

Dr. Neill Overton

Art History and Visual Culture, Charles Sturt University

Death of the Art School: From studio to airport-lounge of the Id

The Art School has always been better at clinical dissection than in making good art. Interrogation through intellect has always been its province and limitation. From ‘the drawing machine’ of Albrecht Durer, through successive mediations of technology as a literal grid between artist and subject - the Art School has simultaneously privileged ‘studio practice’ whilst constructing its illegitimacy under the University model.

I was a lecturer in Drawing and in Art History at Victoria College, Prahran Campus, in Melbourne and at RMIT when in 1992 the amalgamations of institutes occurred that saw Victoria College merge into the Victorian College of the Arts, and Melbourne University. Resultant impacts included those on RMIT, and the realignment of ‘art writing’ within the University model, beyond the previous tertiary art school incarnations as Colleges of Advanced Education. While the studio-art courses acted as if they were a jilted suitor; the University pushed increasingly towards tear-off Masters, and drive-through PhDs—because PhDs generated funding for the Universities beyond the economies of undergraduate programmes.

I am not suggesting that the ‘University umbrella’ is some major villain that devolved studio art practice; merely that it has by consequence changed the relationship of art theory to practice. Whether roped together like mountaineers, or co-dependent—the practice-as-research MFAs, Honours, and PhDs now have a different valuing of ‘art writing’ that needs to be both tested and contested continually. These shifts in art writing impact fundamentally upon the strategies and relevance of ‘Art History’—within which I am a Senior Lecturer, and experienced PhD supervisor. In particular, there is the increasing expectation on the artist/maker in the theorisation regarding their own work, which has created an inverted symbiosis where ‘art practice’ is increasingly the outrigger of the canoe.

It is a phoney romanticism to think that technology and the University has stifled the creative integrity of the studio-atelier Art School; in truth it has always been a blanket that smothers art and ideas, rather than engendering them. The better artists survived Art School through opposition, rather than acquiescence. There are cycles of reaction against the limitations on what can or will be taught. Frederick McCubbin initiated drawing classes in the 1870s through opposition to the National Gallery School’s lack of them in the syllabus. The same

undertaking of students restoring their own drawing classes was made by Godwin Bradbeer in the 1970s at Melbourne College of Advanced Education, in a period when figure drawing had all but disappeared from the curriculum of most Art Schools, a victim of shifting tides of hard-edge and conceptual art that eschewed observational drawing skills.

As the 'studio' evolves into the cloud, regionalism, once all too readily equated with parochialism, dissolves as geography disappears. Wagga Wagga may be seen as nexus rather than boondocks to always be defined in relation to Sydney or Melbourne in this vanished dichotomy of metropolitan and regional. Against this backdrop, the University sector continues to enshrine written research at the expense of practice-as-research modes. Art practice is tolerated as if a magician's party trick, conducted prior to the serious business of 'translating' practice into written thesis—notionally, that art research requires 'validation' by text.

Jan Senbergs, Melbourne based artist and formerly lecturer at RMIT, once said in interview that 'Art schools make good art politically', (Overton, 1993) in the sense that they foster themes and alignments to current debates. This is not necessarily a good thing. It suggests to me TV programmers working towards success formulas of whatever is in current fashion. The mousey protection of the corporate face of every University arbitrates towards schooling in straitjackets of style-policing; it levels out innovation. From George Bell in the 1930s onwards, our art schools have been Petri dishes of similarity. Teacher-driven models insistently ploughing their tenets, such as Bell's, towards planar analysis and linearity, or Max Meldrum's brown-gravy tonal modelling, were and are Australian art schools as manifestly didactic and conformist. Art schools mirror themselves and are simply the new Salon. Senbergs further offered that:

the executives of the art world have created the new closed-shop academy of accepted artists, ignoring the fact that the true *avant garde* are the young or genuinely challenging artists who work outside the system and do not court approval. (Clarke, 1991).

This culture of doffings of 'approval' determinedly spills over from the art school, to modern curatorial practice and the grants system, all of which are assembled posses of taste and taste-makers, and embody an Australian art politic of acquiescence.

James Elkins writing in 2009 breaks down the types of PhDs in studio-art taking place. He proposes a PhD degree where, in his words, 'the student's research could be weighted as

two-thirds of a degree, and the visual art as one third.’ (Elkins, 2009). A more usual weighting is the opposite of that – with 70% for the art project, and 30% for the written thesis component. These two different ends of the see-saw have implications about how art making is valued in the art school PhD. In greater part, it is the art historians who assumed the mantle of control over the types of art writing made towards postgraduate practice.

This is driven by the fundamental conceit that art history is useful for students; there are counter-arguments that you don’t necessarily need to widely read to be a writer, and that you intuit through the funnel of your own experience, and in the doing of it. People have sex without necessarily completing studies in the history of it. Granted, they may not do it well enough to pass an exam. Elkins writes that: ‘If Kirchner or Nolde had acquired PhDs, with the history of German art as their field of research, it is possible that they might never have been able to break the grip of academic work as effectively as they did.’ (Elkins, 2009). And I think we need to consider not only the relative value of reflective writing to art practice, but the types of writing corralled by the University towards it. PhD students in art blindly rush towards data collection and interviewing as if the mere collection of endless grains of sand is a meaningful outcome.

Alison Croggon in the Spring 2013 edition of *Overland*, writes regarding the reduction in funding to the arts: ‘The arts in relation to culture are often compared to research and development in relation to industry: it is the restless experimentalism of artists that generates the vitality of the wider culture.’ (*Overland*, 2013). In likening the arts to an engine room, leading to innovations in a society’s culture, it reminds us how rapidly in the past few years we seek to disguise art and design by cloaking it in the language of other disciplines. She further writes that: ‘In response, artists and cultural organisations are forced to justify themselves in languages and according to criteria that have almost nothing to do with it.’ (*Overland*, 2013). To which I add that much of the impetus to have art and design labelled today as creative industries is less to do with the changes in art making than it is to justify its government funding and support from the University and the society as defacto industrial research and development.

Examples of postgraduate studies such as Ruth Waller’s emanating from scenes of altarpieces of the 14th and 15th century, or the work of an artist such as David Hockney’s researches into multiple perspectives through photographic-joiners – align themselves with writing far more readily because they are already an ‘art history’ investigation. These types of PhDs are easily assimilated into the University, encamped as they are within a recognisable art history stream of relationship with the past. But new media works, or those

that are creating new methodologies as they go – for example, a hybrid PhD exploring textile, drawing and narrative – needs to argue towards their methodology as constituting the PhD new knowledge. Our disciplinary cringe is to favour PhDs in practice that justify themselves through the imported methodologies of social science, philosophy, history, architecture, and education.

Judith Mottram writes towards the characteristics of recent PhDs in art and design that:

‘There are also examples of theses which are apparently written to accompany studio work, but it is uncertain at times whether the contribution to knowledge is enshrined within the art works or within the thesis.’ (Mottram, 2009). This is the pivotal quandary of asking where does the legitimised research find its house. We assume too deferentially that knowledge resides in the writing, and not in the art works or exhibition as the valid research outcome in and of itself. The University values written validation as research, in a practice-based PhD, because the ‘gallery exhibition’ as research outcome is seldom, if ever, re-entered for ‘revision’ in the way that a written thesis is. The exhibition is considered as a closed body of work, while the thesis is assumed to be malleable for major or minor revision. This failing of the exhibition as legitimate research outcome allows the nature of academic art writing to be distorted as a false yardstick of requiring art practice to undergo ‘translation into text’. If art practitioners want equality between exhibition and writing, then PhD examiners need to bounce back more exhibitions for revision.

Staff at the art schools of the 1990s greeted the mergers into Universities as if it was the arrival of Galactus the planet devourer. This ignores the fact that ‘studio atelier’ tertiary institutes were already in notable decline due to other factors than the corporatisation of ‘the University’. The truth is that painting, printmaking, photography, drawing and sculpture had fallen into the acid-bath of eclectic or hybrid arts practices that made discipline-specific teaching all the more ambiguous. Interdisciplinarity in the 1980s obviated any clear accord on what art schools could or should teach as skills. Skills became separated out as a derided polar opposite to concepts. To which state of missing-in-action Donald Brook then wrote:

In spite of the solemn apparatus of art diplomas and degrees, no agreed body of knowledge or measurable standard of skill is generally required of artists, and the very idea of *a properly conducted practice*, conforming to professional norms and community expectations, gets no grip at all. (Brook, 1997).

The 1990s generated vigorous discussion surrounding propositions of what an art school might be good for, and what its role was. As the technology flows over us, we seemingly stop asking those fundamental questions of what and why, as if the answer now tantalisingly hovers in the cloudscape, and we just seek deliverance in the new digital mythologies of access; like arrayed utopian scientists in the 1950s seeking salvation in the atom, lining up with dark glasses to watch bikini atoll. Pat Hoffie in 1996 concisely articulated arguments regarding 'a rethinking of the way we teach art to emphasize the development of technical and intellectual skills rather than 'self-expression'.' (*Art Monthly*, 1996). In short, she wrote that:

Many lecturers in art colleges in the seventies and eighties had been trained by a process of education-by-osmosis: a by-product of modernism which began with the assumption that artists were special individuals, separate from and, by implication, above the interactions and interdependencies of communities, organisations and institutions. (*Art Monthly*, 1996).

We are in a second lap of the same oval. The art school today is in a cycle of revisiting this same confusion regarding its task and identity. The refuge of the art-scoundrel still resides two decades later in this notion of hiding behind the genius concept; of the 'artist' as unquantifiable, quasi-religious outsider removed in their own neatly self-referential habitat of the art school Hogwarts mystery.

Robert Hughes wrote that: 'The art museum can no more contain all culture than a zoo can contain all nature.' (Hughes, 1991). It is a statement we might graft to the art school, so that instead of sentimentally lauding its various sandstone edifices, we begin to examine in an unblinking light what its inherent limitations have always been. It is not the only path towards art practice; and in fact it may well be a factory floor of the mediocre. It skills artists who then go on to train as teachers, and arguably fares better as a production line of art academics, than of artists who exert change. As a spawning ground for academics, curators, researchers, and other gatekeepers of art, it certainly enlarges art discourse, and broadens its curatorial and economic base within the society, but none of that should be confused with significant art making.

Currently, in Australia, we frame the art-as-research debate through twin terminologies of practice-based research, and practice-led research. The windows were opened on this by two key writers—Estelle Barrett, and Graeme Sullivan. Their views regarding art practice are, as I see it, oppositional; in summary, I see Barrett contextualising the work after its

making, as if a process of sweeping up with text after the circus elephant has turned the corner of the main street. Sullivan posits art making more integrally as a concomitant activity, where the art making interrupts the reflection through writing and vice versa. Henk Borgdorff (2006) gives the preferred definition of 'practice as research' as, and I quote, 'that artistic practice is an essential component of both the research process and the research results.' (Sullivan, 2009, p.78).

Walter Benjamin in 1936 made an analogy between painting and photography in the different intrusions into reality they make. In the surgical operation that Benjamin invoked... the surgeon represents an opposite aesthetic to the magician. He wrote that:

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. (Benjamin, 1936.)

In referring to this, I am re-entering the ideas of 'a natural distance from reality' that now acquiesces to the completely immersive environment that the computer offers. These are new intrusions of the digital cloud on the *types* of contact and authenticity, let alone aura, that we expect of not only artworks today, but from our art education models. Is art any longer something that *can* be taught? And if so, what forms or facets of art *are* teachable? Art that provided artefacts to be aired in a gallery context, relied heavily on the sealed perimeters of painting, printmaking, etc., as studio-pocket forms. If all art education has repeatedly moved in and away from teaching 'traditional skills' such as perspective, form and space, and drawing... then equally we perpetuate this spin-cycle of embracing, then detaching from, the particular Australian experience. We are inclined to be tourists of our own Antipodean aesthetics, and the advent of the cloud places up on our visible window ledge the perfect glowing stone of international invisibility.

Whether in animation, indigenous art, textile, drawing, painting, photography, new media, theatre, craft or design... we should arrive at courses that market themselves through their *uniqueness* rather than blanding down towards a common, fast-food artzak model.

Corporatisation is not the anti-art here; the shift is in the priority accorded to the personal studio, as a physical space, and the fact that this Renaissance descriptor of *studio* no longer fits so much of new media, design, and contemporary arts practices which locate themselves 'in the screen'. A similar death by obsolescence awaits the white cube gallery, which since

the 1970s can no longer lasso performative art, site-specific installations or land art, and other non-gallery forms within its designated confines. The art gallery ceases to provoke; it now merely fills time between a latte and lunch. Donald Brook more recently argues (in 2008) that the contemporary artworld is now entrenched as just another competing entertainment within a digital world given over to transient entertainments. He writes:

The artworld is a sprawling, often productively corrupt, cultural institution located within the broader domain of entertainment. It singles out objects for attention in a historically and culturally relativistic way, seeking more or less arbitrarily to restrict the range of considerations that will be regarded as relevant to the appreciation of these things. (Brook, 2008).

The bricks and mortar studio is a niche in the shadow of global students who are mediated through the screen. We roll towards the new death-by-deskilling through anti-teaching stances, which asserts globalisation as the panacea for our presupposed parochialism. This rampant internationalism parallels the impact of colour field painting in Australia in the 1960s, where looking outward also tended to vilify the local. The University increasingly approaches its stewardship of art as if it sees itself as no more than a postmodern telephone exchange. The chalk outline around the art school today places it at best as a type of internet cafe, an airport-lounge of the virtual where all are in constant transit; a pretty purgatory of online forums, blogs, wikis, MOOCs and chatrooms, that offer us disparate, non-corporeal connectivity. For those academics and artists who value conversation over education, then we are in the conversation generating business, towards the future we have to have.

References

- BENJAMIN, W. (1936) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in Benjamin's *Illuminations*, (1970) London, Jonathan Cape.
- BROOK, D. (1997) 'What is the art school for'. *Art Monthly*, April 1997, No 98, pp.20-23.
- (2008) *The Awful Truth About What Art Is.*, Artlink Australia pub., p.128.
- CLARKE, A. (1991) 'The art of Jan Senbergs', *The Age* newspaper, 4 December 1991.
- CROGGON, A. (2013) *Overland* journal, Spring 2013 edition, No 212.
- ELKINS, J. (2009) *Artists with PhDs: On the new Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, New Academia Publishing.
- HOFFIE, P. (1996) 'Art's ineffable value'. *Art Monthly*, May 1996, No 89, pp.4-6.
- HUGHES, R. (1991) *The Shock of the New*, BBC Publications.
- MOTTRAM, J. (2009) 'Researching Research in Art'. In *Artists with PhDs: Debates About the New Studio Art Doctoral Degree*. Ed. by Elkins, J. Washington: New Academia, 3-30
- OVERTON, N. (1993) *Drawing: Approaches to Figuration*, MA, Melbourne University.
- SULLIVAN, G. (2010) *Art Practice as Research*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, p.78.