For all time: past, present and future in the consciousness of the studio artist.

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There is disharmony in the university art school between the artist's orientation towards creating for all time and the institution's preference for projects that yield demonstrable value within a brief timeframe. The elastic temporality of artistic creation frequently draws the artist inwards: the convergence of deep historical awareness with a strong future orientation yielding original, but not necessarily timely, works. This is particularly true of the artist working within studio traditions such as painting, drawing and sculpture. If the studio artist's situation within the university art school is to improve, the processes which occur in the speechless space of the studio must be more accurately and subtly articulated than is often the case. Through reflection on artists' writings about creative processes and with consideration of theories of time-cycles in the life of the artist and in art history, this paper will assert that time is a mutable element of the artist's consciousness which the university must acknowledge if it is to accommodate artistic endeavour. Can the university arrive at a process of evaluating art that is flexible, with emphasis on long-term development and retrospective judgment rather than forward-projection? Are we able to look again, critically, at what is meant by innovation and social relevance in relation to the studio artist? Or is the studio artist destined to be misunderstood - merely tolerated - in the contemporary university?

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An artist's work is an offering for all time. I make this statement cautiously because it could easily be taken as a triumphal declaration when in fact I suspect I am expressing my anxiety as I write it. I reach for the validation of all time to explain a paradox: the work that I do as a painter in the studio seems meaningful to me in relation to a long span of history and fills my days with the anticipation of a future, yet it serves no immediate, worldly purpose. It is untimely, in the sense that it proceeds according to its own calendar and may lead me down obscure paths, without me knowing for how long or what profit I may be detained.

The figure of the painter as a creator of untimely images recurs in numerous epochs, and is especially familiar from the Enlightenment forward. Even during the long sequence of periods when painting was the dominant visual form of the West, its most notable artists established a pattern of deviation from traditional conventions, replacing the familiar with the strange and leaving the audience to draw its conclusions. John Berger put this to a mass public in the BBC's *Ways of Seeing*, explaining: "certain exceptional artists in exceptional circumstances broke free of the norms of the tradition and produced work that was diametrically opposed to its values; yet these artists are acclaimed as the tradition's supreme representatives." (Berger, 1972, p.109) With Berger's words in mind I am prepared to pursue my intuition that the ambitious pursuit of painting has placed similar demands on artists from different epochs, regardless of whether the artform has been central to the visual culture of the day or peripheral, as it is today. An autonomous reading of time-past, an understanding that patterns of judgment will shift in times-to-come, and trust in one's own actions in the present: these are the requirements of a life in the studio, leading me to venture that an artist's work is an offering for all time.

I voice these thoughts in this forum on art education because in the twenty-five years since I first entered an art school as a student, I have watched the university become steadily less hospitable to my view of the artist's vocation. Today it is not enough – or perhaps I should say it is rather too much – for the artist within the university to invoke the judgment of all time. The artist must become something other than a servant of their art: must be seen to put art at the service of society, conspicuously advancing the institution's strategic priorities of leadership on key social issues, or scientific and technological progress. In this system the fortunes of the artist rise and fall with their capacity to attract research funding from governments or negotiate partnerships with business, achievements which oblige the artist to promise measurable outcomes within set timeframes.

Few painters, nor artists working in other traditional studio disciplines, are well equipped for this system. An artist’s excellence as an educator would once have earned them a certain security and respect as an employee of the university, but today every activity occurring under the university’s auspices is measured against criteria formulated in response to a competitive, relentlessly monitored market-place. Undergraduate teaching is big business but the particular requirements of practical studio teaching – as distinct from mass lectures – are not well understood or supported at the higher levels of university administration. Classes are over-enrolled for the spaces in which they are taught, resources are spread thinly and there is scant regard for the conditions and concerns of staff that deliver courses.

It is undeniable that the Commonwealth bears a heavy responsibility for the degradation of teaching and the commercialisation of research in the university over recent decades. Governments’ sustained withdrawal of support for education and culture has been the primary factor bringing universities to bear a close resemblance with corporations. But the economic circumstances of tertiary education are not the only cause of the studio artist’s spiritual alienation within the university art school. From the beginning of the

1990s to the present day I have witnessed a bizarre perpetuation of artistic concerns that were pressing during the 1960s and ’70s, but that artists outside the academy have long-since put behind them: academics encouraging inward-spiralling “interrogations” of the definitions of traditional forms while denying the relevance to students of traditional skills, which I would prefer to describe as the embodied knowledge of a discipline. In universities where dedicated painting departments still exist they may well be led by conceptualists with no manual grasp of the discipline, or futurists in thrall of virtual reality; people who will do anything to avoid the embarrassment of looking at a canvas with colours hand-applied to it. Ironically, the avant-garde position is now at one with the priorities of the university administration, which has its own pragmatic reasons for telling itself that in the 21st century art students have transcended the need for working space and practical teaching.

Have we now reached the moment when there is no place for the painter, for the studio artist, in the university art school? Could the delivery of studio teaching be better accommodated elsewhere, through other models of art education that may evolve? Perhaps so; there is nothing sacrosanct in the union of art schools and universities. But with the evisceration of TAFE in the last decade, not to mention the dependency of institutions like my own, the National Art School, on a state government that would quite happily jettison it, where else can public art education go?

My purpose today though is not to solve the problem of where art education properly belongs, but simply to describe a consciousness of time – a sense of working with and through time – that manifests in the speechless space of the studio. This consciousness is fundamental to artistic creation, and while it cannot be co-opted into institutional agendas the university must value it if it is genuinely committed to artistic endeavour.

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A common view of what occurs in the process of making an artwork is that the artist begins with conception, proceeds to execution and arrives at completion in an organised sequence. In painting, this understanding has come down to us from the artists of the Renaissance, with their orderly execution of fat over lean paint layers. By the time of my birth other formal vocabularies and methods were established, and new materials were available. It may seem nonsensical to describe an intentional activity such as painting as unpredictable, but surprise is a salient aspect of my experience in the studio. Early on I understood that unintended effects within a painting may offer promptings towards an alternative pictorial order, and over years my formal vocabulary has evolved accordingly, based on mutable forms that are interchangeable in their configurations and versatile in signification. I am now used to watching paintings change through dramatically varying states, my consciousness playing catch-up with events on the picture plane. When I do bring pre-conception to painting I hold my ideas lightly and remain ready to abandon them as something better appears.

The sustained concentration required to work in this way fastens me to the studio. It can take weeks to see what is taking shape in the illusory space of a painting, the tipping point between ambiguity and confusion being precarious. It is not unusual for me to work through a hundred layers of paint, but each single operation is an eye-blink compared to the long stretches when I actively observe the painting and then lean it against the wall for later return, a process that can lengthen the execution of a work beyond twelve months.

Through this process, short-term and long-term cycles of development run concurrently. A few minutes is long enough to make a decisive change to a painting but I may not know how best to re-enter the labyrinth for weeks or months, and when I do actually complete the painting, it will mark one moment in the continuing passage of the year, the decade of work, and ultimately my entire oeuvre.

With twenty years of experience in the studio I am beginning to comprehend that deep currents have been set in motion. I offer the example of a group of

paintings that I have completed during the last two years, which proceeded upon much earlier, abandoned paintings. Picking up these unfinished canvases I adapted myself to their rhythms and found myself transported to an earlier moment in my life, hearing the sounds and remembering the concerns of that time, but achieving pictorial resolutions I would not then have been capable of. It is a powerful sensation to push back the tide of one's current preoccupations and welcome back the predilections of the younger self. The notion that art defeats the passage of time is a popular one, issuing from the artwork's power to transport the viewer across generations. This was something else: the winding back of the clock of my own life through the discipline of painting, and significantly it produced some of the freshest, best paintings I have done.

Appraising my newly reworked paintings I wondered: how should I date these works? Their final layer of paint had only just been laid down and yet it was clear to me that their origins lay in another time. The long- and short-term cycles of my painting life had aligned for a moment like an eclipse, and I found it difficult to say whether the pictures I had made belonged properly to any phase.

This sense of floating apart from time while being immersed in present action is the form of consciousness I associate with the studio. It renders me unable to make predictions, set timeframes or articulate definite intentions. When I am in the studio I am serving my work, without responsibility to any external authority. Any such responsibility would be too much of an abstraction to contemplate while immersed in material play. It would shatter the fragile balance of knowing and unknowing, and thwart creation with a premature concern for finality. The studio is a highly productive environment when my routine is undisturbed by deadlines or forward-projections. I have presented fourteen substantial and diverse bodies of work in the last twenty years but conceived none of them as discrete projects.

Neither do I see my paintings as the fruits of research. They are not answers to consciously formulated questions. They have not yielded ready-made

solutions to apply in subsequent situations. Paintings like those I just described are a bolt from the blue. I have often observed how the articulation of a research question can distort an artist's self-perception, limiting their freedom to play – the short-term cycle of creativity - while inflating their erroneous interpretation of the larger, longer-term concerns of their work. No matter how cleverly one thinks they have circumscribed their research, framing an activity as research will promote self-consciousness. The convergence of momentary action and broad awareness which is so characteristic of painting at a high level would be very difficult to achieve within the limits of a research project, or a Ph.D.

In an essay on the drawings of Henri Matisse, the author John Elderfield makes reference to a quote from the notebooks of Wordsworth in which the poet reflects on the wellspring of his work. Wordsworth wrote: 'I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolic language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new.' (Elderfield, 1984, p.32) By taking back the word "seeking" and changing it to "asking for" the poet effectively denies that art issues from striving, from research, and identifies instead with the humility of receptiveness. The enlightenment Wordsworth hopes to receive is the clarification of "something within": not external, but inward. Not novel, but eternal; for all time.

The painter and art historian Avigdor Arikha puts it similarly in his written reflections on the artist's originality and its relation to time. Arikha states: "Innovation becomes obsolete, but uniqueness remains timeless. Cézanne's *Apples* were never new, but unique. Mu-chi's *Six Persimmons* appears new because it is unique… The same pair of gloves painted by Velázquez or by Frans Hals are as different as the voices of two people uttering the same word. In order to achieve such a transformation a power is needed, not unlike the power of the wind rearranging sand into patterns. Such a power is scarce and not available at command.' (Arikha, 1991, p.55)

Arikha and Wordsworth portray the artist as a singular figure, at a still point within the eternal flow of time. It is a romantic vision, the kind of vision that the American art critic John P. Sedgwick Jr. honoured with comprehensive historical analysis in his major work *Rhythms of Western Art*. The main hypothesis of this rambling, freely-roving book is that the evolution of cultures and the history of art is epicyclic; consisting of brief cycles that repeat within longer, overarching developments. Writing in the early 1970s, Sedgwick proposed that western society stands in the final third of a 1,200 year epicycle of evolution: from AD 1000 to 1400 the 'Germinative' phase of Medieval culture; from 1400 to 1800, the 'Evolutionary' phase of the Renaissance; leaving us halfway through the 'Redundant' phase of the Modern period, which will conclude in 2200. (Sedgwick, 1972, p.332) The shortest cycle Sedgwick observes is a thirty-year alternation between the rationalist zeitgeist of ethos and its emotive, subjective counterpoint of pathos, (Sedgwick, 1972, p.144) changing according to the grandfather principle that each generation swings away from its predecessor to the tendency of two generations prior.

Rhythms of Western Art is a remarkable book, rich with propositions that will alienate many contemporary readers. I value it for bringing the lifespan of the artist into scale with a long span of history, and affirming my experience that in the studio the two intersect. In the space of a day teaching drawing, I observe students progressing from crude sketches to drawings that probe their subject with some acuity, and finally descending into self-awareness. They follow a trajectory which is familiar in the historical transition from the archaic to the classic to a state of mannerism; or which I could liken to the passage of the seasons, from the austerity of winter to the flourishing of Spring, with abundance turning to decay as Summer becomes Autumn. This invocation of natural cycles may sound retrogressive, almost superstitious within an academic culture that seeks continual, explicable improvement, but it is inevitable that artists and cultures will pass through fallow spells and moments of doubt through which progress simply cannot occur, that are essential for regeneration. Perhaps, for all the apparent advances of art in our time towards new states, the plurality of our period indicates that we are in

just such a phase, where the way back persists as strongly as the way forward, and the new tools have not yet become effective enough to nullify the old.

Today, with every medium available being used by artists for a multitude of purposes, the chain of art-historical progress taught to me on TV as a teenager is fragmented. Technological media are causing fundamental changes to social relations and perhaps to human consciousness itself, but the presumption of redundancy which sometimes pertains to the paintbrush, the pencil and the chisel has not weakened the enthralling combination of material simplicity and deep culture that they offer. My experience in the teaching studio shows me that the current generation of school leavers are just as likely to swerve away from technological tools as embrace them. To their generation the ruptures of the last twenty years are simply the given environment. As the overworked teenager who served me at Vodafone said last week, ‘now that everybody has a computer in their pocket our artistic abilities are all that separates us.’ He may well associate the digital and the virtual, the looming promises and threats of artificial intelligence, with the intrusion of corporate entities onto the terrain of the self; might seek an alternative mode of perceiving the world and his place in it. Among the students I have worked with who have embraced technological media, the brightest understand that the tools alone are not the key to the future; that a purposeful use of the media requires a critical view of their conventions and a determination not to be dominated by the medium.

Thus traditional forms like painting continue to matter not only for the qualities we admire in individual art works, but for the alternative sense of the present that these forms offer. The studio artist’s consciousness of time as a mutable element in the process of creativity must be accommodated by the university if it is to remain a home for artistic endeavour. Can the university arrive at an evaluative process of art that is flexible, with emphasis on long-term development and retrospective judgment rather than forward-projection? Are we able to look again, critically, at what is meant by innovation and social

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