

Write to Exist

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Nothing about art may be taken for granted today. To utter these now almost banal words is to echo the sentiment of the great German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, whose posthumous magnum opus, *Aesthetic Theory*, begins: 'It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more, not its inner life, nor its relation to the world, not even its right to exist' (Adorno, 1997: 1). In the spirit of Adorno, for whom art was famously formulated as 'the sedimented history of human misery', this paper is written in the shadow of our own overwhelmingly conservative political moment, and the possible place that art occupies within it. It is more specifically inspired by the observation that in spite of the appearance of new forms of mediated, collaborative and relational approaches to art making, art is surrounded today by a pervasive critical silence. There are notable exceptions – such as the critical discourse of globalisation circulating in and around certain large scale international events such as Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta 11* and, locally, Charles Merewether's recent 2006 Biennale of Sydney, *Zones of Contact*. However, following the demise of postmodernism and the waning of 'Theory', the new century is marked by an apparent inability of artists and critics to articulate or advance art's changing role.

I speak in generalisations, because such is the level of most discussions in the pluralised, 'post-critical', 'post-medium' art world. Here I want to provocatively question art's 'right to exist', to move beyond vague notions about art as a form of 'cultural enrichment', or artists as society's 'moral conscience'. In this context, and in light of the themes of this conference – on the future of art, design and creativity in the educational situation – this paper argues for the importance of writing as part of an art education. It is through writing, I want to argue, that a more productive space of artistic enunciation can be formulated, and a position, a voice, thus enabled. But not in any straightforward way. Charles Baudelaire famously said that art criticism should be 'passionate, partisan and political', and for the nineteenth century poet and critic, these were three essentially synonymous words without which there would be little point to modern, secular art. The same might be said of all writing about art. I am clearly not talking about the finessing of artist statements undertaken in professional practice units in the final semester of an undergraduate degree.

I had originally intended to begin my discussion by reconsidering some well known figures for whom writing and art practice have been integrally linked – including Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Ian Burn and Andrea Fraser. It would be possible, drawing on these exemplars to consider various models and methods for emerging artists writing about their own art and visual culture more generally. One thinks of Judd's brilliant explications of Minimalism, Smithson's influential pseudo-anthropological image-text artworks, Burn's conceptualisation of the political act of looking, and Fraser's institutional critique. However, I have instead adopted a broader approach.

The reinvention of the artist

The question of writing opens up the larger issue of what kind of artists we are hoping to train in our educational institutions. We can no longer assume visual art's avant-garde status in culture, nor even its centrality, given its displacement by various more efficient entertainment industries. Since this conference is addressed towards the future, let us imagine a world in which the proposition (or demand) that artists are undertaking 'research' is taken seriously. It seems to me that this stands in contrast to the Romantic notion of the artist as a uniquely gifted individual maker of luxury objects. What if we push the 'research' trajectory to its limit? I am not talking about the reductive sense of studio art involving various techniques that artists can discover in the course of exploring new media. As James Elkins notes, this would be 'a technical and skill-based sense of "research" that we surely do not want to adapt for twenty-first century artwork' (Elkins, 2004: 29). Would it help if we abandoned the idea of the artist as one who produces objects for cultural and economic consumption and embrace the notion of the artist as a service provider? Miwon Kwon has suggested that the notion of the 'artist as an overspecialised aesthetic object maker has been anachronistic for a long time already. What they *provide* now, rather than *produce*, are aesthetic, often "critical-artistic", services' (Kwon, 1996: 103). Think of the compensation a contemporary artist receives for a temporary installation, which is less payment for a product than for artistic activity itself.

In the interest of challenging old paradigms and avoiding lazy clichés, we should consider art as just one mode of cultural practice among others. The choice to become an artist, as the artist Andrea Fraser argues in her book of collected writings, is self-motivated:

Engaging in the production of art is the profession of choice par excellence, motivated, by most accounts, not by material need but by desire. Artists are, above all others, those members of society who are supposed to find pleasure and satisfaction in their work. Artistic practice then, one might say, is entirely surplus labour: there is no necessity about it. (Fraser, 2005: 31)

Although art has a historically privileged role in relation to subjectivity and feelings, Fraser suggests we understand 'art making as a kind of social practice, as a social activity as opposed to strictly a kind of specialized activity that is about producing a particular kind of object.' Moreover, as a social activity, art is in a strong relationship to education itself. In short, Fraser understands 'art as a form of counterpractice within the field of cultural production' (Fraser, 2005: 4).

Maria Gough, writing about debates between Kandinsky and Rodchenko in the immediate post-Revolution period in Russia, recalls Rodchenko's text from 1920 entitled 'Everything is Experiment' in which the artist is a *cultural agent*: a dynamic force in the shaping of the present and the future. In her book, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (the title of course playing on Walter Benjamin's groundbreaking 1934 essay 'The Author as Producer'), Gough demonstrates that the Constructivists' self-critical enterprise was an extraordinarily innovative and compelling instance of the broader theorisation of the question of the artist or intellectual's *Existenzrecht* or 'right to exist' (Gough, 2005: 18). As she suggests,

ultimately, the question of 'How today's artist justifies his existence' – as Victor Khrakovskii put it in 1921 – is as ancient as it is contemporary. In fact, 'the expulsion of poets from Plato's "perfect" community in *The Republic* is... the question's foundational moment' (Gough, 2005: 18).

It is fascinating to consider this issue in light of current imperatives. For instance, it was agreed that, for the purposes of the Australian Research Quality Framework (RQF), the definition of research would be consistent with a broad notion of research and experimental development (R&D) as comprising 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge and culture'. Notwithstanding the vagueness of the terms, or the accumulative proprietorial sense of 'stock' assumed here, is it possible to turn the demands of research into an updated Constructivism for the twenty-first century? Just as Benjamin, in his desire for politically engaged practice, attacked the conventional view of authorship understood as an expert in the field of literary form, it seems incumbent for critical artists not to merely adopt political 'content', but to revolutionize the means through which their work is produced and distributed and consider how, where and by whom their work will be received.

Art practice as dialogical

In his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Grant H. Kester argues that art is uniquely placed to counter a world in which we are reduced to an atomised pseudo-community of consumers. Kester suggests there are two ways of thinking critically about art. The first is 'to define art through its function as a more or less open space within contemporary culture: a space in which certain questions can be asked, certain critical analyses articulated, that would not be accepted or tolerated elsewhere' (Kester, 2004: 68). However, as he notes, the 'space for these analyses and questions is relatively narrow, and the moment that they are applied to sites beyond the art world, the level of toleration diminishes rather rapidly.' It might be further argued that this critical function is almost entirely incorporated into the system art wishes to critique. The second approach involves 'identifying [art's] salient characteristics and linking these to aspects of aesthetic experience that have been abandoned or redirected in some way during the modern period' (Kester, 2004: 68). This might involve a 'critical time sense', and a reinvigorated spatial imagination, such as identifying interconnections among often invisible forces that pattern human and environmental existence. Here one thinks of various mappings of the inequitable effects and flows of globalisation, of the kind initiated in projects such as those at *Documenta 11* and its sibling exhibitions. All of which might come together 'through dialogical and collaborative encounters with others'. As Kester notes, 'the existing cultural construction of art as a privileged realm of free expression provides a quasi-protected opening onto a broader cultural and political arena within which these various forms of aesthetic knowledge can be mobilised' (Kester, 2004: 69). In other words, free expression is not an end in itself.

In a recent essay in *Artforum*, the British critic Claire Bishop outlines the international surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration and direct engagement with specific social constituencies. These are often social events, where the art creates new relations between people, embodying what she calls, borrowing Nicolas Bourriaud's term, 'an expanded field of

relational practices'. Bourriaud's notion of 'relational aesthetics' broadly refers to a strand of practice in which the sphere of human relations constitutes the site of the artwork's meaning; that is, the temporary collective form that it produces. Although Bishop is highly critical of the romanticising tendency within this work, and argues that the quality of these relations must be scrutinised (see Bishop, 2004), she also suggests that this 'mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations ... that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life' (Bishop, 2006: 179). Nevertheless, the question of the institutions of art remains. As Nikos Papastergiadis recently put it:

Artists and collectives throughout the world have been seeking to animate the interactions that occur within an institution and extend the modes in which they can relate to their audience. However, while this form of cultural engagement moves towards opening dialogue and creating connections with other people, the dominant art discourse persists with a methodology that privileges the preciousness of the object and the uniqueness of the artist. (Papastergiadis, 2006: 113)

Arguably, through a clearer understanding of the dialogical potential of the work of art, artists would be in a stronger position to negotiate and challenge institutional conservatism.

Artists, writing and self-awareness

This brings me to the educational context, and more specifically to consider the role of writing in the training of the artist. Amidst the paradoxical wit of his 1890 dialogue 'The Critic as Artist' (1890), Oscar Wilde suggests 'there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one' (Wilde, 1948: 959). Indeed, writing is generally valued at art schools insofar as it is a self-reflexive process that helps to produce self-aware practice. In his book *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, however, James Elkins takes a hard look at art schools and the way we teach, or fail to teach, art making, and doubts whether *self-awareness* necessarily makes better art. Similarly, in a more recent essay exploring eight different potential models for a PhD in creative art practice, Elkins questions the widely held assumption that the thesis component of the research degree is a form of 'art criticism, intended to inform the art practice' (Elkins, 2004: 24). As he writes, 'The purpose of that configuration would be to reach a pitch of sophistication in the description and evaluation of one's own art, and the grounding assumption would be that self-reflexivity is an ultimate good' (Elkins, 2004: 25). He suggests 'the point is debatable':

many artists have made compelling work even though they have no idea of the critical matrix to which their work belongs, and despite the fact that they are only minimally reflective about their own practice. Of course it is also true that some artists' work thrives on self-awareness. This idea that self-awareness is a desideratum needs to be treated as a problematic assumption, not as a guiding principle. (Elkins, 2004: 25)

Elkins' objection to the mantra of self-awareness is worth taking seriously. However, one wonders about the alternatives. Wilful ignorance? Elkins seems to assume that self-awareness

is achievable, and thus dangerous to certain art. But what if we think about writing differently? We can alternatively conceive of writing as a means towards greater engagement with the non-self. Writing can produce a more complex appreciation of art's dialogical relation with others. This would seem particularly pertinent today, given that contemporary capitalism encourages narcissistic forms of heightened self-reflexivity.

Write to exist

I am arguing for the importance of writing as part of an artist's education. But although writing is conventionally conceived as a practice of attempting to help students locate themselves theoretically within their own practices – this is certainly the dominant model of the exegesis in higher degrees by research – I want to argue that writing does not necessarily have to aim towards clarifying and interpreting one's *intentions*. This is perhaps writing at its least interesting. We are all familiar with the 'intentional fallacy', the assumption that the meaning intended by the author of a work is of primary importance. Just as reading is never reducible simply to what is read, the meaning of an artwork always exceeds and often escapes the conscious understanding and intentions of its maker. It is less interesting to consider to what degree meaning in art to be found in some originary moment of an object's manufacture, that to explore the artwork itself – its physical form, its visual rhetorics, its overt and covert references, its cultural context and publics – and how it generates its potential and actual effects.

The 'review' model is one existing model here – and one thinks of the added community-building success of initiatives such as the independent *un Magazine* in Melbourne – however precarious – or the online *Artwrite* (<http://blogs.cofa.unsw.edu.au/blog/artwrite>) at the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales. The 'blog' form of the latter is an excellent model for art schools to adopt. Students are in a position to make an enormously rich contribution to their cultural community, given their privileged place within it. And such writing can assist students to understand the fundamental and shifting role of critique in contemporary art practice, and invite a continual reflection on the institutional and political structures of art making.

As it is currently conceived, however, writing in art schools tends to adhere to a Romantic conception of selfhood – in line with an overemphasis on formal innovation at the expense of the broader conditions informing artistic production. But I would argue that we should resist privileging self-realisation as the basis for art education, which risks simply reproducing the dominant logic and individualising ethos of consumerism. Rather than a therapeutic logic, the role of art education should be to challenge students and unsettle comfortable preconceptions. Collaboration is one practice technique to achieve this; but while there are isolated local examples of very successful collaboration, such as DAMP or the Space Pork Adventures in Melbourne, innovative institutional experiments along this direction – think of the Centre for Ideas at the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) – have found themselves beset with problems, insofar as the dominant culture of individualism remains pervasive. Once again, this is where writing, as a process of 'othering', might assist. Writing can be conceived as a heterology, an always imperfect shared discourse, moving students beyond the repetition and confirmation of a prescribed identity of the self. In this way writing might also move beyond the chore after 'the

real work' – the practice – is done, and become a more creative partner in the creative process. It might open the student to what lies beyond him or her, uncover his or her implication in larger truths, and empower them to articulate their critical values. Finally, then, to return to where I started, Adorno's taking-nothing-for-granted status of art today can become an enabling force of uncertainty.

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