 1981, pvii-viii

<sup>25</sup> 'Graduate Attributes Project,' Institute for Teaching and Learning, The University of Sydney, <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/>, accessed 28/02/05

<sup>26</sup> 'Sydney College of the Arts: Contextualised Graduate Attributes', Institute for Teaching and Learning, The University of Sydney, <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/facultyGA.cfm?faculty=Sydney%20College%20of%20the%20Arts>, February 28 2005 1pm

experience discomfort with cultural and social difference the University has *Equity and Diversity* as one of its strategic goals. It is considered the moral responsibility of educators to act on any intellectual or psychological discomfort that students suffer and contemporary education theory is founded on the assumption of a 'safe learning environment'.<sup>27</sup> This term refers to an environment in which educators and students exert ethical responsibilities to the whole learning community, uphold equal opportunity in education, act on a philosophy of inclusiveness of students from diverse backgrounds and tolerate difference. The Graduate Attributes of Sydney College stresses that students must 'have a developed capacity for appreciating diversity, and for tolerance and understanding of differing cultural perspectives', which matches the University policy that graduates must 'work with, manage, and lead others in ways that value their diversity and equality and that facilitate their contribution to the organization and the wider community'.<sup>28</sup> However, the case at Sydney College of the Arts strongly suggests that there is a mismatch of student to discipline, and student to course content.

When students enrol for a degree that trains them as contemporary artists, and find that the type of work they have been introduced to in lectures is 'too contemporary', or when students of any age who are conservative on issues of racial, religious and sexual morality choose contemporary art as their field, they will find themselves at odds with their peers and teachers, and the learning environment will be one of unresolvable tension for them.

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<sup>27</sup> hooks, bell, 'Embracing Change: teaching in a multicultural world', in *Teaching to Transgress: education as the practice of freedom*, New York and London, Routledge, 1994,p.35

<sup>28</sup> op.cit