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Artists in colleges: 60th anniversary revisiting of Ben Shahn's, The Charles Eliot Norton Lecture, 1957

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This paper critically revisits the Ben Shahn six part lecture series for The Charles Eliot Norton Lecture, 1957 at Harvard. Harvard had only a year earlier argued for the visual arts within the university; the Carpenter Centre designed by Le Corbusier opened in 1963. Also published as a book in that year to commemorate Shahn's contribution to Harvard life, the book is itself a beautiful entente between art schools and the university. The position of the studio school within university life is always an ongoing negotiation. What is the duty of the art school to the greater university community? What is the place of the studio and the autonomy of practice within a research institute.

In 1957 at the height of post-war modernist humanism, Shahn makes a strong case for arts value in a university education. He does also have reservations though about the "loneliness" the artist might feel within the university system cut off as he says from his artistic community. Shahn on the whole is even handed about the place of the artist in the university, and his opening line is, "I have come to Harvard with some very serious doubts as to whether I ought to be here at all." The faith in art, in art's cultural value, as later embodied in Corbusier's own deeply humanist architecture, is taken as read by the Harvard lectures.

By returning to this moment, before the art school was integrated in to the university, at the height of modernist certainty about the value of art in the university, our own contemporary position can be brought into relief.

Oliver Watts is a theorist and artist. His work explores the connections between art, law and power. Watts looks at various issues where art and ideology meet: how images create authority and power; how we are brought to the law as psychological subjects by legal institutions; the connection between aesthetics and ethical acts; the importance of fantasy and irrationality to power structures. Through his studio practice Watts has recently looked at the formation of subjecthood and the markers of class. He has also interrogated the critical place of the artist *within* the structures of power rather than always maintaining avant-garde position outside it; his paintings use a contemporary form of irony and satire that often merely takes ideological structures at face value. These interdisciplinary connections offer new imagination and insights into our thinking about law and justice and personal subjecthood.

I have come to Harvard with some very serious doubts as to whether I ought to be here at all.

I am a painter; I am not a lecturer about art nor a scholar of art. It is my chosen role to paint pictures, not to talk about them. (Shahn 1975 [1957]: 1)

So Ben Shahn 60 years ago begun his lecture at Harvard entitled 'Artists in Colleges.' It is an historical artefact that argues with strong conviction for the value of the art school in the university and published as *The Shape of Content* (Shahn, 1975). It is a document worth revisiting in the context of the contemporary neo-liberal university that puts pressure on the humanities in general and where, in this environment, the art school is particularly vulnerable (see for eg, Baker and Buckley 2009; Elkins 2009; Small 2013).

The book consists of six published lectures that Ben Shahn gave in 1956-57 as The Charles Eliot Norton Fellow; the SCA library has a fifth printing from 1972 but it still felt like an object pointedly from another more decorous time. The lectures, entitled "Artists in Colleges"; "The Biography of a Painting"; "The Shape of Content"; "On Nonconformity"; "Modern Evaluations"; and "The Education of the Artist" celebrate art and question its place in the university.

Shahn introduces his position:

Within the past few years there has developed an increased interest in art within the universities with the promise – the possibility at least – that they may constitute the new art community. Such a prospect has so much to recommend it, so much in the way of intellectual stimulation for art, the way of values and perhaps sympathetic climate, that one hopes it may be realized...I have a number of observations to make on this possible forth coming alignment.

At the same time, there is always the possibility that art may be utterly stifled within the university atmosphere, that the creative impulse may be wholly obliterated by the pre-eminence of criticism and scholarship. Nor is there perfect unanimity on the part of the university itself as to whether the presence of artists will be a salutary within its community, or whether indeed

art itself is a good solid intellectual pursuit and therefore a proper university study. (Shahn 1975: 2)

The background interest that Shahn mentions here is the 1956 Harvard report of the Committee on the Visual Arts, headed by art collector John Nicholas Brown, which brought to light many problems facing the Fine Arts Department, the School of Design and the Harvard museums (The Brown Report). It was on the back of this work that Shahn, who had just represented the United States in the 1954 Venice Biennale (with De Kooning), was invited to come as fellow. The timing also coincided with the closure of Black Mountain College, where Shahn had taught only a few years earlier, and which promised a central role for interdisciplinarity, creativity and making. The idea of an experimental art school and its connection to the university sector was also in another way presaged by Joseph Albers move to Yale from Black Mountain College.

As part of the bequest the scholar was asked to stay at Harvard for a year and to present the lecture series that would subsequently be published. Shahn only accepted after it was agreed that painting would be his 'scholarly' contribution. He exhibited paintings at the Fogg Museum during his tenure. As Shahn concludes his opening lecture, 'That I am here at all is evidence of the changing attitude toward art within universities.' (Shahn: 23)

Reconsidering Shahn and Unfettered Marxist Humanism

With some provisos it is worth revisiting the Shahn lectures in our current context. Reading them to yourself is a form of historical re-enactment that can not help provoke with its mixture of nostalgia, elegy and utopianism. The strength and intimacy of Shahn's lectures, his reliance on humanist values and his clear interest in practice, mark them as a singular and situated piece of work. He does not in any sense kowtow to university politics or to utilitarian arguments of instrumentality or economic rationalism. Instead he argues strongly for the importance of art to education and to society as a whole, from the artists point of view.

Boris Groys stresses the importance of replaying in contemporary art:

But when we begin to question our projects, to doubt or reformulate them, the present, the contemporary, becomes important, even central for us. This is because the contemporary is actually constituted by doubt, hesitation,

uncertainty, indecision—by the need for prolonged reflection, for a delay....Now, one can argue that we are at this historical moment in precisely such a situation, because ours is a time in which we reconsider—not abandon, not reject, but analyze and reconsider—the modern projects. (Groys 2009)

My revisiting of Shahn's lectures is a symptom of this state of the 'now', as outlined by Groys. Part of the fascination with Shahn's approach to the art school in the university is its unfettered post-war Marxist humanism, its particular brand of modernist utopianism. In addition to this transcendental humanist rhetoric the lectures frequently employ a strong future tense — 'will', 'should', 'potentially' — which is very unfamiliar to our own debates on this topic; here the art school's potential is endlessly hopeful. The futurity of the written lectures is a successful rhetorical device.

In Shahn's lectures, however, the artist is shamelessly 'male' – Shahn consistently uses the pronoun 'he'. He iterates the importance of Dante, Veronese and other Eurocentric canonical figures, and the 'genius' of the artist (although questioned specifically in one section and discussed below) is still fetishised. Although seductive, the lectures are a form of crypto-humanism. Within ten years of Shahn's lecture series Michel Foucault had written on the 'death of man' (Foucault 1966: 357), and another ten years later Woody Allen had reduced Shahn's Marxist humanism to a cliché in a famous scene from *Annie Hall*:

Alvy Singer: You, you, you're like New York, Jewish, left-wing, liberal, intellectual, Central Park West, Brandeis University, the socialist summer camps and the, the father with the Ben Shahn drawings, right, and the really, y'know, strike-oriented kind of, red diaper, stop me before I make a complete imbecile of myself.

Allison: No, that was wonderful. I love being reduced to a cultural stereotype.

Alvy Singer: Right, I'm a bigot, I know, but for the left. (Allen, 1977)

If the contemporary is obsessed with the unfulfilled utopian dreams of modernity then Shahn's book is a modernist ruin. Although at the time the Carpenter Centre, an arch-humanist Corbusier masterpiece (with its access ramp, transparent display of those working inside, and the proposed sunny rooftop), was built for the opening of the Visual Arts department in 1963, the artist's education was never fully integrated

into the liberal arts program at Harvard. James Elkins characterises this failure as an American commonplace (Elkins 2006). As recently as 2008 yet another report revisited the status of the visual arts within the university (which for example did not have an MFA program) (Harvard 2008). Mentioning the Brown Report as the last high watermark, the 2008 report stated:

These quintessential features of modern art and scholarship were already glimpsed fifty years ago in the last full-scale review of the arts at Harvard, the Brown Report of 1956...But its overarching vision, even in the fairly cautious and circumscribed form in which it had been articulated, was not fully realised. The arts remained curricularly marginal, institutionally peripheral. (Harvard 2008: 7)

So there is something nostalgic, unfinished, and failed in this lecture series (that Harvard themselves think is worth revisiting) but in its lack of foreclosure, its singularity and in (what is now) a historicised humanist passion, there is something that arrests the contemporary thinker.

Situated, Humanist and Now.

The best way to proceed then, through the approaches of critical theory and post-structuralism, is to move beyond Shahn's essentialism and, through trans-historical generosity, to find a situated singularity in his approach. The lectures are more open ended than you would first expect. They are art and artist centred, and across all the lectures his foundational theme is whether the university can become an active and supportive centre of art creation and education.

This is Shahn's voice on 'The Education of the Artist' in his final lecture:

Attend a university if you possibly can. There is no content of knowledge that is not pertinent to the work you will want to do. But before you attend a university work at something for a while. Do anything. Get a job in a potato field; or work as a grease-monkey in an auto repair shop. But if you do work in a field do not fail to observe the look and the feel of earth and of all things that you handle — yes, even potatoes! Or, in the auto shop, the smell of oil

and grease and burning rubber. Paint of course, but if you have to lay aside painting for a time, continue to draw. Listen well to all conversations and be instructed by them and take all seriousness seriously. Never look down upon anything or anyone as not worthy of notice. In college or out of college, read. And form opinions!

In this quote many of his themes are brought together in a form of spoken word poetry. There is almost a Heideggerian approach to the connection between the mind, hand, and eye; in his repetition of his imperative to paint and draw he makes doing and making foundational; there is the importance of the arts to create community; there is the insistence on the university as a possible centre of creation; and there is the breadth of training a liberal arts degree can add to an artist's training (that is, that extends an artist's training beyond mere skill-based training).

There is no shying away from Shahn's humanist approach, and while still acknowledging the anti-humanist critiques, the current university, with its connection to advanced capitalism has placed critical theory in an interesting position in regard to the humanities. We are forced to become guardian, where once we were the great dismantlers, to the humanist tradition that is under the stress of austerity and greater economic and political rationality. Shahn's defiant humanism is a good counter to bureaucratic expediency in the arts.

The lectures centre on the position of art and the artist and their needs. Before the neoliberal university, and also before post-structuralism, art is strong and heroic. In the 1957 humanist imagining art is not under threat, it is not marginal and it is not 'feminised'; it is a deeply important part of the liberal education of a cultured and educated undergraduate Harvard student.

The canon is not read oppressively but openly and dare I say nomadically. The list that he argues through above shows this line of flight, ranging almost absurdly across non-sequential categories from potato farming to Proust. The approach never relies on skills training, it never argues for instrumentalism (although content is giving precedence over formalist concerns) and it never uses the terms 'art as research' or 'knowledge creation'. Shahn instead argues within the university for the aesthetic and ethical dimension of art as part of a cultured education. He connects to tradition but still suggests resistant strategies.

Artists in Colleges

In his first lecture, the one most relevant to the conference (ACUADS Conference, 2017 on the theme of value), Shahn suggests (in the future tense) that universities could be a new centre for the field of visual art, an innovative critical force. He quotes from the Brown Report:

All the timidity that now surrounds the thought of bringing artist and studio into the university, on a par with other fields of scholarship, lately surrounded the same venture in regard to scientists. Just as the scientist has found his place within the university, just as his laboratory has become academically respectable. So the artist and studio, given time and opportunity, should find their places. (Shahn: 14)

It is surprising to hear the conflation of the science lab and the art studio as fragile addenda to the traditional functions of the university; it shows how recently it was that the humanities were the primary drivers of university pedagogy.

As a community for artists and as a centre of the critical field Shahn in the end believes that the university is a good possible centre:

My preference for the university is based upon a belief that the very content of the liberal education is the natural content of art, that art will profit by and greatly needs the content of liberal education. Further that the humanities and the humanistic view have been the companions of art during the great periods of both.

Possible Provisos

From his experience as an artist in the university system, Shahn goes on though to highlight three problems.

The first is the art school and what Shahn calls 'dilettantism'. As a part of an undergraduate liberal arts degree there is not scope for 'the professional artist' and the dedication to practice that a young artist needs. Shahn points out a contradiction in the approach of the visual arts committee, which insisted that 'visual arts are an integral part of the humanities and as such must assume a role of prominence in the

context of higher education' but later suggested that it is 'doubtful' the student can 'apply himself seriously to creative work' and that they 'do not propose to inject the art school into academic life' (Shahn: 16). As the 2008 Harvard report suggests this problem was not an errant fear.

Shahn jokes 'I wonder whether the university would suggest offering the *experience* of calculus, of solid state physics; the experience of French or German; the experience of economics, of medieval history, of Greek.' (Shahn: 16).

Although worried about the art school, as a form of 'experience' Shahn is still hopeful; he does not wish that the artist choose between artistic bohemia and a university education. He insists 'furthermore that the humanities and the humanistic view have been the companions of art during the great periods of both' in one of his many appeals to the Renaissance (Shahn: 17).

His second anxiety is the university's 'fear of creativity itself.' Shahn says,

The university stresses rather the critical aspects of knowledge – the surveying, the categorising, the analysing, and the memorising... Scholarship is perhaps man's most rewarding occupation, but that scholarship which dries up its own creative resources is a reduction *ad absurdum*, a contradiction of itself. (Shahn: 19)

The artist centred rhetoric here is very apposite to our current debates, especially as it touches so clearly on the discussions around 'practice led research.' For Shahn there is no need to assert that art is research, or a form of knowledge creation, because its value is more inherent. In replaying the words of the fifties, as opposed to our own definitional categories, it points to other possibilities for a critical distance, viewing the university as an equal hierarchical player rather than the subsuming host.

There are problems in this 'autonomous' conception of art though; Shahn is not opposed to the 'artist/scholar' but cannot quite reconcile his 1950s vision of both; his artist is a little too avant-garde and his scholar is like a *Quiz Show* van Doren, as this particularly purple passage lets slip:

Theirs [bohemian artists] has been a different loneliness from that of the artist who safely cushioned within the pleasantness and most agreeable

environment known to man, must at some point arise from the good conversational table, move off, don his paint spattered pants, squeeze out his tubes and become involved in the nervous, unsure tense, and unsatisfactory business of making a picture which will have cohesion, impact, maturity, and an unconscionable lot of sheer work; which will, most uncomfortably, display an indiscrete and unveiled feeling about something; and which will then proceed to violate every canon of good art behaviour just delineated by his recent companions. (Shahn: 20-21)

This passage lyrically and convincingly depicts the rational versus aesthetic irrationality, a language that cuts across the grain. Shahn only accepts the artist if the artist is allowed to violate the rules.

The third problem Shahn perceives is the false and Romantic notion of the artist as unschooled, mad genius. Again he quotes from the Brown Report:

It is a curious paradox that, highly as the university esteems the work of art, it tends to take a dim view of the artist as an intellectual... one encounters the curious view that the artist does not know what he is doing. (quoted in Shahn: 23)

Shahn calls for 'a calmer view toward both the qualities of the man and the qualities of the work.' (Shahn: 24) He goes on to suggest that the artist is perceptive and intuitive as well as schooled, where the poet, for example, might know about spondees and anapaests but this does not wholly get to the heart of things as a maker or writer, 'for it is just such an inexact knowing that is implicit in the arts.' (Shahn: 24)

It is in this modernist phrasing - where art is against the canon, where it is 'inexact knowing' - that Shahn's understanding of modern nonconformity meets with a post-structuralist lack of foreclosure. Like Shahn's soft drawing line (which of course Warhol stole for use in his advertising imagery of the 50s), he did not like the precise or incisive contour but the frayed edge. That the rhetoric is decidedly his, before poststructuralist terminology, brings new life to these concepts.

Arts Singularity

There is no doubt that Shahn believes in a universal form of *sensus communis*. His reckoning of the achievements of art is decidedly Western. However - again reading transhistorically, and taking into account the embeddedness of Shahn's context -he places great value on aesthetics' ability to cut across the grain, in a way that poststructuralist thinkers on Kant have re-amplified. Indeed the following two lectures in the series "The Biography of a Painting"; "The Shape of Content" explicate the art school in the university by arguing for arts singularity through a close analysis of one painting (Allegory 1948) and by explaining the way art signs as a synthesis of form and content respectively.

In this lecture Shahn's speaks of the 'creative habit' (3), the 'creative impulse' (2) inexact knowledge implicit in the arts' (24). Indeed he questions the university as a ground of arts creative impulse if it 'vitiates' arts independence; non-conformity is the main issue of Shahn's fourth lecture. In this lecture he presages the argument:

Thus it is not unimaginable that art arises from something stronger than stimulation or even inspiration – that it may take fire from something closer to provocation, that it may not just turn to life, but that it may at certain times be compelled by life. Art almost always has its ingredient of impudence, its flouting of established authority, so that it may substitute its own authority, and its own enlightenment. (Shahn: 8-9).

While their misgivings about the expectation of universal aesthetic agreement are different, writers such as David Hickey, Elaine Scarry, Jacqueline Millner and Thierry de Duve, maintain that aesthetics speak the unspeakable, image justice and political critique, and that poetry, 'the beautiful', can itself be seen as a form of resistance against the conforming rational (De Duve 2005; Hickey 1993; Scarry 1999; Millner 2010). Shahn's neo-Kantian credentials are based on art's own power to engage with the material world but to uncover ideologies of power.

It is important to note that the critique is not direct and (whether you read it through Kant or through Lacan) the poetic cuts across the rational; the critique is never political as such but always first and foremost aesthetic. Stavrakakis makes a similar case for art when he writes, 'True creation is premised on such a self-critical registering of the lack in the Other, a move that produces a paradoxical enjoyment of the not-All and affects the status of the social institution of language.' (Stavrakakis 2010: 18) Shahn highlights this approach in his third lecture but the seeds of the

argument can be seen in this, the opening lecture. In the final lecture he then further generalises this ethical cry for community building through an appeal to the aesthetic power of *sensus communis*:

the potato field and the auto repair shop remain without quality or awareness or the sense of community until they are turned into literature by Faulkner or a Steinbeck or a Thomas Wolfe or into art by a Van Gogh. (Shahn: 131)

As the writers above also explained, the post-structuralist *sensus communis* may not now be universal, but it is a term of ethical togetherness that is worth keeping even in a more situated and controlled way.

Conclusion: Community of Artists

Shahn's lecture is a reminder that in the debates around art's value in the university, we begin with art's singularity. He places great emphasis on the artist's non-conformity and autonomy. There is a great deal of modern utopianism in this lecture that can be read beyond nostalgia and to be replayed in the contemporary context. As a provisional and hopeful document it sees the university as a place of community for artists and as a place that becomes a conduit for art's power in the community. He speaks of young artists needing the encouragement of community, 'The young person embarked upon such a career needs a community, needs its affirmation, its reality, its criticism and recognition.' (Shahn:130). He feels the university can provide these networks of support, and at their best they now decidedly do function in that way in the contemporary art school. Set in the past, as an idealistic vision of what can happen, Shahn's lecture becomes a critical space for thinking, outside our contemporary debates that are often mired by too much proximity to material questions of instrumentality and budget. Shahn's vision is clear and utopian, even in its ruinous state.

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