

The price of bananas: a painter's perspective

Ruth Waller

Associate Professor
Head of Painting
ANU School of Art & Design

ruth.waller@anu.edu.au

Ruth Waller has lectured in Painting at ANU for 27 years and has been Head of Painting since 2006. She exhibits with Watters Gallery in Sydney and Nancy Sever Gallery in Canberra. Waller's practice explores questions of materiality and illusionism, pattern and optical effects in painting, and our relationship with natural phenomena through painting and traditions of gardening. She is interested in the nature of creative processes, the qualities of knowledge entailed in art practice, the history of painting and themes of influence, affinity and re-invention.

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Abstract

This paper takes the form of a personal and professional reflection on the changing culture of university art schools and the implications I fear this may have for the future of programs focused on fostering individual art practices such as painting. I consider the qualities of experience, criticality and skill we value in offering an education focused on the pleasures and challenges of the tradition of solo studio practice. Drawing on three examples of creative dissent, I reflect on the significant historical cultural role of art schools as offering a space for the dissident, for both students and practitioners who seek to resist conforming to institutionally prescribed norms and values. While the pressures we all feel from government and management may demand a level of adaptation and pragmatism in the interests of survival, I suggest we might take time to consider what we might be jeopardising in the process.

Some years ago, reading JM Coetzee's 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*, I came across a story with which I found myself identifying in a surprising way.

Coetzee's central character Elizabeth Costello delivers a commentary on experiments carried out on chimpanzees by psychologist Wolfgang Kohler at the Prussian Academy of Sciences on Tenerife, published in 1917 as *The Mentality of Apes*. Kohler's captive apes underwent a training program intended to humanize them.

Costello reflects on what **we** might term a Performance Review, whereby an ape called Sultan, is set a series of tests constructed as effective measures of the ape's intelligence.

'Sultan is alone in his pen. He is hungry: the food that used to arrive regularly has unaccountably ceased coming.' (Coetzee, 2003, p.72)

The man who usually feeds him suspends a bunch of bananas out of his reach and introduces three wooden crates into the pen. Costello imagines what the ape might make of this. Sultan is wondering what it is he is supposed to think.

'Why is he starving me? What have I done? But the thought he is being directed toward (by the man and by his hunger) is the instrumental thought. 'How does one use the crates to reach the bananas?' (Ibid.,p.73)

So he makes a tower of crates and gets his bananas and assumes that will be the end of the matter. But no, further obstacles are introduced.

Sultan is realising he is being trained to think in a particular way:

'One is beginning to see how the man's mind works.'...

'He is forced to think the **right** thought namely, how to get the bananas...At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought. From the purity of speculation (why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled towards the lower, practical, instrumental reason...a carefully plotted psychological regimen conducts him away from ethics and metaphysics toward the humbler reaches of practical reason.' (Ibid.,p.74)

And yet:

'In his deepest being Sultan is not interested in the banana problem. Only the experimenter's single-minded regimentation forces him to concentrate on it.' (Ibid.,p.75)

While it might seem a bit perverse to identify with an ape, the model of mechanistic thinking represented by Kohler seems disturbingly familiar. And while Kohler titled his paper *The Mentality of Apes* this account of Sultan's story tells us more about the mentality, indeed the narrow *instrumentality* of Kohler's values and the culture he represents.

Given the ever-shrinking budgets faced by the arts and humanities, the pressure is on in art schools to measure-up and frame our teaching and research in terms prescribed as priorities by government, if we want to continue to get our bananas. The danger is that *creative* thinking becomes distorted into *instrumental* thinking.

Measures such as the ERA, ARC funding and the criteria applied in Performance reviews and Promotion rounds all impact on decisions regarding staffing and curricula. Policies and research funding favour projects oriented to prescribed priorities and supposedly measurable outcomes couched in terms of short-term quantifiable economic and social impacts. And the objective of education nationally is narrowly directed to serve the governmental mantra of building jobs and growth.

While some forms of art practice and the creative industries may suit this model and may well bring welcome *additions* to the culture of university art schools, where will this increasing direction of resources leave the artist/academic or student who wishes to pursue an individual studio practice like painting? Will there be any bananas left for us?

How will those of us whose practices don't fit current measures of *value* survive in this institutional culture?

I feel fortunate that at ANU we have sought to adapt to university culture while maintaining the tradition of studio education, however not without inevitable compromises. We have retained (against the tide) a discipline-specific program whereby our students *major* in the material practice and skills, the poetics, the history, theory and contemporary issues of their chosen studio.

However, I now feel with some urgency a need for us as educators to reflect on the distinctive values this approach to art education engenders; to consider what life experiences and values lead a student to choose a program like ours: What are they looking for in a university education in visual art? What qualities of experience, of space and time do we open up for ourselves, and for the wider culture, in valuing the vocation of the solitary contemplative life of the studio?

Crucially an education in individual studio practice is a sustained and delicate process of engaging with the complexities of our subjectivity, and of exploring the possibilities of inter-subjectivity. Indeed we generate work as the physical, manifestation of the interface between our subjectivity and the complex realm of intersubjective relations, played out in the poetic, material and intellectual life of the studio. A distinctive feature of an effective education in art practice is the exploration of the ways in which our subjectivity constitutes both a *lens* through which we see the world, and the *subject* of that process.

Crucially inter-subjective relations are ignited across times, places and cultures through an immersion in the material and technical base, history and theory of a given practice, and tested through studio critique, and via our engagement with contemporary practices and audiences.

This kind of studio education aims to offer *all* our graduates a relationship with painting which will enrich their lives as a distinctive *way of being in the world*: an alternative to the mainstream cultural values of the marketplace of utility, consumption, efficiency and speed. It seems there is no shortage of applicants still keen to study Painting. While government policy and institutions trumpet technologically driven innovation, many young people are actually looking for alternatives- for many of the generation who have grown up in a digital world, painting, like vinyl in music, is cool.

Teaching Art in the Neoliberal Realm: Realism versus Cynicism, a collection of essays published in 2012 discusses the crisis in European Art Education, in terms which closely match our experience in Australia. Editors Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne suggest that education today is regarded as *one big catering business*- and that a key principle of the catering industry is standardisation: '*the not delivering anything outside the norm.*'

'*Capitalism*,' they declare, '*doesn't know how to deal with the immeasurability of the educational process.*' (Gielen & De Bruyne, 2012, p.6)

In *School- a matter of form*, Simons and Masschelein discuss the ways the values of *entrepreneurialism* have come to pervade education at every level- institutions, artist

academics and students alike are rewarded for entrepreneurial thinking- marketplace thinking.

As a counter to this, they propose our revisiting the notion of "school", in its Greek origins as literally a place of *schole*, - a place of "**free** time" and this does not mean idle or empty time.

'Originated in the Greek world, school was not a place and time organised to reproduce social order or the life style of its elites. Disconnected from, both the oikos and polis, and hence freed from daily economic and political occupations, the school was a real place with real inner space and time, where people were exposed to real things.' (Simons and Maschelein, 2012, p.72)

"School" becomes a place and time of *suspension*.

In suspending '*economic, social, cultural, political or private time*,' school becomes a space of '*setting free*': freedom **from** societal demands, utility and convention and a freedom **to** become, as they put it, '*attentive*' to '*some-thing*'. In the time and space of the studio, that *some-thing* becomes very real- *matter becomes some-thing* as a form of knowledge to study, and a skill to practice, as '*an experience of potentiality*'.

School, they argue '*is always in part about knowledge for the sake of knowledge, ... skills for the sake of skills, ...thought for the sake of thought..*' (Ibid.,pp.73-4)

This is not to revive a notion of school as an ivory tower removed from the world, but rather as a space for fostering a quality of *attentiveness* to experience, and for equipping us with the knowledge and skills to immerse ourselves deeply in *some-thing*: a field of practice or a discipline. This kind of education requires sustained and reflective *time* and must be driven by a passion for that field or discipline, its particular knowledges, skills and history.

I think this idea of the studio as a space of *suspension* might also be considered as a space within which the artist seems suspended in time:

Each student's intuitive, intellectual and applied engagement in the studio with painting's history intersects the past and present and generates a future. While an art historian's perspective is driven by principles of historical scholarship, for the painter, it is as if all paintings exist in the present. We may find resonances with, and challenges to, our own concerns in works made in distant times and places.

So, in pursuing an individual studio practice in painting, we manifest our subjectivity and creative potential via the complex of perceptual, bodily and intellectual experience.

Immersion in painting's history provides entry to the ever-changing conceptions of "the work" of a work of art, changing cultural conceptions of the artist, and a sense of the value of *artwork* in the individual life, and in the broader world. And our relationship as practitioners to

the history of any discipline is not a cosy or easy one- it is a very *testing* thing- serving as a vital context for our own critical reflection.

When artists feel the pressure to conform to a prescribed orthodoxy, radical opposition can take surprising forms. In the 1970s, during the savage repression of the Cultural Revolution in China, when artists were forced to serve the regime by producing communist propaganda, there sprung up an underground band of painters who called themselves Wuming or the No-Name group. These young urban painters who had been sent down to work as labourers in the fields or factories secretly equipped themselves with small portable painting kits and in their limited time off-work headed for their local parks to paint forbidden subjects. Working on a small scale and in precarious circumstances, they drew on two traditions seen as enemies of official art: the Chinese brush painting school of the literati and Western modernism.

Aihe Wang, a member of this group, in 2014 published a vivid personal account of their lives and work as '*a rebellion of the heart*' against the state's '*engineering of the soul*' and the brutally enforced doctrine that art should serve official politics. (Aihe Wang, 2014, p.27)

'Paintings of (broken) homes and interiors, flowers and moonlight articulate lived experiences of the revolution while silently reinventing a private refuge for the body and soul to subsist beyond state control.

...this underground art articulates private sensation and emotions using subject matter with no overt political content.' (Ibid.,p.27)

However as she says, rejecting the official doctrine that art serve government policy was itself a highly political act. Aihe Wang sees these modest-sized, intimate and informal paintings as constituting

'an alternative modern identity and subjectivity for both painter and viewer, formulating a self-conscious and self-reflective individual subjectivity.' (Ibid.,p.27)

Nor does she see the movement as a rejection of collectivity:

'In fact, private art creates an alternative form of sociality through inter-subjective communication. Both the art and the alternative modern individual it created depended on a new alternative form of community, coming into being only within the solidarity created by social being.' (Ibid., p.36)

While our social and political circumstances are far from the extreme coercion and state violence of China's cultural revolution, this example of young artists resisting *the engineering*

of the soul is a moving example of creative resistance. As Aihe Wang puts it, for these painters the individual art practice

'carved out a private space in a visual world and envisioned a shelter evading state control, where the individual could subsist in his or her body, formulate personal sensations and sentiments... in essence, an imaginary and intangible shelter for the unsheltered individual against mass society.' (Ibid., pp.35-6)

Scholar Geremie Barme cites the Wuming as “testament of the power of possibility” in the face of the seeming *impossibility* of acting in opposition to the dictates of the state.

Gielen and De Bruyne see their critique of neo-liberalism in education as *'part of a movement in art schools that is daily combatting the dominant ideology... Disobedience, they declare, is possible, desirable and pleasant- and it is a very effective pedagogical tool.'* (Gielen and De Bruyne, 2012, p.11)

It's a slightly odd translation from the Dutch, but their sentiments are very clear and for us, timely.

Some will dismiss all this as impossibly romantic, given the current political realities.

However there are also those of us who fear that in the rush to adopt *strategic* models of art education, we may risk jeopardizing that tradition of the art school as a space for fostering alternative values, for the exploration of visual and material poetics, the nuanced appreciation of *useless beauty* and for a continuing reinvention the possibilities of creative and aesthetic resistance.

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