

DeCLARIO Domenico

Can a contemporary arts practice significantly include academic leadership? Can significant academic leadership constitute a contemporary arts practice?

Abstract

I'm approaching these questions from the point of view of the practitioner who somewhat unexpectedly found himself appointed Head of a contemporary Art school within a university environment in Australia.

It's self evident that an art school competing for funds and credibility within our university environment faces an entirely different set of academic and financial paradigms than do our counterparts in Europe, who head various art academies and institutions resourced by governments independently from the university system.

When I was appointed Head of the School of Visual Arts at Edith Cowan University in Perth in August 2001, I believed I had all the motivation required to construct a model that might be able to circumvent the mistrust in leadership that, in my experience, had slowly eroded the relationship between the centre and its component parts, resulting, time and time again, in the dramatic diminution of the powerful centrifugal force that characterises the vital dynamic between leadership, staff and students, and drives the entire body forward in a cogent way.

I was determined to avoid this outcome, though I was also aware that its unfolding is neither easily foreseen nor necessarily desired by any leadership.

Here was an opportunity to make the contribution to art education I felt compelled to make, though I knew I lacked the conventional administrative experience; I needed to turn my limitations into a virtue.

Biography

Associate Professor Dr Domenico de Clario
DipArt (PIT, Melbourne) MA PhD (VUT, Melbourne)

Head, School of Contemporary Arts, Faculty of Communication and Creative Industries at Edith Cowan University, Perth.

Born in Trieste, Italy, in 1947 and migrated to Australia in 1956.

Studied Architecture at Melbourne University and Painting at the Accademia di Brera in Milan in 1967-8.

In 1999 awarded Victoria University's Vice-Chancellor's prize for the Best Postgraduate Thesis (MA), and in 2003 awarded the Vice-Chancellor's Prize for VUT's Best Postgraduate Thesis of 2002.

Has variously taught Painting, Drawing, Sculpture, Performance and Installation at RMIT in Melbourne (previously PIT), from 1973 until 1996.

Published two volumes of poems and 4 CDs, and since 1966 has held more than 120 solo exhibitions and presented site-specific performances in museums and galleries world-wide.

Has collaborated with composers (Liza Lim, 1994, 1995, 1997) and contemporary musical ensembles (Elision 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000); presented works at PIAF (1995), Adelaide Festival of the Arts (1976, 1982, 2002), Melbourne International Festival (1998) and the inaugural Liverpool Biennial (1999).

Has been awarded numerous residencies and grants by the Australia Council including the Australia Council Fellowship in 1996-8.

He is represented in major public and private collections in Australia and world-wide.

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Please forgive the following necessary historical contextualisation, replete with anecdotes:

I began teaching in January 1973 as a tutor-demonstrator in the Art and Design School of the Preston Institute of Technology, situated in Melbourne's northern suburbs.

Now afloat in a sea of red-roofed villas, the campus then was a 100-acre paddock with cows still roaming the grassy car-park and kangaroos trekking their way to the Darebin Creek flatlands from the unexplored hills around the Plenty River.

I continued to teach at that same campus until May 1996, when I resigned from what had then become PIT's most recent incarnation, the Bundoora campus of RMIT's Art and Design course. In between the two, it had also been known as the Phillip Institute of Technology.

During the early 70's PIT was probably the most adventurous art school in Australia. In those days Melbourne had 7 art schools, each providing a particular, idiosyncratic approach to art education or *un-education*. Apart from myself, Dale Hickey, David Tolley, Peter Booth, Mike Brown, Micki Allan and others found the space to function in highly experimental ways. We offered everything from filmmaking to script-writing to drama, to circus skills.

Fiercely individual practitioners were recruited from dingy inner-suburban bedroom-studios to come and talk to students about their practices. As a consequence, before the introduction of the BA degree in the late 70's, PIT Diploma of Art graduates like Robert Hunter, Robert Rooney, Paul Boston, John Nixon and many, many others were instructed in a kind of laboratory, where the rules of the game were constantly being changed according to the flow of new information being infused into the school by cutting-edge practitioners.

Most of the staff and some exceptional graduate students from PIT exhibited at Pinacotheca, in this way affirming and intensifying the debates begun in School studios. This made for fiercely independent individuals who were convinced, at times unwisely, or at least prematurely, of the righteousness of their cause. Yet such boldness certainly made the art compelling, and created personas who were able to sustain such personal visions.

I exhibited at Pinacotheca for over 10 years. My ongoing commitment to simply teach in the studios came from these early experiences. I shared with my fellow teachers a diffidence of and an unease with the lightning-fast transition from practitioner-teacher to academic that characterised the shift in focus in 80's art school programmes.

My mistrust of the academic leaders I worked with and the scepticism with which I viewed their daily exhibitions of pragmatic pirouetting (and I'm being kind here) convinced me not to be tempted to follow them on their path. As a result, in 25 years of dedicated tertiary teaching I never ascended beyond the lecturer B level, and I remained frozen at the last step of that level for 16 years.

I resigned in 1996, four years after it became painfully apparent to me that the so-called *amalgamation* between Bundoora's Phillip Institute's Art School, of which I had been a member, and that of RMIT's School of Fine Arts, was simply manifesting as the methodical dismemberment of teaching philosophies, facilities and staffing structures of what was named, post-amalgamation, the School of Fine Arts' Bundoora Campus. That campus school has been extinct now for a number of years.

Later that year I was awarded an Australia Council Fellowship and I embarked on 5 years of intense travel to take up a number of residencies around the world, further research and study. I didn't think, at that point, that I could ever or would ever resume an involvement with an Art School, unless it was at a level where I felt I could make a significant impact on how it functioned.

When I was appointed Head of the School of Visual Arts at Edith Cowan University in Perth in August 2001, I believed I had all the motivation required to construct a model that might be able to circumvent the mistrust in leadership that, in my experience, had slowly eroded the relationship between the centre and its component parts, resulting, time and time again, in the dramatic diminution of the powerful centrifugal force that characterises the vital dynamic between leadership, staff and students, and drives the entire body forward in a cogent way.

I was determined to avoid this outcome, though I was also aware that its unfolding is neither easily foreseen nor necessarily desired by any leadership.

Here was an opportunity to make the contribution to art education I felt compelled to make, though I knew I lacked the conventional administrative experience; I needed to turn my limitations into a virtue.

I reasoned that the only way I could safeguard the operation from my own lack of experience and possible shallowness, from the onset of a survival-mode pragmatism and from the pressures of university management above me, would be to value this opportunity as much as, and in the way I value my own practice; in other words, in order to ensure its integrity I would approach this venture and construct it as an artist approaches an important project, with all of our well-documented obsessiveness and attention to detail, our resourcefulness and our determination to maintain the integrity of the initial vision through to its final manifestation.

I would approach, I decided, running the Art School in the same manner and with the same instinctive optimism I approached all of my other projects.

My practice is based upon the fluid relationship between the visible and the invisible, and on the body as the conductor/translator of this relationship.

In order to define the component parts of this essentially micro-macro dynamic, I'm used to identifying architectural spaces, texts, paintings, institutions, philosophical ideas, in short any subject as a *body*, made of a number of discreet energy centres, each contributing equally to the vital energy flow through this entity.

I then position my body both physically and metaphorically in the space of the translator/transmuter so that hitherto invisible or unspoken ideas or forms or sounds may be made manifest.

I began to identify the School of Visual Arts as a *body*, with each of its studio areas functioning as one of this body's seven energy centres; the body included the school's architecture, the staff, students and energy flows exchanged in each cultural or administrative transaction.

As head of the school I placed myself in the translator/transmuter's role in all of those transactions; between staff and students, general staff and academic staff, School and faculty, School and university, and so on, and I focused on attempting to manifest all of the various needs into a coherent whole.

I reasoned that if the School's body functioned like a wheel its movement might be positive and regular; that if each of the wheel's seven spokes represented a studio area, the entire community would be included, and that if each of the spokes also represented a spectrum colour, then difference would be celebrated positively.

Consequently the School's logo is a seven-spoked spectrum wheel, whose hub is white, and whose spokes are irregularly spaced to denote both a forward movement and a potential and preparedness for constant changes and adjustments within the School's dynamic.

Each spoke represents a studio area in a changing relationship to other studios; the wheel sits on the palm of an outstretched hand, and the wording above it says: *discover the world in your hands*.

It's not enough of course to dream up a logo to make an art school function positively, no matter how relevant it might be to the art practice of the head of that school.

It requires constant and untiring dialogue with all the component parts of the whole, a certain naïve belief in one's instinct, and an illogically optimistic approach to the first glimmers of approaching disaster.

Academic, technical and general staff, and students of the School as well as the broader University community have all responded amazingly well to the approach described above.

Consequently, since the beginning of 2002, the School of Contemporary Arts (formerly Visual Arts) has been undergoing a profound change.

It 's redefining its role in order to be able to fully sustain a more intense engagement with cultural debate at all levels; this debate ultimately constitutes the broad educational base in which learning through cultural exchange can occur. Students have the opportunity to work in a unique multi -arts environment, generated by the close relationship between Contemporary Arts, Performing Arts (WAAPA) and Communications & Multimedia, the three Schools that together make up the new Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries.

This inter school programme provides multi-paths through the undergraduate BA in Visual Arts through to a redefined MA in Visual Arts, an MA in Creative Arts, an MA in Art Therapy, a new MA in Dramatherapy and the newly-written PhD in Visual Arts, which has an enrolment of 5 domestic students and 2 overseas students.

From 2004 we will be also offering a BA and an MA in Contemporary Performance, and an MA in Contemporary Arts.

The Contemporary Arts MA will function as a compressed 12-month course delivered both on-line and through a mentoring programme set up in various cities around the globe as well as in cities in Australia's eastern states. It is envisaged that a number of eminent contemporary practitioners will act as mentors, and candidates will be able to continue their practices in the cities they reside in whilst engaged in the mentoring programme. Assessments of candidates will take place both in those cities and in Perth.

From 2004 we also intend to offer a Professional Doctorate in Contemporary Arts, whose graduating thesis will consist of a comprehensive portfolio documenting the graduate's extensive practice, as well as an exhibition/project and an exegesis.

A contemporary art practice cannot function independently of events shaping both the macro and the micro world; the generating principle that drives any art practice is based on the belief that the individual micro-practice might in some way enrich the macro-whole.

The idea of a 'minor literature' and its seemingly disproportionate influence on a 'major language' was first posited by the French social strategists/philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in the 1980's, whilst attempting to analyse the impact of Franz Kafka's short stories on the German language (The Expression Machine).

Deleuze and Guattari argued that Kafka's 'minor literature', even though generated from the outer reaches of the teutonic world (Prague) by a Czech Jew writing in German, absolutely revolutionised this 'major language'. There are many examples of the transformative power of minority voices to be found in the history of art, music and literature, from Artemisia Gentileschi to James Joyce, Italo Svevo, Albert Camus, Frida Kahlo, Jorge Luis Borges and Colin McCahon.

Our own indigenous artists can be described as arguably the art world's most potent 'minor literates', as the shape and redefine contemporary thinking concerning image-making.

Is it possible to consider whether an Art School's clearly stated objectives and the teaching methodologies employed to achieve them might in themselves constitute a single art practice?

If so, the principles that define this School's practice seek to facilitate a focus on process, not outcome; they seek to encourage risk-taking, they seek to confront students with the inevitability of a creative life's constant choice-making, and they to encourage an understanding of the implications of the micro-macro relationship that permeates all dynamics.

This, we believe, results in an empowerment of each singular voice, for each individual constitutes the 'minor literature' whose unlocking not only enriches but defines the 'major language' that is the School's practice.

This is what we propose: staff and students working side by side in a seven-sided laboratory that affirms the 'minor language' constituting each individual, facilitating the gradual discovery of *'the world in your hands'* that each individual brings to the School. Consequently the staff function essentially as catalysts in the 'colouring in' of the story that makes up each single experience, in this way supporting the transformation/ transmutation between potential and its manifestation.

These are some aspects of what the School is currently offering to consolidate this vision:

- a newly developed course structure facilitating multi-disciplinary opportunities;
- a new Electronic Arts and Graphic Design stream that provides specialist design education ;
- an Artist Residency Programme, with contributing artists coming from the Americas (Paul Ramirez Jonas, Sonya Clarke, Annette Lawrence, Adam Fuss), Africa (Thomas Mulcaire) and Europe (Maria Blaisse), as well as from the eastern States (Lyndal Jones, Eugene Carchesio, Rosslynd Piggott, Gregory Pryor, Linda Sproul, Stelarc, IRAA Theatre, Louise Paramor, Jon Cattapan) and each staying up to 6 weeks, working with honours MA and undergrads.
- the appointment of a number of Post Doctoral Fellows (Dr Mark Minchinton , Head of VUT's Performance Studies, who will research indigenous walking tracks throughout the south-west of WA, Lyndal Jones who will continue to work on videos and texts, Dr Chris Woods from Sheffield University who will provide research leadership in our Artherapy/Dramatherapy courses);
- *spectrum project space*, our new exhibition/performance space situated in Northbridge, a highly accessible location within Perth's cultural precinct, in which students, staff and visiting artists speak, exhibit and perform.
- *soundspectrum* each third Monday presents new music performances and we regularly hold various other performance events there.
- Our resident artists during their stay reside in a comfortable studio/ apartment above *spectrum*, facilitating dialogue with students and the broader Perth arts community.
- *The aurora project*. This is a cinema/theatre situated in the wheat-belt town of Kellerberrin, already the home of IASKA (International Art Space Kellerberrin Australia). The cinema is being refurbished to facilitate projects with IASKA, SOCA's artists-in-residence and the local community, both indigenous and non-indigenous.
The cinema plans to open with a season of African films in October.
I bought this cinema in March last year on my first visit to Kellerberrin. My visit coincided with the very tragic death of Neil Roberts and Noah Pryor, Greg Pryor's infant son. I heard of their deaths on the morning of my trip to Kellerberrin and I walked through the town as in a dream. I saw the cinema was for sale, and it seems that within a minute the agent was there. I decided that I needed to do something affirming, and I bought the cinema there and then. It's to be dedicated to the memory of Neil and Noah in October.
It's at the service of the School and the town's communities.

Beyond issues whose relevance is defined by global concerns, the School seeks to intensify its interaction with indigenous art communities and local communities of all kinds.

The 'Open Bite Australia' programme, run by the Printmedia area, hosts indigenous printmakers from all over W.A .and promotes their work; *spectrum* hosts the highly successful WMC Art Awards exhibition for W.A.'s indigenous secondary students.

Our Geraldton campus is focused on indigenous students and we've just been able to secure a yearly \$6000 WMC Scholarship for an indigenous student to take up the course.

Next year we are presenting, as part of our foundation studies, a unit titled 'Indigenous Protocols' instructing students in basic protocols dealing with indigenous art and artists, so that each student coming through the course will have an understanding of such matters.

We are collaborating with the City of Swan on a collaborative venture later this year supporting the presence of Glasgow's National Review of Live Art at the Midland Railway Workshops. Curated exhibitions, performances and symposiums will be presented at the workshops in October.

The School has secured a number of excellent studio areas at the workshops for its postgraduate students and staff.

This year is the inaugural year for our Australian Research Centre for Art and Psychotherapy (ARCAP) which gathers and promotes the research undertaken by the Dramatherapy and Art Therapy MA programme.

Soon this programme will be broadened to include an MA in Sound, Colour and Movement Therapy .

All of us at SOCA support our logo-image of the seven-spoked spectrum wheel held in the palm of a hand. This image illustrates the idea that the unlimited potential contained within each student's *minor literature* is awaiting discovery and subsequent manifestation through a mutually rewarding collaboration with SOCA staff.

A number of aspects of my practice, other than my work as Head of SOCA, have changed since going to Perth; I'm far more focused on the effect of my work on communities, and more interested in the response of people who are not artists or art-watchers to my work than ever before. I make work that's more portable or nomadic than before; I've become more aware that art has an impact on everybody in the community in one way or another, and that art education plays a vital role in preparing a receptivity in the community to receive that information in the most positive manner.

I'm very grateful to have been given an opportunity to pass on the knowledge and experience I have accumulated in the past to the ones that are coming through, and to the people I work with; I feel privileged to be able to constantly receive significant information about all kinds of things from all kinds of generous people, and to still have the opportunity to transmute it into something that might have a value that transcends language or culture.