

An investigation of the relation between artistic practice, teaching practice and research in universities.

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## In The Lives of The Artists, Vasari writes;

I have tried as far as I could to imitate the methods of the great historians. I have endeavoured to only record what the artists have done but also to distinguish between the good, the better and the best, and to note with some care the methods, manners, styles, behaviour, and ideas of the painters and sculptors;... It is certainly true that some men become artists by diligent application and others by study; some by imitation, some by knowledge of the sciences (which are all useful aids to art) and some by combining all or most of these things... I have tried as well as I know how to help people who cannot find out for themselves to understand the sources and origins of various styles, and the reasons for the improvement or decline of the arts at various times and among different artists. (Vasari, 1991, p84).

Remarkably, Vasari's views, written over 500 years ago, could act as a metaphor for many of the dilemmas that face contemporary university-based art and design schools, research funding bodies and the art world at large. What is it that artists do and how can we distinguish between the good, the better and the best? The intelligible representation of artistic practice has dominated the agenda of many 'stake-holding' organisations in the visual arts industries for decades. These organisations range from those located within the art world and art education to other seemingly remote and unaffected groups, such as occurred in a recent case in Australia where the Taxation Office (ATO) attempted to define the characteristics of artistic practice so that artists could be taxed at an appropriate level. Nowadays, artists are primarily appointed as university teachers, mentors and supervisors on the basis of their distinguished practice as artists, and, increasingly, on their ability to attract research funding from government appointed funding bodies, such as The Australian Research Council (ARC); 'track record' becomes both a means and an end in itself. In both of these instances the merit and worth of the applicant is determined by the critical assessment by peers, based on the reputation of the artist and, in the case of the ARC, their ability to put forward a proposition in terms that are recognised as being the

equivalent to mainstream academic research. However there is a risk that the reputation of the artist/teacher, artist/researcher could be based on the rhetoric of prevailing trends rather than by taking into account a range of 'other sources and origins'. As Vasari was at pains to point out, he not only recorded what the artist had done (embedded in the work that he made), but he "noted with care the methods, manners, styles, behaviours, and ideas..." of the artist he was investigating. In effect, Vasari triangulated the data that he collected from a range of sources to arrive at a view concerning the merit and worth of the artist.

The research findings on which this paper is based reveal that where artists are trained makes a difference in the forms and meanings about art that they ultimately produce, and affects their subsequent teaching and research endeavours, if they follow that career path. The professionalisation of artists often occurs in the context of the university setting, and the impact of university teaching in shaping contemporary art practice is widely acknowledged. The artist is both the object and the subject of training at university level; what university art and design faculties make is artists – the identity of the artist is what is constructed in and by the and through the discipline. Understandings of what it is that constitutes artistic practice therefore needs to be based upon research into what it is that artists do. This research can be philosophical but it also needs to be historical/empirical since artists do different things in different times and cultures (as Vasari points out in the passage cited above). It is therefore appropriate to examine questions such as: Is there a consistency between the philosophy of artistic practice and the causes of the practices of individual artists? Does the latter have implications for the former? And does this body of information have anything to add to the concept of art educational practice and research in the visual arts at university level?

The educational curriculum in practical areas such as nursing, medicine, music, the visual arts and teaching is based on the transmission of conventional practice. The curriculum offered by contemporary faculties of art and design in universities assumes there is a conventional practice to be transmitted in the visual arts and design. In several of the models described later in this paper a typology of the behaviours that shape these practices is provided by several writers, however, they often beg the fundamental question: What is conventional practice in the visual arts? Is it what artists conventionally do, or is it the convention of art educational practices?

With the advent of ethnography as a legitimate form of research there has followed the opportunity to characterise the uniqueness of artistic practice and to join together its functional elements into a case-by-case causal network. Perhaps out of this will emerge broad ethical principles that can serve as tentative guidelines for what it is that artists do. However, the interpreted conclusions of the study on which this paper is based are pessimistic. They counter intuitively suggest that there may be little implication for art educational pedagogy emergent in the explication of artistic practice. As Carl Goldstein points out; "...can we say that we are clear about what art is and what role we expect it to play in our lives and in our society? Are we clear enough about these crucial issues to say that art should be taught in one way and one way only? (Goldstein, 1996, p.281).

An examination of the critical beliefs of two artist/teacher respondents who participated in a longitudinal ethnographic inquiry referred to above provide a well-grounded basis on which to investigate the question of what it is that artists do, and the related issue of the sites and discourses of artistic learning. The respondents to the study are code named A and B to maintain confidentiality; it is sufficient to say that A is a female university teacher of fine arts, of thirty years experience, at the higher level of promotion, whilst B has taught

for almost thirty years at another university and is at the middle level of promotion. Both A and B are practicing artists with an active history of successful exhibitions, In both cases their work is held in the collection of both State and National level public galleries. It is worth noting here that they have both revealed a reluctance to represent their work as research in ARC terms, preferring instead to rely on the notion of 'equivalences', as it applies to artist academics in Australian universities. This issue will be addressed later in this paper, especially in relation to the 1998 Research in The Creative Arts report by Dennis Strand.

The emergent, concealed beliefs of the two respondents, uncovered after the triangulation of the emergent data, reveal that many of the artistic conventions to which they adhere are not explicit within their intentional beliefs. The respondents have shown themselves in a sufficient number of areas to be susceptible to their own myths (Rosaldo, 1993). In addition, both respondents craft meta-representations of their own work that are reflected against beliefs and attitudes, many of which are concealed. Triangulation of A and B's reports about art making practice, teaching and research reveal that their comments import undisclosed motives that reflect external concerns that are asymmetrically related to their work. Thus the agenda of a "discipline", as it is represented within much of the literature pertaining to both school and university-based art teaching, is opaque within the understanding of these two artists. In other words, what respondents do as ends is uniquely skewed in relation to their means.

It has emerged that in many key areas the teaching practice of A and B is often driven by art educational conventions, or, by prevailing models of teaching and learning, rather than by the values that under-pin their own practice. An interesting example of this phenomenon is found in the area of the identification and transmission of basic skills and core knowledge from artist/teacher to student. Peter Dormer's views concerning the lack of skills and fundamental knowledge learnt by students enrolled in foundation level courses in British art schools in the 60's and 70's, is pertinent to this discussion since, as he points out, their teachers were either not versed in the requisite skills, or they had taken an ideological position against teaching them (Dormer, 1997, p.3). Dormer goes on to say that some of the crafts, including painting and sculpture, have been redefined in their content. aspirations and in how they are taught by theories of education that emphasise the importance of learning through finding out for oneself. He writes; "...in the enthusiasm for questioning rules and throwing away formulas an assumption is made that has never been justified empirically, even though it is widely held ideologically – the assumption being that rules, formulas and instruction are necessarily restrictive upon creativity" (p.220-221). Dormer's point that learning a skill is not the same as being an expert, and that being an expert in a body of art or craft knowledge means "living" that knowledge is especially pertinent to this discussion, since there is a widely held view, promulgated by many university-based artist academics and students, that the conceptual framework that underpins an artwork is of primary importance in the realisation of a work, and that one learns skills and techniques only when they are required, not for their own sake. In addition, the subjective basis of such art-making often has the status of holy writ; the view that 'it is because I say it is' denies the fundamental role of knowledge and skills in defining a discipline.

Even though Dormer acknowledges that "individualism" has a role to play in the practice of art-making, he believes that this approach must be viewed with circumspection in pedagogical settings (p.220). He believes that the role of the individual student in expressing her or himself through individual art making activities becomes paramount, at the expense of the knowledge that defines the discipline of the visual arts or crafts. Even

though the respondents to the study under review, A and B, acknowledge the fundamental role of artistic skills, knowledge and related theories in teaching and learning about art, in practice they, too, tend to defer to the concept of individualism when it comes to overseeing the work generated by their pupils; work that more often than not reflects narrow, culturally grounded interests. In this respect, A and B appear to be influenced by the 'child centred', subjective approaches to art making adopted by the field of art education in the 70's, 80's and 90's. Even the influential artist and teacher Johannes Itten, who was responsible for the Preliminary Course offered at the Bauhaus stressed the development of the "true personality of the student" (Goldstein, 1996 p.263).

The inherent ambiguities that exist in the artist-to-artist teacher relation can also be understood in the context of the impact of the university art department on artist/teachers, student/artists, art education and the art world in general; the sites and discourses of artistic learning. The pervasive effect of university teaching practice as a model for teaching and learning art at the primary (elementary) and secondary (college) levels of education works as a "top down driver" for the emergent model of the art teacher at large. In Australia, at least, most educators who teach art in secondary levels of schooling attended art schools located within universities; for example, the minimum qualification required for art teaching in NSW secondary schools is a BFA or BVA with a Graduate Diploma of Education. The minimum requirement for employment as a lecturer in art or design at most Australian universities is now an MFA, or recognition by the field as an exemplary practitioner. For example, a survey of the 2004 web page of Sydney College of The Arts, The University of Sydney reveals that of the 33 members of the academic staff, 4 possess PhD or Doctoral qualifications, 23 MFA, 4 BVA and 2 BA Honours degrees. Those people holding BFA, BVA or Diploma qualifications were either currently enrolled in MFA or Doctoral programs, were close to retirement age, or were recognized as distinguished practitioners in their field. (http://www.usyd.edu.au/sca/).

The way in which these artist/teachers represent their own values and beliefs about the practice of art, shaped during their university training, is a key issue that deserves examination. As students, artists take from their university studies attitudes and beliefs about art as a practice that are often deeply embedded in beaux-arts philosophies. Thus the construction of "professional subjectivity", the primary discourse of modernism, sits paradoxically alongside these educationally embedded beaux-arts notions of what art is. One can hypothesis that artists who teach at university art schools frequently defer to their own art educational experiences and to their formative experience of the art school when it comes to the pedagogical representation of their own artistic practice.

The influence of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus on generations of art teachers and students is also relevant, because, in insisting that art is not a profession, Gropius attempted to displace the academy and all it stood for by substituting the artist re-born as a skilled craftsman; moreover, the artist would be liberated by a new audience, a general public trained in "...a common language of visual communication" (Gropius, 1948, p.20). In other words, Gropius saw the education of the non-artist as a utopian goal. The assertion of a 'language of vision' and of teaching as 'training the eye to see' lay at the heart of this kind of curriculum model. These views continue to hold sway in Australian art educational policy, including DBAE approaches to curriculum design first introduced in the early nineteen eighties.

In Why Art Cannot be Taught, James Elkins refers to the issue of the "core curriculum" in art schools when he writes that the content of what is taught is changed as quickly as possible to reflect each change in the fashion's of the art world (Elkins, 2001, p.56). He

believes that related to this issue is the belief, founded in what Dewey called "the case of Child v. Curriculum", of whether or not the students' interests should determine the methods and content of instruction. Like Dormer, he says that the Child v. Curriculum argument is especially relevant to university art schools because teachers sometimes scramble to adjust what is taught to fit the special requirements and interests of art students. Indeed, because many students have been taught according to this belief in their secondary schooling, they expect that their interests will be similarly addressed in their university art school education. Respondent B reports in some detail about the debate that "raged" in the art school where he taught concerning the content of the 'core curriculum' and the place of so-called 'visual culture', understood in this context as the cultural milieu of the art student. Elkins writes that studio art taught in most universities in the US is "astonishingly" free of interest in its essential "cultural heritage', or to put it in more conventional terms, of what should constitute "the canon". Instead, what constitutes "the core" vanishes "like last year's snow", depending on what is fashionable (p.61).

The critic Robert Hughes derides contemporary university art schools as being little more than crèches, "whose aim was less to transmit the difficult skills of painting and sculpture than to produce 'fulfilled' personalities (Hughes, 1993, p.11). He goes on to write; "... thanks to America's tedious obsession with the therapeutic, its art schools ...tended not to teach (such things as) the disciplined skills of drawing from the live model...because (these institutions) succumbed to the fiction that the values of the so-called academy... were hostile to 'creativity'..." (p.11).

In yet another view of what should constitute the so-called core curriculum in art schools, Howard Singerman refers to his (lack of) training as a sculptor enrolled in an MFA course when he writes: "I do not have the traditional skills of a sculptor; I cannot carve or cast or weld or model in clay...the question posed to me again and again was not how to sculpt or paint, but what to do as an artist" (my italics) (Singerman, 1991, p.4). What this implies in relation to this study is that artist academics, such as respondents A and B, can be driven by external art world and educational agendas that rarely reflect their own artistic motives and practice. B relates that his graduate and final year undergraduate students are encouraged to model their practice on that of professional artists. For example, visiting artists are invited to speak to students, discussing their practice in the shared language of the art world; in student seminars the same language is used in reports of favourite artists, where students make clear the relations and positions that are needed in plotting their own artistic practice. B points out that students are tutored in professional practice, and are required to attend art exhibition openings and other art world events, almost as staged rehearsals for their impending entry as participating artists in the art world. In other words, students learn to craft the framework of artistic lives, or what Derrida has called, after Kant, the parergon, that "...outside which is called to the inside of the inside in order to constitute it as an inside...the limit between work and the absence of work" (Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting 1987, p.63).

Both respondents A and B report that there is a tendency for artists who teach at university to be left alone to more-or-less devise their own curriculum, in the belief that their high-level professional standing as artists will, in itself, be sufficient to inform a worthwhile, authentic and enriched teaching and learning environment. Indeed, most university-based art and design faculties go out of their way to obtain the teaching services of distinguished practitioners. Besides the obvious marketing benefit that flows from having a well-known artist, craftsperson or designer connected to a university faculty, this view is predicated on the belief that the sophisticated skills and knowledge possessed by the distinguished artist academic will be enough, in itself, to ensure the delivery of a highly relevant, quality art

education, brought about almost through a process of osmosis. However, both respondents A and B, in their capacity as, respectively, Head of Department and Dean of Administration report on "disastrous" appointments of distinguished artists to teaching positions within their faculties. In these cases, the artist either reverted to teaching about art education, rather than reflecting upon their own practice, or the artist was hopelessly inarticulate and introverted thereby rendering themselves incapable of communicating even the most basic knowledge to their students. The web pages of most leading university art and design faculties stress the professional standing, as distinguished artists, of faculty members attesting to the claim that this alone will ensure a high quality education for students. The truth is that universities, in a highly competitive market, use the high professional standing of artists, unashamedly and pragmatically, as a marketing device.

Lacan portrays the agencies responsible for artistic practice as buried beneath the unconsciousness of the gaze, suggesting that the motives for what it is an artist does are concealed beneath complex representations which are asymmetrically related to the explicit processes of making (1964). Lacan's stress upon the motility of the relation between the signifier of artistic imagery and the signified of the artist's beliefs is borne out by respondent A. A significant cover term for respondent A is her "subjective theory of mind". This should not be mistaken for her possession of an explicit ontology of artistic thought, but understood as a composite and emergent notion of mind that underlies her concept of the role of the artist and artistic motivation. The artistic process for A, what she refers to as her "sense of direction", is inextricably linked to her own past works. The circularity created by the retrospective reference to her own work is enhanced by her explicit disavowal of art theory and by her rejection of any exogenous influences. Even though A speaks about becoming more "analytical" in her practice over recent years, she defines analysis as "reflection", a process whereby the (her own) "work has to lead you". Indeed she is jealous of other artists' work and avoids thinking consciously about them as much as possible. The context map of A's office reveals that she has posted a number of 'favoured' postcard images which carefully avoid overt similarities to her current work in medium, style or content. Her underlying prompt is not explicit theory or critique, but regret and anxiety in which dilemmas posed by reliance upon the art work and lack of "determination" to do the works, turn the artistic process, for her into a threatening and uncertain activity. In the Lacanian sense her own works and her ideology of subjectivity have become the objects of her desire. Her works serve as a way of affirming herself as an artist, and her subjectivity serves as a way of allaying the anxiety created by the patriarchal threat of competing with the work of others (the critical approbation of the art world which Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) would approve as the mature or sophisticated pathway to the satisfaction of desire).

A's attitude to art making lends credence to Richard Wollheim's suggestion that there may be no definitive answers to some questions about art, especially since the questions themselves are always changing (Wollheim, 1975). To reinforce this point, Singerman's views that; "most artists are not self-made but graduated...versed in the methodologies of contemporary art..." (Singerman, 1999, p.157), and who are not knowledgeful "across each of the domains" of art, are pertinent. Singerman believes that the artist, rather than being a "knowledgeful" individual, whose sophisticated level of understanding is primarily governed by her or his ability to recognise and apply understandings and concepts across and within each of the domains of art, is more likely to be driven by market oeuvres. He writes of the emergence of "simulated art worlds", where the graduated artist is able to indulge her or his practice, subsidized by university run galleries and spaces. He refers to the gallery owner and critic Mercedes Matter who castigates art schools for teaching the

art world, in lieu of art (p.41). Both A and B report that tensions that have arisen in their respective faculties about the relative "loading" or relationship between conceptual frameworks, acquisition of knowledge and skills, theoretical knowledge and professional practice in the curriculum, especially at the foundation level of study.

In the Kettering program, an influential North American visual arts curriculum development project, Elliott Eisner included artists as members of the development team in the belief that their inclusion would lend a certain kind of philosophic and empirical truth to the identification of concepts and principles pertaining to the domain of art making. The responses of A and B in this study suggests that their inclusion, as artists, on curriculum writing projects would not lend perspicacity to their own practice nor provide a generalised and coherent model for others. A and B are not necessarily privileged when it comes to the representation of the motives which govern their own artistic practice, the practice of other artists nor the nominal concept of practice itself. For respondent B, the connotative meaning of "my work practice as a function of my beliefs about art" included seemingly prosaic connotations, such as: "a genetically pre-disposed approach to working (for me)", sitting beside a more abstruse connotation such as "an authentic way for me to represent my fundamental values and beliefs about art". Juxtaposed against these are dissimilar connotative meanings such as "(it is) the only way for me to work comfortably as an artist", "(it is) a way for me to represent my romantic pre-occupation with images", and, "(it is) a way for me to re-visit painting conventions of the past". The complexity and vicissitudes of these beliefs suggest that it would be a futile task for the curriculum writer to appropriate any or all of these statements as a basis for providing a representative model for this aspect of artistic practice. We sense that B 's cover terms lack a principled insight into how his beliefs actually engage with what he does. There is no explicit account forthcoming from B.

A and B's incorporation of their beliefs into their practice shows how partitioning off the critical function of the making process from the sub-discipline of critical practice, despite concerns for interdisciplinary relationships, is a mechanistic misrepresentation of sophisticated artistic process. What sophisticated artists like A and B actually do in the details of their practice may be indistinguishable from what sophisticated dentists or lawyers do were it not for the intervention of these artist's ways of representing such practices 'as art', as Goodman is at pains to point out (1976)

The emergent beliefs of A and B reveal the way in which the social identities of individuals can occupy contradictory and shifting locations and by so doing alter the settings of what is construed as naive or sophisticated. Giroux (1993) refers to the "situated nature of knowledge, the partiality of all knowledge claims, the intermediacy of history, and the shifting, multiple and often contradictory nature of identity."(p. 26). Rosaldo (1993) believes that human cultures, such as the culture of B as a teacher of art, are neither necessarily coherent nor always homogeneous, and that our ordinary lives are "criss-crossed by border zones, pockets and eruptions of all kinds" (p.207). In the case of B's attitudes to art teaching and the critical appraisal of his work, in other words, his "life world" as an artist and teacher, it is clear that complex processes of social action involving his history, language and actions are operative.

Taken in isolation, the connotative beliefs of these artists might appear to be an authentic representation of the motives that drive their practice, both as artists and teachers. After all, these words and phrases are a verbatim account emergent from the transcript of interviews and observations. However, when the same responses are matched against their differing references in which they are embedded, their 'folk' meanings vary

accordingly. Whilst some connotations are intentional, others may be neurotic/subjective, and others may be cultural. The critical interpretation of these "meanings" only emerges through analysis. Thus meanings are not verifiable explicitly by the respondent, since, being emergent, they function as the cause of A and B's beliefs, and are therefore hidden from them. It is probable that their accounts of artistic practice, proffered as a contribution to a curriculum writing project for example, would be shaped by the very circumstances of the project itself, since, as this study has attempted to reveal, the representation of their beliefs are partly dependent on the context in which they are disclosed.

Ironically, as in the case of B, the definition of artistic is very often informed by the discourse of education and art education, rather than by the critical discourse of art. Attempts to translate characteristics of artistic practice into a discourse which inform curriculum are therefore contentious if modelled on the nature of practice emergent in artists such as A and B. The sophistication of artistic practice is often represented in the teleology of educational outcomes that begs the question of the intervening agencies in the process by which these outcomes are achieved. It is an ethical question as to whether it is desirable to provide a definitive model of what constitutes artistic practice, and an empirical question as to whether artistic agency is dictated by ends.

Despite the entrenched belief that it is their artistic practice that informs their pedagogy, the apparent tendency for artists to 'unintentionally' reproduce their own characteristic style in the work of their student/apprentices, and the symbolic capital invested in the concept of the artist as teacher, the evidence that the instructional relations between student and artist teacher can be driven by art educational convention rather than by the formalised reproduction of the artist's own practical experiences must be taken seriously.

The way in which these artist/teachers represent their own values and beliefs about the practice of art, shaped during their university training, is a key issue that also deserves examination. As students, artists take from their university studies attitudes and beliefs about art as a practice that are often deeply embedded in beaux-arts philosophies. Thus the construction of "professional subjectivity", the primary discourse of modernism, sits paradoxically alongside these educationally embedded beaux-arts notions of what art is. This paper has sought to explore the hypothesis that artists who teach at university art schools frequently defer to their own art educational experiences and to their formative experience of the art school when it comes to the pedagogical representation of their own artistic practice. It is this empirical question that the study on which this paper is based sought to investigate.

The issue of the relation between artistic practice and research, as it relates to the two respondents referred to previously, is equally contentious. Respondents A and B revealed an open hostility towards such issues as ARC funding guidelines and its relationship to what they did as artist practitioners. However, their hostility appears to be unfounded because, as Dennis Strand points out, "Academics in the arts are expected, as part of their professional obligations, to maintain and develop their expertise and professional standing. Apart from their capacity to teach and to communicate, they are hired by the university because of their reputation as highly competent and/or experienced practitioners in their field...(there is an expectation)...(that)...the individual (will) maintain this practice at a high level and to produce original work" (Strand, 1999, p. xiv). Both A and B amply meet this criteria, indeed, in 2005 B was awarded a A\$60,000 prize for painting, one of the richest prizes available for painters in Australia. Strand's report went on to recommend that universities themselves and major funding bodies for universities, such as the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) should adopt the

notion of research equivalence as an appropriate and valid concept for recognition of research-based practice in the creative arts, and incorporate this into their processes for allocating research funds. This recommendation has been widely adopted by universities and DEST to the extent that the practice of artist/academics is now recognised as equivalent to publications for the purpose of determining the research quantum of institutions. Even though artist/academics cannot receive ARC funding for the production of artworks, they can receive funding for research into aspects of their artistic practice.

Never the less, A and B maintain a level of deep hostility towards the ARC, believing that their artistic practice should be funded for its own sake, and that they should not be forced into finding ways of "mis-representing" their artwork as research. Paradoxically, this is despite the fact that artist/teachers can apply for funding from the Australia Council for the Arts to support their practice as distinguished artists, as, indeed, both A and B have successfully done in the past. The fact that the artistic practice of both A and B is grounded in what could be categorised as 'traditional' approaches (painting and printmaking, respectively), and that they are older and generally more conservative than their younger colleagues, could account for the level of deep hostility with which they view contemporary notions of research as practice in universities.

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