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What impact are higher degree research programmes having on emerging trends and themes in contemporary art?

The questions arising from higher degree research programmes have been contentious for arts educators over at least the last three decades in Australia and may have had their origin in post war art education in the UK. I would suggest that in an attempt by artists and art historians to establish objective academic credentials for the disciplines of art and its interpretation they left the way open for Creative industries and other such anti creative ideologies to emerge. The need to establish relevance for the practice of art is an inevitable part of the struggle for funding and political acceptance but the most easily verifiable markers for relevance in that context are extrinsic to the purely pointless research that art ought to be. There is not time here to make a case for why art matters but I do have a text on that and it is not about self expression or internal worlds, it has to be about encountering the real world, but it is much more to do with empathy and chance discoveries than the art market or even the art world.¹

The rhetoric from Creative Industries gurus tends to be dismissive of individual acts of creation and sees excellence as a threat to democratic principle. Art can never be made for the market in my view, what Donald Brook describes as works of art as distinct from 'ART' are things the market and the art world accepts as art but that is no guarantee of it actually entailing art, as I believe we should conceive of it. Creative industries will scoff at individuals making unmarketable things as an effete act of elitism designed to titillate the bourgeoisie and establish their difference from the proletariat. Forgive the 19th century language. We are all acutely aware of the pejorative use of the term elites and sometimes overdo the defensive response of self-effacement that often takes the fun out of art that after all is supposed to be risky. This is not to say that the avant-garde and its continuing influence on

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contemporary art is not democratic. On the contrary our continuing commitment to returning the act of completion to the active viewer creates opportunities for interactivity etc. I argue that it is a core value for many of the most adventurous artists today as well as for the two waves of avant-garde activity in the teens of the last century and after WWII. It is just that it is not automatically the death of the author it is just the birth of a more nuanced and collegiate author.

Very few people working in the area have tried to seriously understand Donald Brook's message about the indefensibility of art as a philosophical kind or a discipline. This is a pity because while I believe passionately in the importance of what we call art, Brook makes some challenges to us all that if taken to heart would give us great questions to work on. I have to agree with Donald that there is no clear definition of what art is and I would contend that neither should there be. I am definitely not one to suggest that somehow we know it when we see it, in my view most of us don't in fact recognise it at all. What I believe for sure is that no important art ever emerges as a result of an advance plan or preconceived outcome. The most exciting thing about art is that when we actually discover something through making art it comes as a surprise. Often by chance as Duchamp made very clear and as Bacon constantly reminded us. John Cage following Duchamp realised that chance provides a means of depersonalizing his work while making it more deeply part of the material world. Oddly enough Bacon felt something similar. This is never about me he claimed.

Like a gene a meme appears as a result of an accident. While we can't constantly be coming up with new memes that to a degree have to be defined by their reproducibility just like a gene, all art should be about setting up a potential for a discovery. This may seem to be setting too high a bar but since artists are supposed to be allowed to make fools of themselves they are free to try, and who knows occasionally they may then hit the mark. I have a theory that I hope to develop in a forthcoming book that traces the interactivity of avant-garde and its persistence into contemporary art as part of the democratizing process that nevertheless depends on the creative act in the

plastic arts as depending on consciousness interacting with material and process.² Tony Cragg tells a very engaging story about drawing or writing with a pencil on paper.³ We make and erase a string of marks altering and adding till we find that something interesting has been formed. When we stand back and look at what we have done it is often a complete surprise. As Tony put it “I did not know that!” Mind acting upon matter and vice versa makes discoveries possible.

Research should be a very closely interrogated term in art education. Studio practice must be considered as potentially research where experiments genuinely take place and I don't mean only in technology but any new way of assembling knowledge of the world and of our own minds. Environmental and social primary research has led to some of the most inspiring art of the last 6 or 7 decades but poorly digested cultural studies by some artists make for the most tedious and unhelpful texts that those of us who agree to examine ever have to put up with. I also believe that this is often damaging for the artist since the tendency is sometimes to make art that demonstrates the dominant theoretical tendency that will by definition never discover anything new. Having a broad grasp of ideas both current and historical through theory but also in literature and art will always strengthen the artist's way of interacting in the world but it should not necessarily be the structure or the criteria for their research.

Research that occurs when artists engage the material world manipulating or rearranging materials and objects like the pencil in Tony Cragg's tale is much more likely to surprise and excite our interest than reiterating second hand texts. Artists who do primary research in the community and the environment also discover ideas and ways of doing things that make sense and often make highly charged art. While the idea will always take priority, as Sol LeWitt proposed, the act of transforming matter into an idea or idea into matter can

² The integration of consciousness with the surrounding worlds of culture and nature has been available as a concept since Spinoza if not before. However recent neuro science shows us that this is not just a metaphor but a concrete reality. Just as embodied memory turns out to be a material fact revealing that our minds are coextensive with the world around us.

³ Tony Cragg gave a paper at the Art Gallery of New South Wales on the occasion of his exhibition that I curated in 1997.

produce intense affective responses from a viewer. Finding out that other people in other places do things differently or view the use of objects differently is a fantastic way to rethink our assumptions and see things anew. The cognitive component of the art must be paramount but for the content to become internalized and recalled as if it were a personal discovery something like an affective or empathetic field seems to be necessary. Something internalised in this way will stay with us and maybe change our view of things in ways that differ from things we know as received text.