Defacement, dematerialisation and erasure: The Artist Learner and Contemporary Art Practices

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This paper explores teachers and learner’s creative activity in the context of their exposure to contemporary art practices. The starting point is the findings of a recent research project in the UK, Teaching through Contemporary Art, (TCA) in which teachers developed experimental classroom practices brought about by their direct engagement with contemporary artists. This often resulted in the instigation of socially engaged collaborative learning practices, involving unorthodox methods such as dematerialisation, defacement and erasure, making a striking contrast with the formulaic art curriculum commonly found in state schools. When contemporary creative events occurred it was frequently under the reductive constraints of regulated institutional curricular and prescribed teaching methods, and this paper explores the alternative conditions necessary for sustained, dynamic models of creative practice.

The imperative for research into new pedagogies based on contemporary art arises from their conspicuous difference to the equivalent art practices that normally occur in schools. These are characterised by a hierarchical concept of art driven by concepts of individualistic talent and genius, and the adherence to a well established and largely unquestioned canon of great artists who
work within a narrow range of aesthetic codes, normally those associated with mimetic depiction. Pedagogically these regimes rely upon an expert specialist for delivery of skills and appropriate sensibilities to a largely passive set of recipients – the learners. The ability to utilise representational systems through a specific kind of naturalistic realism is often of importance when children’s work is assessed, even if this is not explicitly stated; the progression toward this particular system is often assumed to be acquired through the ‘natural’ developmental of the child.

Many TCA encounters, on the other hand, were much closer to the sharing of ideas in an arts or science community, where the motivation is centred on the pleasure of articulating and sharing the idea or event-residue of the creative act, and the perils of failure or mistakes appears to recede. As a TCA teacher explained:

*One of the things which struck me was the significant difference between the realities of making art myself, how I go through processes and create things, I was particularly depressed at the emphasis placed on the idea of producing final pieces. As though anything was ever final [...] I decided that this would be the focus of the project: no more preparatory studies, no ‘final pieces’. This new approach could be summed up as: ‘make something, talk about it, make it again or make something else.’*

An important reason for TCA was the frequently debated idea that contemporary art practices often engage directly with social identity issues that affect children profoundly, such as gender, sexuality, race and media culture.

There has been considerable research and academic speculation on the conditions that facilitate (or prevent) such contemporary creative production in education: Arthur Hughes for instance, argues that the
concept of a planned learner response governed by predetermined learning outcomes will primarily present the learner with obstacles; Efland, Freedman and Stuhr, and Tara Page et al similarly refute many orthodox practices and instead emphasise the importance of responding to the social and political context within which learners find themselves, and bell hooks argues that acknowledging learner ‘voice’ is crucial. Even the fundamental principle of the institutional constructs of learner and teacher are cast into doubt by identity theorists such as Judith Butler whose concept of ‘performing’ identity cannot help but force a critical review of what we mean by such positioning, and Dennis Atkinson explores the contradictions inherent in assumptions of fixed, predetermined classroom identities.

Learner choice of content and procedure was much in evidence in the TCA project, but the concept of learner agency needs to be carefully distinguished from the ideologically appropriated rhetoric of ‘choice’. This has had a good airing in recent years through neoliberal discourse, which has found its way into educational theory and policy. Slovoj Zizek’s (2009) theories of ‘choice’ seem relevant here: as he argues, ‘We are forced to live as if we were free’ (quoting John Gray); in constructing this oxymoron he is making a critique of reactionary approaches to politics in the guise of ‘freedom of choice’. This ideology of choice is manifest in contradictory educational methods, a poignant example of which occurs in the common classroom practice where learners are made to ‘choose’ a ‘best’ design or text from an assemblage of samples that they have, in theory, prepared beforehand. In reality the samples have been produced by coercion, often retrospectively, and
usually impelled by the authority of the qualification system, encouraged by a teacher who is under pressure to achieve ‘good’ results as a measure of their performance. Such pedagogic fictions were rejected by TCA teachers in favour of strategies that sometimes critiqued the idea of choice itself and the underlying power relations it expressed.

Risk

Examples of risky strategies using contemporary practices were evident in several of the TCA projects, in particular when teacher Marisa created the conditions that enabled children to make choices about the method and content of their work, even where this resulted in unpalatable consequences for the institution. The pupils opted for a graffiti type project in the mode of the artist Banksy. Banksy’s work comprises political commentary through clandestine interventions into public spaces and institutions such as museums, and he employs methods such as graffiti, cartoon murals and bogus exhibits. This artist’s celebrity status in the UK, in combination with his critical posturing, has considerable allure for the students. Usually he is studied in reductive and sanitised ways, through drawn illustrations or photo reproductions in students’ sketches and design journals.

In this TCA project the students agreed through debate with their teacher Marisa (despite the reservations she expressed) to emulate Banksy’s work by authentic methods: creating critical public works by similarly clandestine means, including performances and interventions into institutional and orthodox practices, such as filmed performances such as spraying stencilled graffiti on nearby
underpass walls, and text statements on ceilings and windows. The works were rendered in such a way that they were all able to be easily removed later by their author/artists, although this would not have not apparent to the spectators – the passing public and school teachers; a competitively playful and perhaps mischievous mode of practice chosen by the pupils, given the well publicised and controversial practices of the artist. The characteristics of this project, which is more properly described as a series of interventions, illustrate the uneasy relationship between institutions, concepts of professionalism, and art.

‘Risk’ is a commonly used word in institutional policies describing practices that are thought to foster creative or imaginative thinking, and it often appears in the assessment criteria of arts subjects. Yet social and political risk, generated through the same processes of new thinking, are usually avoided; rather creative risk is often used a synonym for experimenting with unfamiliar techniques or subject matter, or at its most extreme for the declaration of mistakes. In the Banksy project, however, it meant pupils operating through methods likely to be construed as vandalism, defacement or social dissent, criticism that has been levelled at Banksy’s work itself. Challenging institutional practices to the extent that the teacher’s professionalism may be compromised, and the children might elicit institutional or public distain, is certainly very risky. However, these practices – Banksy-type interventions and performance – in the contemporary art milieu in which they are ordinarily located, might be seen as quite orthodox, and the collaboration, planning and execution of such clandestine art manoeuvres celebrated. The students were making their creative production an accurate parallel of the well-
established social interventionist art practice, but in institutional terms they were troubling the concept of creativity and artistic practice.

The Banksy project’s pedagogically unorthodox interventionist approach resonates with the artist Richard Serra’s recent remarks:

‘Everyone who makes art has to invent their own procedures... Every generation will invent their own procedures and processes for their own needs.’

This is because much contemporary art is dynamically integrated into society, as socially engaged practices. In order for artists – and learners – to make an intelligible social response they must by necessity be current and contemporary in their thinking, which brings with it social dilemmas such as teacher Marisa experienced with the Banksy-style interventions.

**Erasure**

During the TCA project teachers frequently had to contend with unexpected practices. The extent to which teachers may have to accommodate the unfamiliar through their engagement with contemporary modes of creativity may be extreme, given that the extent that the work as object, and with it the proposed learning outcome in its material form, may disappear entirely.

A literal example of this occurred through an iconoclastic learning event precipitated by an artistic encounter between myself with two-year-old grandson Sonny, which makes an interesting corollary to the project’s discoveries. Sonny, drawing on a blackboard, asked for
assistance but deferred when I begin to contribute. Even at two years old he recognised my status in a number of social hierarchies, not least that of the artist. Rather than contribute to the drawing, Sonny decided to command, offering imperatives such as ‘draw a ship’ or ‘draw a dog’. The situation, took an unexpected turn when Sonny commandeered the board rubber and started to erase the drawings. Sonny then quickened the pace and rubbed out images during the act of drawing. We were playing, in Bruner’s sense of the word: societal mimesis was occurring and the consequences for error were downplayed. The reduction of social risk, however, increased the aesthetic risk taking, and therefore the value or significance of the artistic engagement.

In this respect Sonny’s play is reminiscent of the encounter between the American artists Robert Rauschenberg and Willem de Kooning, which resulted in the work *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). In this artistic, rather Dadaist engagement, Rauschenberg made a request to erase one of de Kooning’s drawings. De Kooning, at the time a much more famous and established artist, participated by selecting a drawing that was hard to rub out (a paint and ink drawing). Rauschenberg duly spent three months making his erasure, presenting the finished piece as a new work. Sonny’s two-year-old practice of erasure, and the demise of my image making, took the form of such contemporary aesthetic play. Once completed, little discernable material trace was left of either participant’s work, making the temporal visual exchanges the most significant component of the encounter.
In many TCA instances subjectivities were exchanged: the role of the teacher emerged in the learner, reinforcing the idea of the artist-learner as well as the artist learner. This constant shifting of the role of the ‘generator of ideas’ oscillated from teacher to learner in the same way that it oscillated between Rauschenberg and de Kooning. Rauschenberg was attributed the final artwork, but this only serves to raise the question: was this work – and is any work – ever truly attributable to any single agency? Yet in a contemporary artistic sense this dichotomy is already anachronistic, since communal agency has many precedents (viz. Gilbert and George, Guerrilla girls, Singh sisters, Chapman Brothers) and the vanishing, dematerialised object has been commonplace for decades. Can art production ever escape being in some fundamental sense collaborative and experimental, and if so, is that also the condition of all institutionally produced knowledge, irrespective of the author?

References


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