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Studio Practice Online: The Return to Art as Concept

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With this paper, I hope to argue for a positive consideration of teaching visual art studio classes online. I will discuss the benefits that eventuated from my own experience teaching a painting class via Zoom for the National Art School (NAS), Sydney in semester one of 2020 and extend these outcomes to consider their application to the field of contemporary art more broadly. The intention of this paper is not to offer solutions to the challenges presented by teaching studio classes online, but to provide an analysis of the recent phenomenon concerning our inability to view or physically experience material artworks under lockdown conditions. I will position this phenomenon in relation to the frequently forgotten or overlooked ideal of art's dematerialisation with conceptual art and consider a definition of the contemporary moment as 'post-conceptual' in light of art's recent and actual dematerialisation.

Online teaching presents challenges we are by now overly familiar with, including (but not limited to) access to technology, managing student engagement, and maintaining a work/life balance. Under normal circumstances, studio classes at NAS offer direct engagement between lecturers and students in a studio setting, with small class sizes. This offering was obviously challenged by the move to online teaching since students frequently lacked a space within which to produce work at home, and lecturers could not directly apprehend work in a physical studio setting. My role as a lecturer in the painting department at NAS involves predominantly one-on-one consultations with both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the context of their physical studio space; the sudden move to online teaching during Sydney's lockdown period in early 2020 presented lecturers with unforeseen challenges in their attempt to continue teaching according to this method. My personal involvement during this period was with third year and master's painting studio classes, wherein students are expected to develop and refine their studio practice in preparation for a career as practicing artists.

While NAS successfully adjusted the academic year and course expectations to accommodate the compromised conditions and lecturers continued to consult with students online, something less easily managed during studio classes was the direct, physical apprehension of student's work. Experiencing artworks via digital reproduction is an inaccurate exercise at best, even when utilising professional photography or high-tech exhibition walk-throughs, but the challenge increases when critiquing student work. Being presented with badly lit documentation of artworks set in a student's bedroom or their parent's garage, or having paintings held awkwardly to a screen or webcam, meant it was impossible to fully see, and therefore assess, students' work with any accuracy.

Alongside the physical apprehension of artworks, discussing work outside the studio context compromised teachers' ability to advise students on processes and materials. Viewing artworks via digital presentations made by students themselves prevented lecturers from casually witnessing smaller works, studies or rejected artworks that are quite often placed within a studio, stacked on the floor or even partially obscured. Here, students were making the ultimate decision regarding which works were to be discussed with their teacher. On contrast with this, in our usual physical setting our ability to draw a student's attention to an artwork they considered a failure, or an incidental drawing they were not intending to present, can offer opportunities to suggest new views regarding that which they are trying to achieve. In addition, the ability to observe materials to hand within a studio setting can provide clues regarding potential problems with students' processes and outcomes. Details such as the grade of canvas or type of paper or board, the quality of gesso and paint and the way it is applied, the size of brush used, are all potential indicators of issues that may otherwise go unnoticed. These details are only available in a real-life studio setting where objects and surfaces can attract an experienced artist's eye and help them direct students' attention towards expanded possibilities for their work.

The conditions concerning art's apprehension during lockdown did not apply solely to an educational setting, since all of art's institutions – galleries, museums, and performance spaces – were unable to make their usual public offerings. Opening events were cancelled and spaces were shut down, exhibitions frozen in time. Institutions developed novel methods for viewing art via digital platforms, while education and event departments invented new ways to engage audiences without actual physical engagement. These were interesting times for the consideration of art as a concept: while art objects continued to exist, if nobody could enter a space and

look at them, did they need to be installed? Were they lit, or sitting in darkness? Why turn on the lights? How did the objects *feel* with nobody in front of them? Artworks did continue to exist, and were no doubt seen and appreciated within private settings, however in the context of art's public institutions, which tend to define that which we consider our shared culture, the absence of art's public apprehension tends to highlight questions concerning art as a concept, or the ontology of art.

As the semester of online teaching progressed at NAS, limitations surrounding the physical presentation of students' artworks during class rendered one-on-one consultations less urgent. In conversation with other painting lecturers, it became evident that we were all altering the style of our classes to accommodate online teaching. The Zoom format we used – based on that of a meeting – demands an unusual sense of formality, and while lecturers addressed the changing grid of students' faces or names appearing on their monitor, they also confronted their *own* face in communication with them. For me, this lent the teaching experience a sense of performance, of a need to keep students interested and engaged. It seemed that most, if not all, lecturers in my department were initiating their online classes with a mini-lecture or presentation followed by group discussion, a format more in line with a studio theory class than that of practice. While NAS does conduct studio theory classes and continued to conduct them online at this time, the application of theory or group discourse in a studio class setting is perhaps less usual.

An outcome of these altered conditions for teaching studio practice within my own classes was a greater emphasis on art's practice as it relates to theory or discourse. In addition, unless students required privacy for their consultation, those in the Zoom frequently witnessed each other's personal critiques, a situation not normally possible in a real-life context. At the end of this online semester, several students expressed to me that they had enjoyed the class's format; like me, they seemed to value the relation of art practice to theory. Here, there was less emphasis on art as a necessarily material or object-bound concern and more on art as a concept, perhaps as an object of philosophy over something seen or experienced. Addressing art as an idea echoes the questions raised by the invisibility of art in institutions during lockdown. When a sense of art as visual was removed, discussion tended towards questions concerning the nature of art today, inciting debate between at least some students and pointing towards a sense of practice as discursive. When art cannot be seen, it raises the question, 'what is art?'

This question is rarely intentionally raised within the practice of artists working today, in contrast with the intention of much work produced by modern artists. The modern period may historically be viewed as having been concerned *with* this very question, an historical attempt to reduce art physically and aesthetically to its essence. In a chronological and progressive view of modern art, the formal characteristics considered extraneous to the concept of art for its time were progressively withdrawn by each modern movement, reducing art to its essence. Components such as the frame, the image, the requirement that art be a painting or that an artist even manufacture an original object were progressively deleted from that which could be considered 'art', landing in the moment fifty years ago wherein art as something visual, aesthetic, or object-bound was challenged altogether by conceptual artists. Removing each layer of art's physical characteristics – things that had been assumed essential to art's determination as a concept, that delineated it from everything that wasn't art – led to the realisation that as a concept, art did not in fact require physical embodiment at all. In its final extreme, conceptual art resulted in such invisible practices as 'Dissolution' (1975-1976) wherein artist Raivo Puusemp was elected mayor of Rosendale, New York; 'General Strike Piece' (1969) in which Lee Lozano began her total withdrawal from art practice and her engagement with the art world; and Bas Jan Ader's 'In Search of the Miraculous' (1975), his attempt to single-handedly navigate a crossing of the Atlantic in a 13-foot boat. While photographs can record aspects of these works or the artists that made them, there is no physical or material way in which to capture, view or otherwise apprehend them, existing as they did within the ephemeral reality of time and space.

With conceptual art, art as a concept entered the real world, its disappearance within the conceptual moment a significant event that occurred seemingly spontaneously and globally. The ideals of conceptual artists intent towards art's invisibility, or its dematerialisation, can be witnessed in words quoted by Lucy Lippard in her essay, *Escape Attempts*. Here for example, Sol LeWitt (cited in Lippard, 1997, p. xiii) states that, 'ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical...the words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept'; John Baldessari (Lippard, 1997, p. xiii) declares, 'I was beginning to suspect that information could be interesting in its own right and need not be visual...', and for Joseph Beuys (Lippard, 1997, p. xiii), 'to be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration...Objects aren't very important for me anymore.' Ultimately however, conceptual art is considered to have failed in its

attempt at escape from the material or the institution. Lippard (1997, p. xxi) claimed that in 1969, artists thought nobody would want to pay money for objects such as, '...a Xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded...', but that only three years later, '...major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by...the world's most prestigious galleries.' Shortly post the conceptual moment, institutions such as the museum or the market moved to embrace art's new ephemerality as a concept, consequently exploding it to inhabit every instance and every form in a move that simultaneously and inadvertently increased the institutional stronghold over art's new infinity of instances. This situation, which informs current art, results in an inability to work against the current definition of art as form (such as took place within the modern), since when art is embodied by all form, including the very lack of form, any movement against this 'official' art *via* form is impossible. When art's form is ultimately invisible, nothing is left to abolish from art in its visual, or formal, sense.

In Peter Osborne's attempt to provide a philosophy for contemporary art, *Anywhere or Not at All – Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, he utilises the phrase, 'contemporary art is postconceptual art' (Osborne, 2013, p.3) to define current art. Concerned to avoid the chronological – or modernist – implications of such a proposition, Osborne describes it as 'speculative', identifying an infinite movement that somehow exists between its two terms rather than a sense of historicity or progression. Other theorists, including Terry Smith (Smith, 2009) and Hal Foster (Foster, 2009) have been equally concerned to locate a definition for the art of the current moment, commonly sensing a lack of its convincing or stringent theorisation. Any offering in the direction of providing a definition for contemporary art however is thwarted, ultimately, by a sense that its theory should remain true to the very *indefinability* of the current moment, to its openness and the almost infinite particularity of its instances.

To me, contemporary art is quite literally a post conceptual art in its most chronological sense, wherein the conditions for the art of the current moment are set by the outcomes of the conceptual period prior. In line with Osborne, I believe these conditions are based on conceptual art's failure to free art as a concept from the aesthetic and the object. Contrary to Osborne, I am not content to conclude that this failure, '...demonstrated the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a *necessary*, though

radically insufficient, component of the artwork...’ (Osborne, 2013, p.49). Osborne concludes that the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a component of the artwork means that a philosophy of art for the current moment demands an at least partial re-embrace of the aesthetic. This return to the aesthetic, to the visual, material or object-bound nature of art as a concept today is exemplified by the popularity of New Materialist or Object-Oriented applications to contemporary art’s theorisation. As an artist, I find this return to art as something necessarily material or visual unconvincing, a retrograde step that dishonours the stated aims of conceptual artists and which runs counter to a sense of contemporary art as a post conceptual art. To me, contemporary art, both in its definition and practice, should honour the conceptual ideal of escape and somehow inhabit the difficult point wherein this ideal failed, or at least address it.

It is in relation to this idea of a return to the ideals of the conceptual moment, of a return to this sense of that movement’s failure to escape the institutions of the market or the museum, that the recent – and in some places, ongoing – sense of art as invisible has been an interesting condition for a consideration of art as a concept today. Where conceptual art failed to dematerialise art as a concept, or to fully eliminate the aesthetic as a consideration of that which may be considered ‘art’ in the current moment, an inability to apprehend art as material or object during lockdown offered the very realisation of this ideal, however unwanted. The increased consideration of art as theory during studio classes at NAS echoes the conceptual ideal of treating art as a concept: where conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth (cited in Guercio, 1991 p. 18) stated in 1969 that, ‘all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually’, and that, ‘the “value” of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art’, the emphasis that was inevitably placed on art as a concept and art practice as discursive in Zoom classes indicated a return to this ideal’s possibility. In addition, a sense of teaching art online as a kind of performance, with disembodied beings engaging in a digital dance in the absence of material artworks, the idea of art as ephemeral or performative equally seemed to gain renewed currency for considerations of art in the current moment, the moment of post-conceptual art, more firmly in relation to its origin in conceptual ideals.

While physical conditions are easing in some locations and the objects of art are increasingly, if cautiously, interacting with their human counterparts once again, this unprecedented event leading to art’s physical invisibility during lockdown was an

interesting encounter with a return to art's conceptual ideal of escape, a forced confrontation with the ideals that determined the nature of art today. This was an *experience* of contemporary art as a post conceptual art, less in terms of that moment's failure and more in line with the purity of art as a concept in its freedom from the institution, situated in the real and within discourse, despite these ideals' seeming impossibility.

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