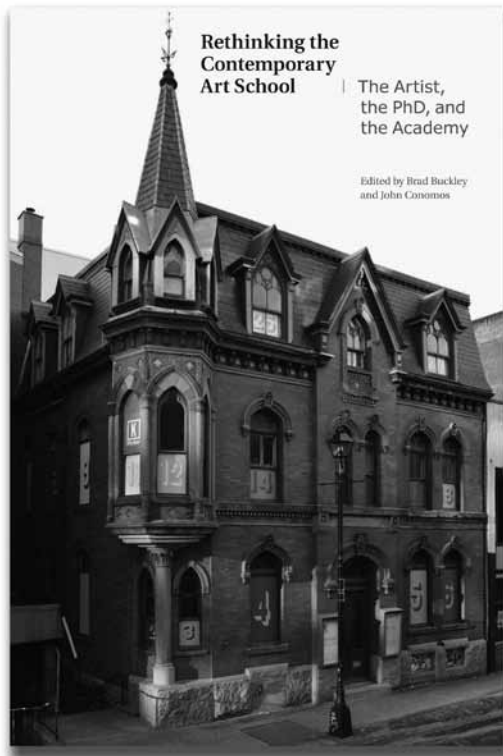


# experiencing ideas

## *contemporary art in the academy*

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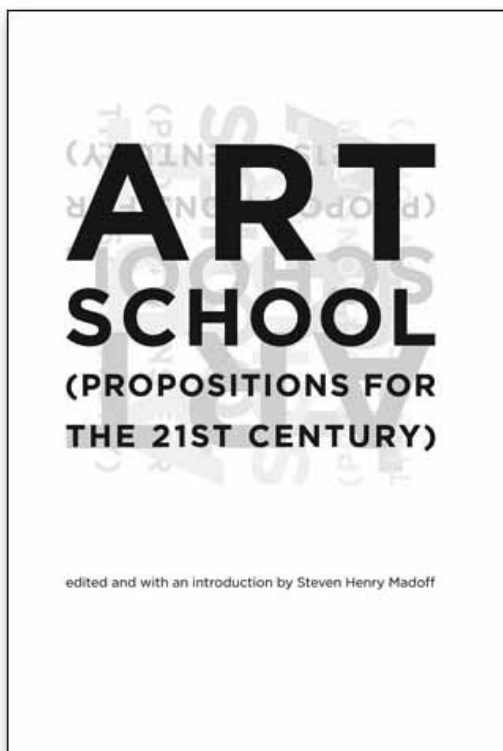


### SEAN LOWRY

Like contemporary art, art education now inhabits a range of formal and informal contexts in real, virtual and nomadic spaces. Some institutions are attempting to accommodate looser open structures and informal spaces in order to complement formal academic programs. At best, a delicate balancing act between structure and experimentation underpins the tenuous and evolving relationship between contemporary art and the academy. Beyond all the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity, student centred learning, and research driven pedagogy, conditions on the ground are typically relatively conservative, with many institutions clogged up by swelling bureaucracies and archaic pedagogies. Recently published by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artist, the PhD and the Academy* (edited by Brad Buckley and John Conomos), provides a springboard for discussing a range of problems pertaining to the often problematic relationship between contemporary art and the academy. What should the art school of the future look like? How can communication technologies be best utilised? What is an appropriate terminal degree for art education? Do artists need PhDs? If so what is the best model? What is an appropriate relationship between a studio practice and a written thesis? How might the relationship between theory and practice at an undergraduate level best prepare students for postgraduate study? How can the boundaries between disciplines be made more permeable? Will creative endeavours be forever marginalised within the research culture of the university? Together with the also recently published *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, published by MIT Press, *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, addresses the new and emerging challenges facing contemporary art education in the early twenty-first century.

Shifting between sharp critique and inspirational rhetoric, the tone set in Buckley's and Conomos' introduction, through to the various models and ideas offered by the cast of international contributors, is one of cautious optimism. As Buckley and Conomos remind us, although these are clearly not the "best of times", we nonetheless inhabit a pivotal period of transition in contemporary art education. Given that art students, as Buckley and Conomos describe them, are typically "unruly mavericks", the institutions of art education must somehow accommodate the paradox of generic individualism. As USA critic Eleanor Heartney has put it, individual expression is meaningless outside of a social context that offers "an arena in which to act".<sup>1</sup> Yet at the same time, "there is no community unless there is a collection of individuals". For Heartney, although this "tension between the demands of the individual and the demands of the collective can never be completely resolved", it is nonetheless "out of this tension that culture grows".<sup>2</sup> The challenge for contemporary art education is to somehow provide a structure for experimentation. Within a landscape of infinitely elastic production, is it possible to perform the contradictory balancing act of maintaining a critical stance, while producing a culture forever eaten by the speculative exchange of money and bureaucratic weight of our educational systems?

For some, the new professionalism witnessed across the sphere of contemporary cultural production is simply further evidence of the delusional "freedom" offered by neoliberal notions of creativity and education in service of the marketplace. Perhaps this is so. At any rate, the messages, aims, agendas and outcomes of art education are certainly contradictory. This is not necessarily a bad thing. As Su Baker reminds us in her contribution to the book, conceptualism and institutional critique speculate upon the economies and ideologies of context in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the market. It should be a fundamental aim of art education to both critique and accommodate such contradictions. Whether or not the students that we produce are finally in servitude or defiance of the machine, the contemporary art school should nonetheless facilitate a context within which they can decide for themselves. Or not. They might instead decide that there is no need to come down on either side of the contradictions that they have inherited. Contemporary art students are for the most part already accustomed to a culture of immediate access via digital networks to instant information and communication. Given this access to information, the art school can at best aim to encourage a culture of creatively and critically relating to



information. Beyond the acquisition of any specific skill or canon, these are skills potentially transposable to a range of contexts not yet encountered. In particular, learning not only how to look, but also to examine from where and how one is looking, remains an important skill transposable to life beyond art school.

Mirroring the shift toward user-generated content and virtual environments, a model of student teacher exchange that involves facilitating a “conversation” (although not new) appears to have garnered relative consensus among the contributors to *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*. As Baker explains, education in general has shifted from teacher-centred instruction and a linear one-size fits all format toward student-centred facilitation and interaction. In accordance with navigational approaches emphasised by digital communication, students are often better served by being able to browse and then take their own course pathways through a curriculum. Once a student becomes actively and critically engaged with any subject, it becomes exponentially easier for them to learn anything else. The emphasis is therefore on depth rather than type of engagement. Much of the tone in both *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School* and *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)* in some way or another either acknowledges or analogises (as is the case with Baker’s contribution) the impact of Web 2.0 and the culture of social interactivity that dominates contemporary communication. The net result is less broadcasting and more collaborative or participatory modes of production and distribution. We are now all both uploading and downloading culture. It is clear that any pedagogy that does not acknowledge and integrate this reality is unsustainable.

Although contemporary art is inherently interdisciplinary, it nonetheless remains constricted within many institutions by the legacies of disciplinary classification. As Baker explains, interdisciplinarity in contemporary art is more than a given. It is a defining feature. It is not that specialist fields don’t offer scholarly depth, but rather that distinctions based primarily upon material, technical or intellectual certainty cannot accommodate complexity. As Baker asserts, to claim otherwise is hopelessly romantic.

What should a multidisciplinary curriculum look like? For contributor Jay Coogan, the contemporary art school might now resemble a “town square” in which ideas come to meet and cross-pollinate. Contemporary creativity is epitomised by a general sympathy toward ambiguity and contradiction, a strategic understanding of symbolic communication, and an acknowledgment of the value of connectivity and juxtaposition. Transdisciplinarity in contemporary art now implies a series of bridged disciplines, each with its own specific histories, theories and methodologies, yet somehow bound by shared critical and conceptual genealogies. Although art students need access to material training, choice of medium should not be prescriptive, for it is no longer possible to defend the currency of any one material approach over another.

Contemporary art’s union with the academy was in some ways inevitable, for as Joseph Kosuth once noted; “The artist who wants to develop art beyond its painting possibilities is forced to theory and logic.”<sup>3</sup> Ever since industrialisation separated the craft of making from the philosophical task of thinking, the dichotomy between theory and practice has troubled Western thinking. It is clear that the teaching of art exclusively in terms of ‘skills training’ devalues the educational value of critical debate, discussion and difference. For some art students, a correlation between a lack of interest in theory and conceptions of art as a sensory expression of individuality remains.

The question as to what kind of skills and knowledge should be provided by an art education remains contested. Art is a loosely and somewhat consensually projected activity, which like culture itself contains no clearly definable or observable physical form. Like the idea of a nation, it exists only where people agree that it does. Art has no independent essence without being framed in relationship to life. Art is not life but is nonetheless framed in parallax with life. Although there is often no substantial difference between art and non-art objects, structural differences are accorded as a consequence of context. For Canadian philosopher David Davies, the physical model accompanying the work of art can be described as its “vehicular medium”.<sup>4</sup> The artistic act is now widely reduced to nominating this structural place of art. Unlike the stylistic permutations that defined the evolution of the visual arts within modernism, since the 1960s contemporary art has increasingly traded discipline specific categorisation for critical and conceptually defined genealogies. This idea of art is now potentially instantiated as a place, action or remediated form. This trans-disciplinary landscape has seen many ideas that find their origins in contemporary art enact a considerable influence in a range of broader contexts. It is clear that typical assessments by universities of the vocational benefits of art education do not take this into account.

In an age of ever-increasing specialisation, the effective twenty-first century art educator needs to be, as contributor Luc Courchesne stresses, somewhat of a polymath. The aim is not to accrue information, but to learn how to use it. Ideally we want to provide the opportunity for students to create artworks in any form while maintaining a level of critical engagement. Students need be encouraged, in a non-prescriptive manner, to take intuitive and intellectual risks while remaining sympathetic to the principles of open source collaborative knowledge generation.

Given the influence of post-Duchampian conceptualism, the relative weight of any one discipline, style and genre, has for the most part been flattened. Instead, an expanded idea of artistic production as the expression of a sign via any sensorial means prevails. Notwithstanding the depth of engagement availed through medium specificity this is nonetheless a pluralist landscape containing many distinct medium or discipline specificities, all overlapping in seemingly infinite transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary hybrid configurations. Yet from material production to the transmission of ideas, the one thing that seems to bind this landscape together is the use of technology. From information retrieval and communication to reproduction and manipulation, digital technology is now ubiquitous. But does this technology simply avail us faster and faster access to the same old stuff? Beyond all the rhetoric, what does it actually mean for contemporary art pedagogy? Correlation, hybridisation, collaboration and participation certainly provide the pathways to new knowledge. The important thing is clearly not which specific body of information is emphasised but rather how we relate to information.

The problem with designing curricula in the contemporary art school is that contemporary art has evolved into such widely divergent formations that it is far too fragmented to form a coherent picture. This lack of consensus paradoxically remains its consistent quality. It is clearly intellectually irresponsible to claim any single canonical model within this complex cultural landscape. Even as educators, as much as we might worry that perhaps we should know a little more about this artist or that theory, we nonetheless accept that our own artistic and academic trajectories are dominated by our past editorial choices. By facilitating a conversation, we are not simply imposing our own niche determinations. We are instead also challenging ourselves to learn. Art education is perhaps best defended, not in terms of this or that discrete body of knowledge, but as training in a mode of potentially transposable critical thinking. Theory can provide an understanding from which practice emanates and practice can provide form or action from which theory extrapolates. Although art is theoretical in its philosophical structure, it is clearly a mistake to discount forms of thinking that develop through the speculative practice making and doing. Art education should be capable of accommodating projections of art as a philosophical vehicle, while also acknowledging its concrete nature and historical particularities. Ultimately, this involves balancing an emphasis on social agency with the material concerns of the “vehicular medium” of choice.

How does the relationship between the expanded expression of a sign via any sensorial means and the rigour of scholarly research play out in dematerialised or post-studio practices? For British philosopher Elizabeth Schellekens, even conceptual artists “instantiate” an idea by turning a theoretical proposition into something experiential, or as Schellekens describes it, “experiencing the idea”.<sup>5</sup> With the deskilling of art following conceptualism, many artists have been re-skilled as theorists. Most advanced art practices now require an *a priori* knowledge of both art history and the specific idea being articulated. Art theory enables us to comprehend the philosophical transformation that occurs in which anything can potentially become art if it occupies the structural place of art. Since conceptualism, art has become increasingly accustomed to playing host to its own critique. Historically, artists have arguably been more successful in critiquing established conceptions of art by rejecting its organic form (in which political content is only one element among many). Yet art that is merely a perfunctory illustration of theoretical ideas still clearly negates the expressive and experiential value of the vehicular medium. Without an intellectual dimension art is reduced to craft. Without an expanded “vehicular medium”, art is reduced to a philosophical proposition. In considering why artists bother to pose philosophical questions within the context of art, Schellekens argues that by “turning art theory into art practice, conceptual artists dealing with philosophical notions and distinctions also turn the abstract into something concrete”.<sup>6</sup> The key feature that distinguishes art from craft is the importance of context. Irrespective as to whether it appears in the form of an object, a performed action, or an expanded context, art provides the vehicular medium for the expression and communication of ideas. Art education therefore needs to balance the development of a transposable awareness of the art condition against the specificities of the medium(s) or discipline(s) addressed.

Given the pace of change (and despite the stubborn resistance to change still apparent within many institutions), flexibility in curriculum development is increasingly important. Formats easily adaptable to the requirements of individual students and researchers are essential. Although contemporary art resembles the broader humanities in many ways, it nonetheless requires pedagogical contexts that do not necessarily fit within the established research culture of the broader humanities. Academic theories cannot directly explain or inform an artwork. Theory instead provides a context with which to situate an artistic practice within wider fields of contemporary and historical thinking. The artist is no longer a mythical figure in emotively fuelled overdrive. We now understand that what is supposedly welling from within us is in some way a product of space and time. Yet art that is merely an illustration of theoretical ideas is often so predetermined that nothing of the intuitive processes of creativity is allowed in. At worst, academic art education can transform artistic production into a painfully

self-conscious activity accompanied by a belief that it is somehow raised to a higher level via the ham-fisted application of a recently acquired or fashionable theoretical arsenal to an otherwise embryonic practice. The integrated studio can employ the dictum of theory into practice into theory, and conversely, practice into theory into practice. For the artist, meaning does not necessarily exist within the physical model (or vehicular medium) in and of itself, but rather within the play of difference and friction between physical elements and their broader cultural context (i.e. allegory, metaphor, metonym etc). Abstraction can further evacuate the specificities of generally intelligible meaning. Although meaning is in some sense communicated, there is also typically something that cannot be described. In considering Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius' famous claim that "art cannot be taught", perhaps it is more appropriate to say that the critical and professional contexts that surround and extend an art practice can be effectively facilitated via an academic art education.

Broadly speaking, contemporary art education continues to move from a so-called silo mentality and culture of prescriptive, top-down pedagogical models toward the aforementioned idea of a conversation or dialogue between artist students and artist educator. Yet at the same time that the educator's role has moved from broadcast delivery to knowledge facilitation, the bureaucratic monsters that typically encircle art education have moved to systematise the rhetoric of student centred learning and research driven teaching. Once again, new limitations are endlessly introduced by the need for external and institutional justification. For some, coupled with globalisation and the reach of technology, contemporary art schools have proliferated generically to mirror the fashions of the art market, spreading like rhizomes to respond to the so-called "crisis" in art education. Yet as Buckley and Conomos point out, there are still some important differences, primarily between university and non-university affiliated institutions, and between European, Anglo-Australian, Canadian and USA approaches—particularly in terms of the nature of terminal degrees. The MFA, for example, is still the terminal degree in the USA. Perhaps, as Buckley suggests, if the PhD is more widely regarded as an appropriate terminal degree for art education, it might follow that art is awarded more substantial recognition as a valid scholarly activity.

Pointing to the bureaucratic limitations of the externally determined, top-down research model typically offered within university affiliated art schools, Buckley and Conomos point to the relative autonomy of the independent art school as providing a context, in which the prerequisite flexibility needed to implement change is often more apparent. For Buckley and Conomos, the exhaustively prescriptive qualitative framework demanded by the modern university can become the enemy of the open-ended, speculative and hybrid formations presented within contemporary art production. For many complex reasons, it is often problematic to distort the parameters of advanced art in order to fit established expectations as to what constitutes research within the funding models of the modern academy. As Sydney-based artist, writer and academic Adam Geczy reminded us in an earlier issue of this publication, according to orthodox research models, an implicit idea should be made explicit.<sup>7</sup> Yet at the same time, as Geczy notes, in the case of art, what is made explicit is not necessarily clear to organised reasoning. Art unleashes contradictory forces that simultaneously confirm and critique the very idea of organised reasoning. Like Nietzsche's conception of "The Gay Science", our sense of absurdity runs far deeper than mere reason. The speculative energies of artistic endeavor are not easily bounded within the rationale of organised reasoning. It is often intuition that casts the first stone and absurdity that has the last laugh. As Geczy notes, the rigorous development, systematic documentation and analysis of theoretical propositions, historical models and production methodologies that constitutes the written thesis component of a PhD should conform to conventional research definitions.<sup>8</sup> Irrespective as to whether or not art itself constitutes research, many of the contributors to *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School* acknowledge that research is increasingly the dominant mode in which new knowledge surrounding modes of production and critique in art is developed. Perhaps it is what art academics do as teachers, or within publications such as this book that best constitutes research.

The contributors to both *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School* and *Art School* repeatedly stress that the contemporary art school should provide an environment that promotes creative thinking and open source collaborative knowledge production. Since creativity is culturally determined, it also necessitates a degree of cultural engagement and civic responsibility. Given the fluid and experimental nature of contemporary art, its pedagogy should comfortably accommodate and balance the breadth and depth of its diversity. Even so-called foundational skills should be taught with some consideration as to their historical and cultural contexts. In this sense, "how to (insert medium)" is perhaps better presented as "what is (insert medium)?" This part of the educational experience is then transposable to other contexts, often long after the foundational skill itself has been discarded. Arguably, the important part of an art education is an appreciation of the agency with which art can transform ways in which cultural issues are conceived, an understanding that art possesses an active and performative cultural function, and hopefully an ability to participate in the many ways in which art portends, creates, critiques and mobilises new cultural

formations. Following the impact of a critique of canonical art history that has been underway for half a century, the oft-heard nostalgic lament for the loss of traditional skills does not acknowledge the contemporary realities of a pluralist cultural landscape. After all, who decides which particular skills should be taught? Should we not equip students with the critical skills and thirst for learning to follow their own imaginations and find out? Why should a student painting in oils be separated from a student exploring interactive virtual performance? As Buckley and Conomos remind us (echoing Yve-Alain Bois), one cannot keep two feet within a discipline and claim any wisdom as to its broader social or philosophical relevance.

Contemporary art is still impacted by a sense of the loss of aesthetic dominance in the wake of conceptualism. Yet at the same time, its so-called anti-aesthetic dimension contains no independent dimension outside of the sphere of aesthetics. For contributors Juli Carson and Bruce Yonemoto, in re-examining the post-studio tendencies of art education since the 1980s, it is also important to retrieve some of that which was lost within conceptualism and postmodernism's assault upon modernism. For Carson and Yonemoto we are now presented with the task of balancing the history of modernist aesthetics with the cultural theories that defined poststructuralist discourse, in order to develop a pedagogy that is informed by the legacies of modernist production and aware of its blind spots. Although it is not possible to occupy the past with any authenticity, we can return to unfinished projects or reapply old ideas to new contexts.

Today's students are entering a world already containing enormously complex networks of shared information. The focus has therefore shifted from providing information to facilitating a relationship with information. Given that the social function of art is that of identifying aesthetic conventions and artifice that are inherently political and then opening them up, *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School* effectively demonstrates that once we consider contemporary art's capacity to communicate a critique of the predominant mythologies of its surrounding culture, the value of contemporary art education ultimately stands as somewhat antithetical to the utilitarian and vocational instrumentalism of an economically rationalised tertiary education system. A contemporary art education should provide a conduit for students to apprehend the world and its cultural and political parameters without being muted by the expectations of prescriptive vocational benefit. The role of the knowledge facilitator is to unsettle student preconceptions about the world and their place in it. Art educators therefore possess an opportunity to stimulate dissent within the new knowledge economy. *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artist, the PhD and the Academy* provides a testament to a time of important generational change in the institutional realm of contemporary art education. While it focuses primarily on the state and future of art in the academy, *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)* on the other hand, is perhaps slightly more weighted toward autonomous or curatorial activities in the broader art world—not that the tone inside and outside of established educational institutions is particularly distinct (for both are arguably part of the same broad institutional apparatus). A twenty-first century art education should accommodate the plurality of contemporary cultural production, encourage lateral thinking and collaboration, yet at the same time be capable of enabling a depth of engagement within individual creative direction(s). Meeting these demands requires flexibility and a balance between structure and experimentation. It should not be overly systematised, for the real value of student centered learning and research led teaching is found in the promotion of a mutating laboratory of ideas. Contemporary art education should accommodate a culture of debate, pluralism, open-source knowledge, experimentation and innovation that challenges the traditional vocational rationalism of the modern university. Art education is perhaps best defended, not in terms of this or that discrete body of knowledge, but as training in a mode of potentially transposable creative and critical thinking. As educators, our role is to give students both the means and the impetus to critically navigate our complex cultural landscapes for themselves. By emphasising a flexibility of mind applicable to a range of potential scenarios we also increase the possibility of integration within and across disciplinary boundaries. At any rate, the ivory towers have collapsed and the silos are (albeit slowly) dissolving.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Heartney, 'In Praise of Uncertainty', *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads*, Cambridge, NY: Cambridge Uni Press, 1997: 7

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Kosuth, quoted in *Frieze*, Issue 125, September 2009: 24

<sup>4</sup> David Davies, *Art as Performance*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 59

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Schellekens, 'The Aesthetic Value of Ideas', in *Philosophy & Conceptual Art*, Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens eds, Oxford, UK: Oxford Uni Press, 2009: 80-81

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*: 82

<sup>7</sup> Adam Geczy, 'Art is Not Research', *Broadsheet* 38.3, 2009: 207

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*: 209