

Evaluating the Other

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Abstract

This paper sets out a philosophical basis on which an understanding of 'the Other' may be formed thereby aiding an appreciation of the practices of Others. In an artworld with growing homogenising tendencies, both through government funding and market pressures, it is essential that academic art practices protect Otherness and heterogeneity.

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The purpose of a practice-based tertiary education changes from undergraduate to postgraduate and once again, and with a significant shift, within the structure and process of a PhD. At undergraduate level, a university education is simply to familiarise students with the norms and structures of the professional world. Its purpose is simply to acculturate incomers, a process of naturalisation to the new micro-culture. Graduates then decide what to do within this culture - to play according to the rules or to make up new rules knowingly. At postgraduate level, students attempt to further refine the rules of their individual engagement. Here they explore further theory or they pursue the commercial system. Sometimes students attempt both.

But a PhD does something else. No longer are you expected to simply fit into what exists, understanding its mechanisms and theories, playing with it. Now you must make an original contribution and this 'original contribution' must be distinct from anything done previously. By definition, not all types of art practice are doctoral theses or every artist would have a PhD. By definition, a PhD practice is distinct from any other type of professional practice. But, while true, it is highly contested. After all, wasn't originality in art debunked as a myth back in the 1980s?¹ In addition, has anyone really thought about the distinction between an 'academic practice' for want of a better word, and other practices such as those based within the art market or those based within the state funding system?

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Practice-based PhDs are a recent phenomenon. Arguably they only evolved as a consequence of an increasingly centralised government funding for Higher Education: all cultural practices now being funded - and potentially prescribed - by one source, one set of criteria. Up until the 1970s, there weren't even degrees for art practice. Being practice, not theory, working with the hands and not the head, artists in Higher Education received a certificate after 3 years instead of a degree. And there was no Masters to go on to. These came in during the 1980s. Having such a short history of academic equivalence has meant that practice-based degrees have a somewhat problematic relationship to both the definition of degree-level and its assessment.

Before university-based arts education, artists learned their trade through the studio system or entirely auto-didactically, gaining kudos for their practice via entry to various exhibitions like the Royal Academy's. (Hence the importance of anti-Academy exhibitions like those held by the impressionists and later, the early twentieth century modernist avant garde). Within the studio system, artist-students were taught by masters: people whom one emulated and, if possible, surpassed. It was appropriate, desirable even, for the master to impose his [sic] vision on his students. If students didn't like or agree with the vision, they would find a new master.

Once art practice was embraced within the university, became the subject of an academic degree, this level of subjective extension becomes inappropriate. To be defined as academic, there needs to be objective criteria for art practice and this causes us no end of problems. Both philosophically and through the experience of history, the value of art is highly contested. By the twentieth century at least, Kant's transcendental, universal aesthetics are thoroughly critiqued and deposed. And the history of the avant garde shows us that the criteria for (good) art shifts, evolves, mutates beyond all recognition for reasons too complex for consensus. How then does the academic establishment assess (good) art practices?

Before I begin to tackle this question, I digress briefly to address why this is only really a significant question at PhD level. At undergraduate level, the lay of the land professionally is mapped out. At this stage, the perhaps inappropriate imposition of 'the master' (the artist lecturer) onto the student is par for the course. The professional artworld is filled with blinkered arrogant players simply promulgating their own favoured positions. The

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student experience is verisimilitude. Why protect the student-artist from the vagaries of the artworld? At postgraduate level the artist already knows more of the world and their own position on it. They therefore make a more selective choice about the direction of their studies. They will find the master who best extends their own professional ambitions. The imposition of the master onto the student may be considered appropriate at Masters level but by PhD, it is the doctoral candidate who must be the master. The inherently problematic relationship between artist-lecturer and artist-student within the academic environment becomes untenable. Suddenly, and for the first time, it becomes absolutely imperative that the difference, the Otherness of the student, the differences between supervisor and candidate, is negotiated and as equals.

A quote from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theorist and cultural critic describes the real difficulty in appreciating, let alone negotiating, the Other. The treatise begins with a set of axioms; the first being:

‘People are different from each other’

She then goes on to state that:

It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions.²

I would add to the list the more ancient classifications of horoscopes and humours and newer inventions like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicators (MBTI). MBTI is a system of classification derived from Jungian psychoanalysis whereby all of humanity is classified into 16 types along 4 axes: extravert-introvert, sensory-intuitive, thinking-feeling, judging-perceiving. It is often used in assessing candidates for employment in large corporations and despite this, it is also useful for describing micro-cultural assumptions and biases within professional art practice and education.

The MBTI and other psychometric variations state that artists or artist types are sensing over intuitive and perceiving rather than judging (SP). (NB These are specifically defined terms within MBTI and not necessarily intuitive or ‘commonsense’ definitions). Of course, experience shows us otherwise. Even when we choose to use these perhaps spurious

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categories, artists can be found across any of the 16 types, though arguably there may be a preponderance within certain 'types'. Art practice can and does span all types of MBTI-defined preference though discourse would have it otherwise. For example both practitioners and the wider world believe that artists are generally sensitive and feeling as opposed to rational and logical. What happens then to the perception and appreciation of art practices that are rational and logical, like for example that of Hanne Darboven, or Paul Brown who works with computation intelligence and cognition? Do they necessarily become not-art or bad art? Clearly this is not the case.

Across these types of systems of classification we see a common and historical need to make sense of the fact that, as human beings, we are different - in potential, in ability, in areas of interest, in processing information and in skills, and this is even before we get to the further complicating factors of difference in background and culture. Throughout history we have invented ways of appreciating these differences. Nevertheless, as human beings, our default position is that our way is normal.

Here individual psychological development and wider Western culture intersect in prolonging this misperception. From the time we are children we must learn that our perception of the world is not the only one in existence. Our subjectivity is not the whole truth and we learn we must negotiate a path between our subjectivity and what has been termed objective reality, or the subjectivity of others. This is a developmental process and one that is hard fought. Not all adults make the developmental journey away from the 4-year old's perception that the world revolves around him.

In addition, as a whole Culture or set of Knowledges, those of us who fall within the legacy of the Classical tradition (Western Europe and its colonies) fail to appreciate difference. Philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, (1906-95) noted that (Western) knowledge, which is based on the Ancient Greek episteme, is grounded both in an assumption and in an alarming paradox. While Knowledge is understood as universal it also all stems from, and is confined to, the particularity of the Græco-European experience and tradition. In other words, the Classical legacy has bequeathed us a belief in universal values, ethics and aesthetics. Yet these values, and even the idea of value itself, is specifically Ancient Greek/European. This is the first problematic of Western culture - the universalisation of the specific onto the

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global. But it doesn't end there.

With a Knowledge based on *philia*, a system of like-ness, on the exchange of the Same with the Same comes an inherent horror of difference. There is no ethical engagement with the other as Other. The Other can not be appreciated on its own terms. Instead it is assimilated. Not permitted to be Other, it must become an extension of the Self / the Same. The horror of the Other is minimised once it becomes part of the Same.³ Examples of this type of extension can be seen clearly with Orientalism or Primitivism – where within Western culture, another culture, person or cultural artefact is not understood in its own terms but as part of what is already 'understood' or imagined of that culture.

The history of science helps us to understand the systematic imposition of the Same onto the Other through Knowledge. Astronomers, for example, are constantly shocked by new discoveries. They seem particularly susceptible to such shocks because they have a history of imposing what is 'normal' for earth, or the planets around us, onto the rest of the universe. The shock discovery of water on one of Jupiter's moon, Europa, is one such example. It was imagined that no moons can have water because our moon doesn't. Microbiologists too have had to re-write the fundamentals of their Knowledge recently. Prerequisites for life were understood as oxygen, water and light for photosynthesis universally. All life needed these ingredients. Twenty years ago it was discovered that hydrothermal vents in the deepest parts of the oceans can also sustain life; in fact a whole new set of parallel and coextensive lives. There life is sustained by oxygen, carbon dioxide and hydrogen sulfide – not light. Basic, fundamental truths had to be altered: 'true for us' is not universally true. Unlike the rest of culture, though, science is forced into an ethical engagement with the Other. It is part of its ethos.

In the Arts, instead, we have a long history of repressing the Other. In our more enlightened moments we have assimilated difference. The assimilation of anything assimilable and total rejection, or total invisibility, of anything that is not, is systematically iterated throughout culture, through museums, galleries and in education. The art and culture of white men from dominant culture (heterosexual, middle-class, Christian-atheist) from western Europe and north America still dominates our museums, galleries and publications. The skew at Tate Modern towards white men from Western Europe or North America is 85-90% of the work on display, and

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has been since the beginning. Levinas might say that unless we get a grip on the Classical paradox, get some theoretical or philosophical perspective on our singularity, and therefore the bias in our knowledge, it can't be otherwise. Our understanding of the world is skewed and inherently flawed. But he was a philosopher. He was in the business of truth. Artists, on the other hand, may or may not be.

To be broadly schematic, contemporary art practices can be divided into four (though there are of course artists with practices that overlap any or all categories). Art practices are located within the market, within the government funding system, within academia and outside all of these. The question of truth is relevant only to the latter two categories, if at all. After all, the purpose of market-based art is to serve the market - to create commodities from which profit is derived. Questions of content and form serve simply in finding a niche. Within the market system all other values are inherently subsumed to economic rationalisation.⁴ While the purpose of government funded art practices are defined by the government through the application process. The precise details of the brief may be set by the artist or curator in the application procedure but the process is designed to elicit the right type of practice in terms of Arts Council or DCMS priorities. It is then further constrained by direct performance indicators as to outcome.⁵ Therefore it is only outside both the market and the state that an art practice concerned with truth or values outside the economic or the government-prescribed may be afforded a platform.

Here I am not harking back to a Kantian transcendent universal Truth but to a practice that has at its centre a search for contingent, relative, reflexive truth, sharing with the Other and standing next to other modalities of thought. It is Deleuze and Guattari who posit that art is simply another modality of thought, a philosophical act.⁶ This may be the purpose of 'academic practices' or practice-based PhDs.

If it is true that it is only within academic practices, and specifically practice-based PhDs, that truth can be pursued in its own right, as having value that is only of itself, then above all, a culture of the Same must be dismantled and the Other recognised. Given how difficult this is, by virtue of both human development and the skew of Western culture, creating an ethical engagement with the Other is not to be presumed. It takes work. To my mind there is only one way to achieve this: to work with, to be taught by, to be managed by, the Other as *Other*. For both the supervisor and

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the doctoral candidate to recognise the process as an engagement with the Other, understanding them as Other, not simply as part of ourselves. Only then will it be an ethical engagement and one where truth can emerge. What is art / what is good art can only be judged once an ethical engagement with the Other is established.

While any academic working in any of the arts and humanities may fail to recognise the Other, recreating a culture of the Same, it is within practice-based research that academics are most susceptible. We have a history of imposing our subjectivity, both historically and in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Plus in the arts since the avant garde, we have a problematised notion of objective standards. Additionally as artists our job traditionally has been to extend our Self, imposing it onto the wider culture, creating art that may or may not have a (mass) audience. In supervising and, more importantly, in assessing doctoral practices, an ethical engagement requires great reflexivity and a greater awareness of the dangers of imposing a culture of the Same.

And this is vital because, in contemporary reality, it is only within PhD / academic practice that non-instrumentalised art practices, explorations of truth and an ethical engagement with the Other have a platform.

Footnotes

1. Krauss, R.E., *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England, MIT Press, 1986
- 2 Kosofsky Sedgwick, E., *Epistemology of the Closet*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p22
- 3 Levinas, E., *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, The Hague, London, Nijhoff, 1981
- 4 Polanyi, K., *The Great Transformation*, 1944
- 5 Munira Mirza's *Culture Vultures: Is UK arts policy damaging to the arts?* (2006), *Peer's Art for All: Their Policy and Our Culture* (2000) and Richard Hylton's *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector* (2007) all examine the role of government funding of the arts citing the mediocrity produced by government social instrumentalisation.
- 6 O'Sullivan, S., *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006