

Artists Teaching Artists: A Survey of Current Debates

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Biography

Grant Stevens is an artist and Lecturer at UNSW Art & Design. He received his PhD from QUT in 2007, and lectured there 2011-15. Stevens' artworks have been exhibited widely, and are held in public and private collections nationally and internationally. His research traverses the connections between contemporary art, new technologies, visual culture, and subjectivity, as well as the changing conditions of teaching and learning in art and design contexts.

Abstract

With their abilities to draw on first-hand knowledge of the techniques, processes, and concepts informing the development of artistic practices, artist-educators have long been integral to the teaching of fine arts studio programs. Since the formalisation of modern art and design programs, the most important and influential art schools have placed artists at the centre of the design and delivery of their courses. Today, artist-educators continue to play important roles in the training of future generations of creative practitioners and thinkers. However, current shifts across the higher education sector, which demand ever-increasing levels of transparency, accountability, and rationalisation, are bringing the contributions of artist-educators into renewed focus. Envisaged as the first part of a larger project, this paper seeks to chart current debates on the role and value of artist-educators in fine arts higher education. Through a survey of recent literature in the field, the paper aims to identify the key ways that artist-educators can contribute to and shape fine arts higher education in the current university environment.

Keywords: artist-educator; pedagogy; higher education; neoliberalism; contemporary art

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There is a paradox in the current relationship between art and education. On the one hand, the international art world champions the ways that art illuminates, enlightens, and educates. Contemporary art is rife with relational, participatory, research-based, and socially engaged practices, all of which place the activation of the audience's consciousness at their core (Bishop 2011). It is also standard practice for museums, galleries, and biennales to house education departments with dedicated education staff who are central to forward planning and programming. Here, as in art practices, there is a fluid movement of language across educational, research, and gallery contexts. Artists no longer do "artist talks"; they give "performative lectures". Galleries routinely host lectures, master classes, forums, symposia, colloquia, conferences, workshops, reading groups, round tables, and even summer camps.¹ And yet, despite all this attention on art's epistemological functions, the foundations of art education as we have come to know it appear destabilised and under threat. The recent developments in Sydney's art school ecology, as well as state and federal changes to arts funding, demonstrate the tenuousness of status quo. Artist-educators, especially those "fortunate enough" to hold academic teaching positions (like myself), consistently report myriad difficulties in aligning their teaching methods and creative practices with the mechanisms of the institution. In short, while education as art is thriving, the education of art faces immense challenges.

This modest paper aims to identify some of the ways that artist-educators can contribute to shaping fine arts higher education in the current university environment. Here, I acknowledge some self-interest in writing this paper, as an artist-educator in the early stages of my academic career. In a sense, this paper has grown out of a desire to understand my own experiences as an artist-educator. However, rather than call on self-reflection and anecdotal evidence, this paper looks to current literature in the field as a way to corroborate the tacit knowledge emerging from the classrooms and tearooms of the sector. It is hoped that, in part, this paper offers a humble call-to-arms; a prompt for us working in the field of fine arts education to be proactive in affirming the invaluable contributions that artist-educators make. In so doing, I suggest, via Jacques Rancière and Thierry de Duve, that we might even stumble on some of the fundamental values and beliefs that drive us to make and

¹ This merging of museum and academy functions has been the specific subject of the multi-phase exhibition and publication project, *Academy* (Nollert et al. 2006).

teach art. The argument for artists teaching artists becomes an argument for the social benefits of art.²

An underlying motivation for this paper is to understand the largely unexamined assumption that it is logical and proper for practicing artists to teach future generations of artists (a proposition that I have a personal stake in protecting and promoting). The idea that artists can and should teach artists has been entrenched at least since the Renaissance Academies (Elkins 2001, 9), and is prominent throughout modern and contemporary art schools. Indeed, the mythological statuses of schools like the Bauhaus (Wick 2000), Black Mountain College (Harris 1987), and CalArts (Hertz 2003), are largely founded on the reputations of the artists who have taught there, and on the lineage of student-artists that they have influenced; a relationship that de Duve describes as a “chain of direct kinship” (de Duve 2009, 27). As de Duve has shown, while ‘aesthetic transmission’ (a somewhat unfashionable term) remains central to fine arts education, the processes by which transmission occurs have evolved with the changing contexts of modern and contemporary art (2009, 17). While the pre-modern master-apprentice model may have at least had the appearance of a direct artist-to-artist transmission, today, art schools are just one node in a network of professionalised contexts for the learner artist. They are just as likely to learn through the interfaces of the gallery, museum, and infinite online portals, as in the formal classroom. Today’s prevailing model of collective studio learning, with its emphasis on contextual research, critical reflection, discursive elaboration, and professional practice, seems to recognise these changing modes of learning. However, for de Duve (2009, 22), understanding such shifts in the history of art schools opens up a broader, perhaps more important question: how do artists, artworks, and art schools address and hence model specific forms of sociality?³ In other words, the fundamental challenges currently facing art education provide opportunities not simply to consider the preservation of studio teaching, but more broadly, to consider how art conceives and reimagines the social realm in which it is made and encountered.

² Here, I also acknowledge that because of fairly limited research in this area, my paper follows the literature available, often resulting in shifts between Australian, European, and American contexts. The integration of both local and international contexts is deliberate as I am hoping to sketch out an understanding of my immediate context as well as recognise that art and education are increasingly global industries. There is an obvious risk here in falling short of a comprehensive report, and an obvious lack of sources that reference Asian, African, and South American contexts.

³ de Duve argues for ‘nothing more or less than a mode of transmission of art addressed to everyone as if they were all artists’ (2009, 24); a kind of democratised aesthetic realm that empowers the ‘public’ to stand by their aesthetic judgements.

Today, it is difficult to ignore that the social realm of art, and therefore of art education, is being shaped by the seemingly ubiquitous spread of neoliberal values across the spectrum of cultural endeavour. The economic imperative is now so entrenched that arts organisations, galleries, artists, and educators barely flinch when asked to undertake near-constant processes of justification and evaluation. And who could argue that greater levels of transparency and accountability are bad things, especially when it comes to the use of taxpayers' money in funding cultural activities and higher education? From the Dawkins reforms in Australian tertiary education initiated in the late 1980s, through to the more recent Bologna Process in Europe, global arts education has undergone a raft of changes to ensure greater accountability, standardisation, and professionalisation. For some, the results are welcomed levels transparency and clarity in the delivery of fine arts education, while for others the results are a homogenisation and sterilisation of art itself; a deterioration into 'managerial ideology' (Buckley and Conomos 2009, 9) and the 'catering regime' (Gielen and De Bruyne 2012, 3). Regardless of perspective, the sector is increasingly governed by the mantra of perpetual change. Under these conditions, calls for stability and independence may be well founded (Buckley and Conomos 2009, 24), but it is also incumbent on those at the coalface to offer clear articulations of what we do now, and to provide affirming models of our potential contributions into the future.

In this regard, looking at current research in this area is instructive. There are four general ways to characterise writing on "artists teaching artists": the identity of the artist-educator; classroom practices; systemic reporting; and, polemic provocations. While divergent in approach and focus, these sources describe a sector oscillating between anxious self-doubt and strained self-affirmation. This is not new. As de Duve (2007) again points out, there have always been uneasy tensions in practices of 'aesthetic transmission' (de Duve 2007). Since the inception of modern art, artists-educators are expected to be both at the vanguard of practice, and to work within academic systems that demand continuity, consistency, and routine. Likewise, student-artists are expected to situate themselves within the histories and discourses of art, while at the same time question and disrupt any suspicion of inherited or assumed knowledge. These contradictions are perhaps what make art, and its learning, thoroughly captivating and engaging activities. However, when imbued with a hint of existential crisis, self-perpetuating and unresolvable anxiety becomes the norm.

In the writing about the identity of the artist-educator, contradiction is a catch-cry (Wilson and van Ruiten 2013, II). Much of the work in this area is connected to the UK context, and responds directly to the Artist Teacher Scheme (ATS) established in 1999 to aid the professional development of artist-educators across all art forms. As one might expect, a large-scale government funded program like the ATS has been accompanied by a plethora of institutional and academic evaluations, many of which combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies measuring the impact and success of the program. What emerges in much of this literature is an understanding of the artist-educator as performing a 'hybrid identity' (Hall 2010, 105): one that combines professional artist and professional teacher in often uncomfortable and incompatible arrangements, and yet, also allows the artist-educator to maintain competing agendas of an individual practice, and a collective learning context. In his evaluation of the identity of the artist-educator, James Hall (2010) suggests reflective practice as key to sustaining this hybrid performance. He argues that artist-educators 'need to develop skills of negotiation through which they can articulate and continuously reappraise their art practice and, at an appropriate stage, use that practice to inform their teaching' (Hall 2010, 109). This conclusion is reasonable and perhaps even virtuous, however, there may be more than a hint of yet more institutional outsourcing of responsibility to the individual: an ideological cornerstone of the neoliberal regime.

Beyond these appraisals of the artist-educator identity, numerous sources profile the specific classroom workings of individual artist-educators. Here, there are at least two distinct categories: academic research contributing to the field of learning and teaching, and retail books with broad appeal. Forums like ACUADS and publications like *Teaching Artist Journal* provide excellent platforms for scholarly explorations of how artists teach. Often written to affirm an individual's or team's approach to the organisation of curricula, classrooms, and learning activities, these papers often share first-hand knowledge, as well as aid in internal processes such as teaching evaluation, professional development, and academic promotion. While these sources often remain localised to academic contexts, there are another range of sources that collate the classroom activities, anecdotes, and advice of well-known artists who teach. *The Photographer's Playbook* (Fulford and Halpern 2014), *Akademie X: Lessons in Art and Life* (Mark 2015), *Ch-ch-ch-changes: artists talk about teaching* (Reardon and Mollin 2009), and *Draw it with your eyes closed: the art of the assignment* (Petrovich and White 2012), are just a few recent examples. These books are often less formal, enabling readers to gain insights into what makes artists

creative, and how to cultivate one's own creativity, whether a professional artist or not. These books also serve to reinforce the significance of the artists featured, confirming both the artist's inventiveness, and the spread of their influence. While these writings on classroom practices, both academic and mass market, are important for unpacking and profiling how artists teach, they do not necessarily offer insights into overarching trends and influences in higher arts education.

In contrast, two recent large-scale systematic reports are worth noting here: the *Studio Teaching Project* (Zehner 2009; de la Harpe 2009; Frankham 2009), and the *SHARE Handbook for Artistic Research Education* (Wilson and van Ruiten 2013). The *Studio Teaching Project* will be familiar to many as it draws on first-hand accounts of studio teaching across a range of Australian art, architecture, and design studio programs. Combining quantitative and qualitative data, the resulting reports chart the strengths and challenges of studio teaching in an Australian context. While not specifically about the role of artists-educators, a prominent aspect of the reports is the connection between studio learning and the professional experiences of the teacher (Zehner et al. 2009, 59-61). Through its broad conclusions, the project also confirms some widely held assumptions about studio teaching: for example, that the studio enables opportunities for collective and peer-to-peer learning, class sizes should be kept down, studio spaces and facilities need regular attention and maintenance, and so on (Zehner et al. 2009, 79-80). It offers valuable if generalised understandings of current issues in an Australian context.

Similarly, the *SHARE Handbook* surveys the strengths and challenges facing higher fine arts education. With a focus on PhD programs in Europe, the handbook is vast, comprehensive, and deliberately 'poly-vocal' (Wilson and van Ruiten 2013, II). With a 'toolbox' of curriculum resources also included, the document is part condition report, part introspective self-analysis, and part teaching kit. It is undoubtedly an important contribution to helping understand the factors influencing higher education in the creative arts, but like the *Studio Teaching Project*, it remains broad and open-ended: ambitious enough to capture diverse approaches and understandings of the field, but not necessarily providing clear and affirming models for the future.

In addition to explorations of the artist-educator identity, classroom practices, and overarching systematic reports, there are sources that seek to move beyond describing the field, and instead propose alternative ways of conceiving the factors at play in current art education. Unconstrained by the need to provide corroborated data

or to assimilate divergent perspectives, books such as *Teaching Art in the Neoliberal Realm* (2012) and *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School* (2009) critique current conditions and offer provoking ripostes to the “silent erosion of studio teaching” (Zehner et al. 2009, 99), which is spoken of in the hallways of many art schools. Yet again, there is a generalised anxiety, and even pessimism here. As if beaten down by the mechanisms of ‘massification’ (Wilson and van Ruiten 2013, 8) and rationalisation, those like Buckley and Conomos, Gielan and De Bruyne, seek to rise from the ashes of the ‘old school’ art school, and provide impassioned pleas to maintain the core values of art education. These are worthy if sometimes polemic attempts to stake out a territory for a future of art education to believe in.

This brings us back to precisely the question of what it is that we believe in. Somewhere in this broad and diverse array of literature is an underlying sense of the values that artists bring to educational contexts. Is it possible to synthesise these viewpoints and develop a clear and affirming set of principles? Would such a process simply reinforce existing imperatives to consolidate and homogenise? As I have already suggested, if there is an obvious commonality across the literature, it is the play of contradiction, uncertainty, and anxiety that pervades our collective experiences as creative people operating within constraining contexts under conditions of perpetual change. And there is diversity: individualised experiences and practices that respond to infinitely complex local and global factors. In the face of this complexity, and the resulting disempowerment in affecting change, what can we say and do to stake out a shared territory? One response would be to continue focusing on individual classroom practices, like many of the papers at this and other conferences do. Another complimentary response is to clearly articulate and affirm the sets of values that aid arguments for supporting the specificities of those individual classroom practices. It is crucial that we make the case not just for art pedagogies, but also, in a sense, for art itself.

Here, Jacques Ranciere’s book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) helps provide one way to understand the values of artists teaching artists. Ranciere’s book details the unorthodox teaching methods of 19th Century French educator Joseph Jacotot, and the implications of Jacotot’s teaching for intellectual emancipation more broadly. Jacotot’s method, which he stumbled upon attempting to teach French literature to non-French speaking students, goes against the accepted doctrine of the ‘teacher-as-explicator’. Rather than typical ‘Socratic’ processes of explanation, Jacotot’s method requires the teacher to simply be curious and attentive to student learning.

Following Jacotot's lead, Ranciere argues that, against popular opinion, teachers therefore need no mastery of the subject being taught, and instead need only to prompt, question, and to verify: 'He will not verify what the student has found; he will verify that the student has searched.' (Ranciere 1991, 31) At first, this idea of the ignorant master seems to run counter to conventional wisdom about why it might be important for artists to teach artists: namely, the assumption that practicing artists 'transmit' skills and knowledge because of their firsthand experiences as artists. Instead, the ignorant master, as a potential model for artist-educator, operates through modelling attentiveness and facilitating curiosity.⁴

Jacotot's method relies heavily on verbal processes of translation and explication. Importantly, however, it is founded on an understanding that these processes are not direct or universal:

It is because there is no code given by divinity, no language of languages, that human intelligence employs all its art to making itself understood and to understanding what the neighboring intelligence is signifying. Thought is not told *in truth*; it is expressed *in veracity*. It is divided, it is told, it is translated for someone else, who will make of it another tale, another translation, on one condition: the will to communicate, the will to figure out what the other is thinking, and this under no guarantee beyond his narration, no universal dictionary to dictate what must be understood. (Ranciere 1991, 62)

With this understanding, Ranciere argues that the Jacotot method becomes akin to artistic endeavour itself. Where the explicator-teacher inadvertently reinforces a gap between knowing and not knowing⁵, the ignorant master understands that it is the *quest* for meaning, interpretation, and understanding that is most important to learning. Like an artist, the ignorant master is not satisfied with the arrival at

⁴ Without direct reference to Ranciere or Jacotot, Edward Colless describes something similar by comparing teaching to the monk-like dissolution of the ego: 'This is why "good-natured" teachers master the terms of their discipline as monks do, professing in their transmission of knowledge a love that passes on the truth of self to their student. Their's may be a particular branch of knowledge, but it manifests a universal truth, and so it offers a universal love: the desire for the student to master desire by contemplating his/her resemblance to the master's desire.' Colless 2009, 105)

⁵ Edward Colless similarly describes this relationship student-teacher relationship in connection with common art school teaching: 'But the method of Socratic teaching, of which we are still legatees, proceeds by ironic demonstration of the student's – or, in the Platonic dialogues, the opponent's – lack of knowledge. This isn't just a shortfall on the subject of debate, not a quantitative lack in the corpus of knowledge constituting, say, the canonical inventory of a particular subject. It is deficiency of self-knowledge.' (Colless 2009, 103-104)

meaning, fact, or truth. Instead, they are curious and attentive to the conditions of this arrival, and to the conditions of ‘not knowing’ that perpetuate these never-ending quests. Furthermore, the ignorant master/artist recognises the imperfections and impossibilities of direct expression and universal transmission: the ‘gap between feeling and expression, between the silent language of emotion and the arbitrariness of the spoken tongue’ (Ranciere 1991, 68). In this recognition, ignorant masters/artists seek meanings and understandings in forms of non-identical resonance: forms that hold open, rather than close off, quests for meaning and understanding. Here, the practices of art and learning become social binders, bringing people together through an unspoken ‘agreement of wills’ (Ranciere 1991, 64); the will to attempt communication, and the reciprocal will to attend the communicative act with inquisitive, attentive, and curious consideration.

Much of this rings true with the classroom practices of artists. Teaching art today is not (if it ever was) about the direct transmission of techniques and facts. It is, to return to de Duve, a very different kind of transmission; one largely focused on the nebulous notion of an ‘artist’s attitude’ (de Duve 1994, 35). Melding de Duve’s and Ranciere’s respective lessons, I would like to propose that if there is such an artistic attitude to teach, it should be founded on the inquisitive, attentive, and curious consideration that underpins our collective will to make sense of the world around us. Perhaps we know this already: at their best, classrooms where artists lead artists are forums for ways of looking, thinking, playing, testing, questioning, performing, and making that do not necessarily accord with prevailing doctrines or epistemologies. As artist-educators, we need to stay attuned to these values and to find ways to facilitate them in our classrooms. At times, this may require “monk-like” (Colless 2009, 105) discipline in putting aside our personal prejudices and assumptions, so as to welcome open-ended speculation and inquisitiveness in our students.

Amid ongoing demands for instrumentalisation and measurability we also need to make the case for these attitudes not only as valid and verifiable “learning outcomes”, but also as transferrable, “real world”, and life-long skills for our collective future. As Ranciere (1991, 70-71) again points out, the kinds of learning that artistic attitudes offer are not simply about producing a lineage of artists; they are also about cultivating a social realm where equalities of intelligence and opportunity are enabled. As neoliberal ideologies and global capitalism approach their zenith, with corresponding growth in xenophobia and social inequality, it is now crucial, perhaps more than ever, to cultivate artistic attitudes. For those of us working at the nexus of

art and education, this means rigorously understanding and boldly articulating both the specificities of our individual practices, and the shared values that ensure art's broader social benefit.

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