

*Notes for an Art School*

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# Denial & Function

A history of disengagement in relation to teaching

The last twenty years have seen an enormous shift in the role and potential of educational environments in relation to visual culture. Shifts in the status of art education within the broader pedagogical context have been taking place. These changes in emphasis have refocused our perception of how things should proceed towards a position that is potentially away from the role of the artist as the prime parallel functionary in relation to younger artists/students. This has moved us towards a situation where the artist-teacher is merely one element within a matrix of expectations and institutional aims within established educational models. This perceived shift is, paradoxically, demanded by both university art schools—which must create neo-academic justification for all their departments—and by some independent-minded artists who are increasingly unsure that it is relevant to insert themselves as the sole providers of ideas within schools. We therefore face a new set of dilemmas, for the shift is not complete or well planned; it is taking place as I write and we still face many differing art school models. We must acknowledge that the changes are subtle manoeuvrings in the culture rather than dramatic shifts. For the most part, artists remain the primary educators within studio-based art school departments. But the fact is that the expectations layered onto these schools now clearly exceed the desires and qualifications of most artist-educators in terms of the theoretical and bureaucratic components. We are familiar with the still-standard idea that the best people to teach or educate or discuss ideas with young artists are other artists. Yet, while this assumption of professional competency exchange is still embedded in the culture, there has been a rise in the daily programming of most dynamic art school environments, an increasing provision of parallel structures alongside that of studio practice. The most notable development has been the mutation from a vague representation of basic art history as a component of the young artist's educational experience to the provision of serious critical theory, to a greater or lesser extent. Traditionally, such moves have been viewed with suspicion by older artist-teachers who are devoted to earlier theories of artistic practice via their insistence on the prime importance of the role of the artist in relation to younger artists within the educational sphere. Some art historians have also traditionally been suspicious of engaging with active, ongoing contemporary visual art practice within art school environments. Yet it is clear now that, certainly in the UK and the US, we have been living through a period when the theoretical component of a young artist's education has become an increasingly important aspect of the educational experience in a formatted and clearly defined way, so we better pay some careful attention to it.

The comments related and outlined here are primarily restricted to western Europe and North America, the main places where I have some knowledge of educational practice. And, within that powerful framework, my work has also been mainly restricted to schools that function under the umbrella of large urban universities: in my case, Goldsmiths College, which is part of the University of London, and the School of the Arts at Columbia University in New York. However, I have been involved temporarily as a visiting tutor, lecturer or guest professor in many schools, including the academies in Frankfurt and Hamburg, the department of cultural studies at Lüneburg and the Kunstakademie in Munich. Other specific moments have seen work in relation to the *École des Beaux-Arts*

in Grenoble, along with the ECAL in Lausanne. On top of this, while my knowledge and experience has been partial, my involvement has also been partial and fragmented in relation to the traditional power structures that get established at places such as these.

While I have an interest in the legacy created by artists who have chosen to teach as a way to avoid structures within the dominant art system that might otherwise negatively effect the direction of their work, it seems that the development of a more precise critical component of art education over the last twenty years has made it impossible for artist-teachers to avoid viewing themselves as implicated players within the broad critical territory of art production. It is no longer possible for someone to teach 'artist to artist' but instead necessary to identify oneself as an implicated subject within the critical space that is established within the terms of contemporary art education. The teacher is no longer someone who merely creates a notionally-free space within which the young artist may experiment and operate free from certain pressures. Now the artist-teacher and the artist-student must stand side by side, each as subjects and generators of the critical discourse around art, whether they want to do so or not. Within the art schools that I have been involved in, there is an obligation for the student-artist to be well versed in the language of critical theory in order to provide a political and theoretical framework for their practice. It is expected that this critical framework be rigorously contemporary in order to ensure that even if the student-artist claims complete disinterest in the critical components of their practice they still understand that this apparent disinterest is merely a component of an earlier critical structure rather than a rejection of critical potential per se. While this does not mean that forms of refusal are suppressed, it is much harder to veil forms of refusal than in the earlier environment, where proximity of artist to artist could ensure a suppression of the critical cultural processes taking place between them. It does, however, lead to an embracing of certain figures who leave art school with an apparent rejection of ideas at the root of their work. During moments when the commodity exchange of art-like ideas seems most buoyant, there is a concurrent rise in the number of people leaving art schools who appear to have escaped the critical context in which their ideas were formed. Most of these artists in fact project paradoxical messages, as is the case with people such as Damien Hirst or Maurizio Cattelan, both of whom make work that is deeply steeped in an understanding of post-Duchampian Western traditions in terms of fabrication or creation of the *mise-en-scène* but takes fundamentalist acritical positions to be the base of the ideas, whether that be sex and death or post-clownish auto-destruction and overstatement.

Within this context, that has arisen where the critical procedures that underscore art activity are exposed simultaneously by order and by demand, we ought to witness a shift in the type and quality of art production, arguably for the better. While some would suggest that this shift has created work that is pitched against the art now visible that uses the market as the primary determinant of value and quality, in fact what we more clearly witness is a situation where certain types of gallery- and market-determined structures are increasingly isolated through their reliance on a preponderance of self-conscious, acritical art production—with notable exceptions, of course. This does leave us with a problem. What can be lost

in our current scenario is a sense of the value of a semi-autonomous critical context. So while studio-practice-orientated art students are told about moments of critical significance in the recent past in a form that increasingly melds with the traditional seminar and studio visit, this is at the expense of a distancing that may be required to create a truly significant semi-autonomous critical community. To put it in other words, while a multiplication of critically engaged moments in an art school ought to offer more, it can give students the impression that they have absorbed a requisite quantity of basic theory in the same way that in the past they might have taken the correct number of classes in life drawing. Art school departments need to find ways to attract the best art historians and critical theorists and therefore put themselves in direct competition with dedicated art history and critical theory departments. This new venue for the best theorists would mean the possibility of new critical structures emerging alongside the work of the student-artists.

So, given these broadly and simply stated current conditions of shift and slow mutation, what might be a next step in terms of thinking about the potential of future educational perspectives, for now unencumbered by the dominant structures of broader university requirements and potential complications, in order to clarify thinking? For while many students who attend university-affiliated art schools are conscious of the apparent benefits they might accrue from being able to take classes in various other subjects and generally fade in and out of the academic ambience of a serious place, the result is increasingly a post-student body who at the end of their course are now left looking for a relatively casual differently-mediated, yet still critical, ongoing neo-educational structure to work within as a kind of post-post-graduate working situation.

This means there has recently been a rise in the potential of such a quaternary working place. It is normal for a young artist who has recently graduated from a serious school to look carefully for opportunities within foundation or studio programmes that in fact replace the excess of programming that is often perceived to have arisen at graduate level with a concurrent lack of an articulated critical relationship between the artist and the structure of a place or course. The problem is that the illusion of freedom projecting into the near future is exactly that. A situation created by a confusion of practices that is neither open nor closed, truly critical nor truly free. One of the main problems relates back to assumptions of what working environments should be like: studio-like working environments were originally the desire of the student, but have concretised themselves over the last fifteen years into the rule rather than the option. The idea that each person requires a fixed location to work within—yet within a wrecked and improvised environment—refers only to certain kinds of studio practice and not to others, such as my own, which has never involved using a traditional artist's studio. It is no accident that many of the most interesting students find absolutely nothing to gain from sitting in a cubicle wondering how to relate to the broader social context, or completely divorced from it. Often, the only option in this environment is to work in ways that mimic the conditions of the production, with the concurrent stifling of critical art practices that reject the model of the solo artist struggling to articulate his or her vision within a workshop environment.

The serious model of a new potential school would involve a remodelling of space, both literal and intellectual, at the beginning of each chosen time period of work, with ongoing assessments of the usefulness of the working space on a regular basis. Within these discussions about environment, there should always be more than one representative of the faculty in the room. The elevation of the single teacher and consolidation of his or her role offers a perverse message to students about the potential of the artistic position within society that prefers to view artists as singular, context-free creators who survive or transcend a circumstance, rather than working within one. There must be changes made each year, or at least serious reconsiderations of the appropriate spaces within which to work critically as well as practically, with as much thought given to the spaces where discussion takes place as to the spaces for the creation of art works. Historically, as a legacy of battles from the 1960s, where students fought for more control over their working environments and to be free in relation to the institution, we have been left with an improvised, space-hungry model of working practice that is not necessarily what students would want from a new 'fourth stage' educational environment. We must, therefore, reinvestigate these apparently crucial moments that set in place, over thirty-five years ago, our current model of working in order to understand whether they remain functional models in a contemporary situation. It is quite clear that those shifts were not brought about by students alone, but by certain coalitions of enlightened teachers and students working together to remodel working and learning environments. This situation must be re-attained if a dynamic new working possibility is to be discovered. If a diploma, thesis or degree exhibition is seen as a requirement of the place, it should be shifted within a post-post-graduate environment to halfway through the course and the final moment of assessment replaced by a series of discussion panels and symposia where students would be expected to address their work without an exhibition as such. At this point, they would also be permitted to present, via someone else, a person interior or exterior to the institution, who could speak on their behalf. The relationship between the teachers and students should be under constant review. This would mean that the staff should present work alongside the students in order to create a true debate and shift the potentially hierarchical nature of the discussion towards an exposure of the potential weaknesses of the staff, rather than merely exposing the students to critique. In addition, the provision and discussion of broad themes to be addressed critically should be introduced at the beginning of each yearly work session. This does not mean that the students have to take any notice of these themes, but that the artist-teachers have to start to articulate what they see as crucial issues for debate, rejection and development, rather than merely attempting to adjust their ideas to the propositions put forward by the students themselves. These broad themes would be an attempt to place the school in a critical framework that replaces the existential void that can often emerge in an art school environment, without suppressing the students' desire to find and propose new models themselves. It would be a way of creating a set of concepts to work off, rather than an excessive focus on separation via critical theory classes pitched against an excessive focus on the work of the students themselves, as they attempt to find new models and ways of working.

Within all these shifts there will and ought to be moments of refusal and collapse. The current situation inevitably leads to these moments and it is not possible to imagine a situation where this could not be the case. The issue here is not to try and repress dissent and disagreement in a new model, but merely to change the orientation of the model. At present there are too many givens, each of which is related to a consolidation of earlier moves within art connected to existentially-based philosophy rather than the reality of our complex situation. So at present there is an enormous rift between the theoretical components of an art school environment and other practical working aspects of the same place. This break is not clearly perceived and articulated by most of the people working or studying, but they are aware that there is a problem rather than an interesting set of dilemmas. To change the working environment and at least introduce constant moments of review would not lead to a more calming or precise way of functioning, but would remove the alienating and imploded quality of the current relationship between the creative aspect of the art school and the critical functions of the same. There is no situation now that exists free of critical play. The question is how long we can continue with a situation where the critical and the notionally practical can continue a dysfunctional relationship that at times can appear completely out-of-sync.