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A Different Kind of Studio: Reflecting on the open studio and the artist-teacher

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For more than 15 years, QUT's Visual Arts discipline has employed a teaching model known as the 'open studio' in their undergraduate BFA program. Distinct from the other models of studio degrees in Australia, the open studio approach is cross-disciplinary: in preference to notions of medium-specificity, students are encouraged to engage with the more holistic notion of *practice* by focusing on experimentation, improvisation and collaboration. However, while this activity proves to be highly relevant to exploring and participating in the 'post-medium' nature of much contemporary art, the open studio also presents a complex of challenges to the artist-teacher. The open studio, as we have argued elsewhere, produces a different type of student than traditional, discipline-specific art programs (Robb 2009) – but it also produces a different kind of artist-teacher.

By presenting interwoven accounts of each of our experiences as artist-teachers at QUT, this paper will provide an account of our individual backgrounds and pedagogical approaches and the subsequent way in which these have been influenced by and presented challenges to our approaches to practice. As an emphatically reflective account, it responds to Donald Schon's observation about educational practice: "the critical issue to begin with is not what the students learn, or their difficulties, but how the teachers have their own understandings of the material at hand" (Schon 1996, 14). While this paper primarily addresses the complexity that arises from open-studio teaching, the examples it provides will resonate with tertiary educators who are likewise grappling with the challenges of teaching contemporary art, regardless of discipline models.

1. Background

If traditional studio teaching will always require the artist-teacher to relinquish some of his or her personal preferences, this relinquishment is fundamental in a cross-disciplinary course - especially when the teacher's own practice is anchored in exclusively discipline-specific concerns. It is precisely this tension between a discipline-based studio practice and cross-disciplinary teaching practice that has given impetus to this paper. However, while we both share a passionate commitment to cross-disciplinary

teaching, we have each come to the open studio with very different backgrounds that have shaped our engagement with the process of studio teaching.

1.1 Daniel Mafe

My introduction to teaching in the visual arts studio began in QUT in the early nineties when I was appointed to co-ordinate the painting studio. My own experiences of art school, have helped form my approaches to teaching. I went to an at the time very conservative art school where medium, at least within the painting studio, was never up for question. This however was not the case with the sculpture discipline where students actively investigated a broad range of media, seeking that which best suited their ideas. This left me with a particular question: why did sculpture students not appear to take a material for granted but rather looked at what was possible to construct work with? In the painting studios by contrast however, everyone seemed to know that to paint was to use paint (and oil paint at that). While in the mid-1980s the differences between disciplines were more explicit, this disparity between the attitudes of these studios was instructive to me. As a result, when I began teaching painting at QUT I made it as clear as possible that students were free to use any material that they saw as most appropriate to their ideas. In other words this studio initiated the principles of the open studio at QUT.

There was a problem though. A consistent sticking point with students was the fact that the studio was named a painting studio. This name worked to inhibit experimentation and encouraged students to be cautious when exploring a mode of working that did not immediately 'read' as painting. Some years later, all the separate visual art studios at QUT were merged into first year, second year and third year studios. This had the immediate effect of shifting emphasis to the relatively broader question for students: what kind of art will I make and what media best suit my ideas? They were now at liberty to choose the medium that suited their ideas best and as staff we were similarly at liberty to focus on helping the emergence of their nascent creative identities into contemporary *artists* – feedback that was unfettered by the constraints of medium.

1.2 Charles Robb

My experience as a tertiary art educator began in a specific discipline area: sculpture. At the time this seemed entirely natural: in my undergraduate degree I majored in sculpture and three-dimensional form has been the exclusive focus of my studio practice. If I was attracted to sculpture initially due to its affective qualities – qualities borne by my driving interest in corporeality and the figure - by 2002 when I was unexpectedly invited by the University of Southern Queensland to run their undergraduate sculpture program for a semester, this interest had become more a habit than a carefully considered aesthetic position. The experience of developing the USQ sculpture curriculum revived my

interest in its specificity as a medium. I understood well the way in which this medium was an artificial construct: a product of an academic system, informed by art-historical heritage and the modernist disciplinary paradigm. And while the focus on medium-specificity served as a productive way of orienting and directing the creative process, and of 'scoping' the teaching program, what I did not fully appreciate was that they were also a profound and unnecessary limitation to pedagogical goals.

This insight was one that was almost immediately raised by the challenge of the QUT studio model when I began teaching there in 2006. A discipline-based focus proved to be of little help as I grappled with student practices that ranged from performance and video to drawing and painting. Now, my discipline specialization was a hindrance, profoundly limiting my capacities as a studio teacher. Where spatial concerns were an apt point of reference in the sculpture studio, in the open studio a broader framework was required. Instead of looking to *medium* and approaching studio teaching from a developmental perspective, I needed to tailor my teaching approaches to the specific characteristics of a student's individual practice. This shift from an external reference point, to one that was located internally required a different pedagogical approach. My teaching had to become much more dialogical, interrogative and collaborative. In place of the hierarchy of the instructor-student relationship, as an open-studio teacher I had to first *learn* about the student's interests, fascinations, habits and apprehensions through conversation and a close consideration of their working processes. As I came to see, the open studio invites a more horizontal approach to teaching in which student and teacher are frequently in a collaborative exchange of ideas and understandings.

2. Pedagogical Emphasis: Process

For both of us, the open studio has forged a different way of thinking about the relationship between teacher and student that occurs in studio teaching. This shift in emphasis is exemplified by the shift from seeing art as an historically conditioned 'thing' (an attitude underscored by both our different discipline backgrounds), to engaging with it as a *process*. While we have both found that, as Robert Morris has written, when art is considered as a process "the artificiality of media-based distinctions ... falls away" (Morris 1993, 75). This however is not done with a view to revealing some authentic truth about art's ontology, but rather to address the performative dimension of its production. By focusing on the category of process rather than those of skill or technique, we are able to address both the experimental, materially-based actions of the studio, as well as the critical processes of analysis and interpretation. In this way, the open studio is able to maintain a firm and rigorous foundation for student activities that are often multifarious, dynamic and highly individual.

2.1 Daniel Mafe

As an artist and studio lecturer I have always understood and been sympathetic to a view of art as process-based, but what does this term mean in the contexts of both practice and teaching? Contemporary art has certainly been extremely interested in process and rendering that visible at different times, and much art is also clearly and obviously process-derived and there has been research into this. Practice-led research has made this view a pivotal plank to its self-understandings as writers such as Barbara Bolt have articulated in publications like *Heidegger, Handability and Praxical Knowledge* (2004b) and *Art beyond Representation* (2004a). In these texts the focus is strongly on understanding art not just as representation but rather as a process where the *handability* of art can act as a material form of 'concept' making and in doing so, expresses the performative nature of making. This line of thinking has also proved important in the unfolding of my ideas about my own practice-led research and studio teaching.

This is very clear when working within the third year studio environment at QUT where emphasis is placed on process as a complex of overlapping activities. In this approach, process is regarded as the basis of practice understood as "all the activity an artist/designer is engaged with. Practitioners think, read and write as well as look, listen and make." (Haseman and Mafe 2009, 214). In other words a practice "[...] not only suggests the techniques or media an artist uses to create art, but also fundamentally the artist's conceptual approach or method by which he or she goes about making art." (The Andy Warhol Museum 2013). Practice and process are intrinsically linked in the contemporary art studio.

This wholistic understanding of practice and the processes that define it, is important for students to grasp. Without that larger understanding students cannot be encouraged to find a personally relevant direction, conceptually and practically. In a way, ideas are now to be worked with in the same way that materials are. What this means is that ideas, rather than prescribing art, are understood as emergent entities within its making and are therefore as fluid and subject to change as any physical media. In this way *handability* is now extended to cover a wide range of almost rhetorical tropes as students shift from thinking to making to researching to exhibiting and back again. The elements that constitute a complete practice are worked as a range of overlapping and mutually informing processes.

By the time students at QUT enter the third year two things occur. In the first semester they tend to draw together a range of work to achieve a kind of temporary mastery over their chosen forms and areas. Issues that arose in second year move towards resolution

in this time. In the second semester however I engage them in questions relevant to a longer view by encouraging students to think beyond the semester format towards a more thorough engagement with independent practice. In other words, process as a forming principle becomes dominant again. In this space, students think about longer term projects either for further study in the Honours year or begin to prepare a practice that might work best for them outside of the institution.

This has significant implications for teaching. In this context, my teaching role is predominantly that of a mentor. The supervisor as expert is gradually replaced by or at the very least augmented by the supervisor as a sharer of experience, and the modeling of a flexible, adaptive and fluid approach to practice becomes ever more important. The student now becomes the expert on their practice and needs to 'own' this new authority – a development that can be quite challenging. As a mentor the studio teacher needs to move from the power base that expertise can define to the more 'vulnerable' support or advisory role. As a studio teacher this impacts dramatically on one's own thinkings. In this advisory role one is now very much a learner. For someone who has mainly worked in a discipline specific way, this change of dynamic presents rich, engaging and pointed challenges to one's own creative processes.

2.2 Charles Robb

In my first year studio curriculum, process acts a chief point of reference for connecting material experiences and form without recourse to discipline constraints. Towards this, I have developed a scaffolded program that introduces students to experimentation via constraint-based tasks in which they are asked to develop works through the process of trial and error and improvisation, often working collaboratively. The program of tasks is initiated by a focus on materiality through which students are challenged to explore what the material can 'do' – to explore the actions and forms that are implicit to a given substance. From here, the attention progressively moves to actions through tool-based, gestural, 'non-art' and performative modes of activity. The objective throughout this program is to give students an experience of an array of different ways of making art, a processual repertoire through which they can begin to develop their individual 'voices' as artists. This heuristic model of learning is broadly liberating to the student. An emphasis on process rather than formal resolution enables the student to relax their attachment to familiar ways of working.

But if the most immediate effect of teaching cross-media was the way it made me recognise the importance of process in the studio, it also made me consider more general questions about the creative process. Over subsequent years, as I discussed works with students, watched their works evolve and refined my curriculum, a body of

principles emerged that were to change my own attitude to practice. These can be summarized as follows:

- All experimentation requires sustained repetition;
- No amount of preparatory work can substitute for 'live' experimentation with media;
- No aspect of a work can ever be exhausted;
- All art should be seen as a situated encounter;
- All works can be analysed in terms of their qualities of contrast and correspondence;
- Ambiguity is the essential currency of art.

I found that these simple rules of practice, almost none of which had formed part of my own undergraduate training, acted as a powerfully liberating force in the studio capable of being applied across the full gamut of artistic mediums. These rules might be thought of as a studio 'discipline' in the alternative meaning of the word: a code of practice. Through this 'code' the rules of engagement are placed within the artist's control. 'Discipline' becomes a method, tailored to the individual concerns of practice. We can think of it as a system of rules, but it might be better interpreted it as a *topology* – a dynamic set of elements and relationships that give direction and orientation to the activities of the studio.

3. Personal impact

The open-studio can be characterized by two modes of 'openness' that distinguish it from the discipline-based studio. On the one hand, as discussed above, the open studio operates inwards, acknowledging the idiosyncratic, subjective and localized features of contemporary art practice. But equally, the open studio faces outwards, fostering a more porous relationship between the studio and world. In moving beyond discipline boundaries, the open studio creates an opportunity for students to enlarge their concept of practice to include the full spectrum of interests above and beyond conventional art processes and forms. At QUT, this approach has resulted in student practices that incorporate such disparate activities as pole-dancing, bricklaying, Death Metal performance, swimming and axolotl-keeping as students draw their outside interests into the space of practice. This two-way action – inward and outward – has likewise exerted itself upon us as practitioners as teaching roles cannot help but influence the attitudes we carry into our individual studio practices.

3.1 Daniel Mafe

The two way action discussed above is certainly relevant to my own expectations of my arts practice as I had to adapt my thinking to understanding painting as art and not

simply as 'painting'. Painting for me was no longer a dialogue within self-contained discipline specificity. It is not that those discipline narratives were no longer relevant but rather I had to include the broader narrative of what constituted art and how my use of a painting medium contributed to that or at least occupied space within it. A broader example of this concerns the 'end of painting' dialogues through the eighties and nineties which were I think symptomatic of this very process of painting engaging with a post-studio contemporaneity, and it was in the so-called noughties that painting at least in some quarters, began to throw off this solipsistic introversion and engage with the world and art world more proactively.

This challenge to my previous thinkings lead me to engage in constructing digital works, real time patterned animation, sound works that commented on and developed the extant narratives of my work formally and technically. Within this new working space I challenged the speed with which pictorial ideas developed, as well as the material nature of what I worked with, its *facture*. All the various material elements I work with feel to me to be practice-led expressions of that unnamable core motivating factor that drives my work as a whole and my painting in particular. My ideas of a making practice opened to include creative and critical writing, and with that a swarm of possibilities opened up before me. And yet I still think of myself as a painter and I think of this expanding range of work as painting. The writing emerges from the same sources as the painting and digital work; it comments on other work critically and creatively, each aspect supporting and working with other aspects to form an emergent whole.

This expanded understanding is a direct result of my teaching and the challenges of doing that in an open studio environment. I speak to students working with film, sound, installation, photography, sculptural practices, or text, and sometimes all of these approaches. To wrap my head around that multiplicity I have to understand or at least be sensitive to the individual core motivations of students, that which drives and orientates their approaches to making, and it is in doing so that I have renegotiated my own motivations and their ways of manifesting.

3.2 Charles Robb

The emphasis on process and experimentation in the teaching studio, proved to be instructive in my own studio practice as it allowed my thinking about to process to move beyond a strategic method of consolidating form, towards seeing process as an active experimental agent. In my own studio, this has seen my interests shift from a concern with sculptural self-portraiture to a more process-driven investigation of replication and resemblance – a focus that now forms the basis of my studio practice.

As discussed above, the open-studio also engages broader methodological ideas about how a practice is constituted above and beyond medium or personal style. The basic unit of reference is not the work, but rather the more *field-based* subject of practice. When providing feedback in the studio, proximity is all-important: responses and suggestions need to be located within the creative matrix formed by the student's working methods, and its material, formal and processual 'palette'. What the open studio has thus revealed to me as a practitioner is the *topology* of practice. Drawn from mathematics, *topology* treats space not as a static field but in terms of its properties of connectedness and movement. Introduced into the studio lexicon in the 1960s by pioneering Post Minimalists Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman (Graham and Wallis 1993, 42) (Auping 2004) , topology has the capacity to capture the mercurial structural dimension of practice, without reducing it to a mechanical or didactic system. This insight has been elicited by my experience of teaching in the open studio and the study of 'deep' process that this teaching model demands. The effect of this new way of understanding the ontology of the studio now forms the basis of my current PhD research – a practice-led project that seeks to consider the implications of a topological account of practice. It is a powerful example of how teaching in the open-studio, invites questions and insights that can fundamentally transform one's relationship to practice. My practice may remain focused on the sculptural medium, but the questions it now explores far exceed the conventions of that medium, to address more complex issues of methodology and subjectivity.

Summary

The open studio encourages a rethinking of the ontology of practice – and this has pedagogical as well as individual implications for the way artist-teachers engage with the studio. In our cases, the open studio ultimately reaffirms our decision to remain connected to discipline within our respective practices; it has made discipline a conscious mode of working, rather than simply a default category of practice. The open studio model does not demand that artists dispense with discipline, but simply that it be recognised as merely one of the multitude of reference-points that an art practice can engage with.

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