



Convention and practice
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Representation of the origins of sophistication within practice

Those responsible for the development of sophisticated artistic practice in art and design students are keen to justify the connection between an art or design work and an artist, or designer, especially to understand how such a connection is represented in the mind of the artist or designer. Theorists suggest that one way of achieving this outcome is to find out what an artist/designer believes about their work and then try to account critically for the effect of their beliefs in their work. Despite the popularity of this approach in contemporary ethno-methodology it is important to be reminded that of every one hundred properties identified in a work only a small proportion of them may be theoretically accounted for through the intentional beliefs of the artist. Beardsley understands the properties of a work to be determined by the beholder; Goodman - as determined by entrenched convention; Danto as properties determined by the politics of the artwork; Lacan – as properties determined by the gaze; Foucault - properties determined by textual power; and Wolff – as properties determined by the socio-economic fortunes of the artist or designer.

The second way of representing the origins of sophistication within practice is through an interpretation of artists' and designers' beliefs. Considering that the significance of an artist or designer's works may be determined externally in ignorance of their motives, it remains to be interpreted as to an artist's or designer's causal relationship with their works. For example, of all the agencies held accountable for sophisticated practice, the functional effects of the artist's beliefs may be the most obscure. An artist's beliefs about their practice may be neurotically opaque (driven by concealed motives) within their reports, and need to be challenged.

The study on which this paper is based places the artist at the centre of inquiry rather than the work. It assumes that the work is relevant when considered as one among a number of causal influences and is invested with no particular privileges in the study. Although it is common to talk of an artist in terms of their work the theoretical basis for linking an artists expressed beliefs to properties of their works originates in psychoanalytic theory, clinical diagnosis, or broad-brush social interpretations. Thus, I shall argue, it is quite possible for

an artist expressing sophisticated beliefs and skills to make unsophisticated artworks or, conversely, for sophisticated artworks to be made by artists with unsophisticated beliefs.

Although this study is an ethnographically based investigation of two artists, rather than of designers, the artists who were the object of the study worked at significantly large art and design schools situated within two of Australia's major universities, both located in Sydney. Because of the collegiality of each setting, artists and designers frequently worked closely together, often teaching the same cohort of students. The investigation could thus take into account the attitudes, values and beliefs about the practice of design expounded by designer academics, albeit in a tangential way. Never the less, this study makes no claim to authentically represent the values and beliefs about the practice of design held by designer academics, rather, the study focuses on artists.

This study proposed to investigate the relation between artistic practice and teaching practice. Based on a previous investigation into the unconfirmed prediction, embedded in the influential North American curriculum movement, Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), that the sophisticated practice of artists conforms to an integrated and disciplined pattern, this study hypothesises that artists who teach find few pedagogical resources within their own practice.

Despite the symbolic capital invested in the belief that it is artistic practice that informs their pedagogy, and despite the apparent tendency for artists to reproduce stylistic character in their apprentices, this investigation seeks to dis-confirm the view that the instructional relations between student and artist teacher were driven by art educational convention rather than the formalised reproduction of their own practical artistic experience.

Emergent findings and the focus of the inquiry

The study investigated a number, no more than four, artists with a mature practice who also teach art in tertiary institutions. Data emergent from a previous study into artistic practice was used to inform the structure and content of the investigation (Carroll 1998). Findings emergent from this study informed the study and provide the focus of the inquiry.

It emerged from the previous investigation, for instance, that for one male respondent, identified as 'B', knowledge about art theory was an unnecessary condition for being an artist, but that he, nevertheless, saw it as merely an advantage for him, especially in relation to his role as a teacher of painting at a tertiary level. Even though he claimed to believe that it is important for artists to teach because of the way in which they were able to "pass on the practice of art to the next generation of artists", it was not necessarily his own practice of art to which he was referring. Rather, his teaching practice tended to bear out his beliefs about teaching art and not his beliefs about art. During his period as Head of the Department (HOD) of Painting at an art school, this artist developed a reputation amongst staff and students for his rigorous approach to the structuring of the curriculum, in respect of the inclusion of "fundamentals" such as colour theory and drawing skills. In justifying this approach he says, "I came from an ideas base", (meaning his background in art education), and, "I come from a more discipline oriented perspective", and "I started out (as HOD) by simply defining the discipline".

In a second respondent's art teaching practice, triangulation of data revealed a similar tendency for her not to allow her own values about art to impinge upon her teaching about art. For example, the connotative meaning of "teaching in an art school", emergent as a folk term, meant for her variously: - a way for an artist to maintain dialogue with the field (a

socio/cultural motive); a difficulty for an artist, since teaching absorbs one's own creativity, (a subjective/ psychological motive); a benefit for an artist because it affords ready access to resources (a pragmatic motive); and, as a way for an artist to gain recognition by the field (a kind of socio/cultural legitimisation). This artist/teacher respondent did not even mention her artistic values, nor the way in which teaching might enable her to "pass on" these values to her students.

This is not to say that her artistic values do not in actuality impinge upon her teaching; what it does say is that there are many other reality manifolds operating in this particular instance, and that these equally shape her motives and beliefs in relation to this included/cover term. Her beliefs, as well, are veiled, and are therefore not able to shape her explicit intentions as revealed in her responses. Significantly, the role of each of the domains of art, such as the critical and the making, and their interrelatedness, for example, does not even warrant discussion by her as a consequential issue in this context.

The politics of influence and the practice of artists

In an interesting illustration of the politics of influence underpinning the practice of artist/teacher respondent B, it emerged that the folk belief - "art teaching is an acceptable/justifiable occupation for an artist" - had a number of connotative meanings, each meaning serving as a kind of self-legitimation of his role as an artist and teacher. These included; "it is the occupation followed by many well-respected artists"(artists whom I admire, and aspire to emulate their achievement); "(it is) an important way for the practice of art to be passed on to the next generation of artists" (the artist in the role of sage); "(it is a way of) achieving social repositioning for acceptance into the artworld from a middle class origin". In response to a similar question about the importance of engaging in dialogue with other artists, and the role that teaching in an art school fulfils in this regard, the emergent beliefs of this artist similarly fulfil a kind of self-legitimation of his role as a teacher. For him, art teaching" as a folk term, connotes; "a way for me to reinforce my ideas about art"; "important for my development as an artist"; an opportunity for me to develop friendships"; and, "a way for me to develop an identity in the world of art".

Of relevance to the investigation is that foremost among the kinds of artistic lives reported on by the artist respondents was their "life" as artist educators. Their narratives about their lives as teachers were partitioned from their discourses about their lives as artists and about their art works. Rather than reflecting on the values and meanings which underpin their own artistic practice in their reports about art teaching, they tended to fall back onto an almost romantic rhetoric about the nature of creativity, or, on other occasions, they looked to externally derived competency-based outcomes as a way of determining how they should teach art. For example, when one of the artists, 'A', was asked to consider the ways in which an artist might develop and maintain a sense of direction in her work, she immediately related her answer to the kind of advice she would give her students concerning the notion of "justification". She explained that this is "why we make them talk about their work, and why we make them articulate their ideas"(Carroll 1998, Structured Interview, p.25). However, she failed to provide a coherent explanation of what she meant by "justification", suggesting that it is the act of justification, rather than what is embodied in the meaning of justification that is significant in her attitudes.

In other words, within her narrative of teaching this artist saw "justification", in respect of her teaching practice, as a way for the student to demonstrate competency in standing up in class and talking about their work. Ironically, she then goes on to claim that, for her, the work itself establishes its own direction and that the theory of art practice, of the kind that she might teach her students, is difficult to articulate. She said; "the work itself has to lead

you on... I don't feel comfortable with defining the theory of the what I want to make work in, and then making the work follow the theory" (Carroll 1998, Structured Interview, p.27 Cover Term: "Her Theory of Mind is Subjective"). This sets up a kind of "tail chasing" exercise, making it understandably difficult for her to pass onto her students a coherent explanation of notions such as "justification", even though she claims that this is an important concept for them to grasp. The triangulation of data (utilising semantically analysed texts of unstructured and structured interviews, unobtrusive observation, scrutiny of documentary sources, etc.) from which these views were taken, revealed that for this artist the included/cover term "sense of direction" incorporates connotative meanings such as "something that underpins my philosophy of teaching", and "(teaching) seriously affects my own sense of direction because I am continuously giving out (to my students)", and "(it is) a work ethic"(SI, p.21,23,31).

Deep narratives and the shaping of artistic lives

The stories within these artists' reports, as Renato Rosaldo (1993) predicts they shall, embody compelling motives, strong feelings, vague aspirations, clear intentions, and well-defined goals (p.129). The deep narratives disclosed in the triangulated reports of the respondents actually shape the events of their artistic lives. These narratives emerge as strategies for the conduct of their professional practices and are not merely a passive description or interpretation of what the respondents have already done. There is little evidence, for example, that they confused their ethical "lives" as teacher with their lives as artists for the simple reason, this author believes, that they both intuitively sense how the uncertainties of the latter would overwhelm and immobilise the former. Their implicit separation of the two categories demands respect.

While one of the artists applies many of the art making activities that she uses as an artist with her students, her concept of the way these two activities were performed by herself and her students is not differentiated by degrees of sophistication on the same continuum. Rather, these activities were conceived under two qualitatively different discourses which were used by her for different intentions and different goals. Thus it is not inconsistent for this artist to ask students to deliver an oral defence of their art making practice since, for her, art education and professional practice were about categorically different kinds of activity. A "narrative analysis" of the kind, predicted by Rosaldo and others, quickly reveals that the reality manifold of human experience has many layers which are constantly changing in terms of settings, circumstances, episodes, time, and roles.

What is a sophisticated artist and what is the function of a sophisticated artist in the resolution of valued art works?

Two ways of representing the sophistication of artistic practice are the "artist" as agency, that is, the work represented as a function of sophisticated artistic practice. Versus the "art work" as agency, that is, artistic practice as a function of the representation of sophisticated art works. The former infers "sophistication" from the practices of the artist, the latter infers the "sophistication" from the artwork.

What is a sophisticated artist and what is the function of a sophisticated artist (the causal agencies) in the resolution of valued art works? This question needs to be asked of a visual arts or design curriculum, since, if an art or design student is to represent the understandings and competencies of a sophisticated artist or designer as an end state in their tertiary art and design education, then doubt arises as to the model that best characterises the sophisticated properties one might prefer to represent (excluding the negative connotation of "sophisticated" as "affected" and "shallow"). In addition, if sophisticated artistic abilities were a causal agency, in the production of sophisticated

outcomes of artistic practice, then what are these abilities and how should they be inculcated in tertiary art curricula?

Those responsible for the development of sophisticated artistic practice in art students are keen to justify the connection between an artwork and an artist, especially to understand how such a connection is represented in the mind of the artist. Theorists suggest that one way of achieving this outcome is to find out what an artist believes about their work and then try to account for the functional limits of the effect of their beliefs in relation to their work. Despite the popularity of this approach in contemporary ethnomethodology it is important to be reminded that of every one hundred properties identified in a work only a small proportion of them may be theoretically accounted for through the intentional beliefs of the artist. (For Monroe Beardsley - properties of an art work were determined by the beholder; Nelson Goodman - properties determined by entrenched convention; Arthur Danto - properties determined by the politics of the artworld; Jacques Lacan - properties determined by the gaze; Michel Foucault - properties determined by textual power; Janet Wolff - properties determined by the socio-economic fortunes of the artist).

An artist's beliefs about their practice may be neurotically opaque, that is, driven by concealed motives within their reports, and need to be challenged. This realisation is missing from the design of many studies. Thus, considering that the significance of an artist's works may be determined externally in ignorance of their motives, it remains to be interpreted as to an artist's causal relationship with their works. For example, of all the agencies held accountable for sophisticated practice, the functional effects of the artist's beliefs may be the most obscure and the least reliably reported by the artist themselves. This study places the artist at the centre of inquiry rather than the work, since the artwork is only relevant as one among a number of causal influences and is invested with no particular privilege in the study. Although it is common to talk of an artist in terms of their work the theoretical basis for linking motives and properties to works is confined to psychoanalytic theory and clinical diagnosis, or to broad-brush social interpretations. (Lacan 1977, Berger 1973) Otherwise the properties of art works, including their idiosyncrasies of style, tend to supervene on artistic practice. (Brown 1989)

As it has been stated above, it is quite possible for an artist with sophisticated beliefs, dispositions or skills to make unsophisticated artworks or, conversely, for sophisticated artworks to be made by an artist with unsophisticated beliefs, dispositions or skills.

Because of the pervasiveness of outcomes based assessment and the shift towards standards and frameworks as benchmarks for assessment, occurring in the tertiary setting in Australia and internationally, it is beneficial to uncover the complex ways in which artist/teachers define the criteria they apply to both shape the content of the curriculum they deliver and which they use to assess student achievement. The link between these ways and the occluded motives that subtend their practice are, as demonstrated in this study, by no means clear.

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