Article

THE STUDIO *SANS FRONTIÈRES*: THE OPEN STUDIO AS AN ANSWER TO THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING CONTEMPORARY ART

Charles Robb

Interdisciplinarity is the overarching logic of contemporary art practice: today's art assumes a breadth of form and medium as diverse as social reality itself. In this "post-medium" context, fidelity to a specific branch of media is a matter of preference rather than an obligation fostered by the gravity of art historical conventions. This paper will discuss the challenges this openness has for the teaching of art at a tertiary level, by far the most common training ground for aspiring professional artists. Drawing upon my own experience as both a practitioner and studio lecturer, I will discuss how the "open" studio approach developed at QUT provides a highly effective alternative to the discipline-based studio in preparing students for both the professional reality and expressive potential of contemporary art practice.

Even the most superficial survey of contemporary art will reveal the complex and idiosyncratic spectrum of media deployed in the contemporary studio. A brief inspection of *Current: Contemporary Art from Australia and New Zealand*,[1] the most substantial recent survey of practice in our region, will reveal that more than 60 percent of the featured artists work in more than one medium, with more than half of these artists active across more than three. Medium, as a discrete part of art's ontology, has an increasingly tenuous relationship to the practice of contemporary art. This tendency towards interdisciplinarity, process, collaboration and contextuality can be understood as both a rejection of the rigid taxonomies of mid-century modernism and a synthesis of the forces of pluralism, technological convergence and social fluidity that increasingly define contemporary culture.[2] The complex interactions of art and culture have been the subject of much scholarship over the past 40 years. Lucy Lippard's seminal theorisation of the "dematerialisation of art" in the 1960s[3] has been elaborated upon by an array of contemporary critics. Rosalind Krauss's theory of the "post-medium condition,"[4] Nicholas Bourriaud's notions of "Altermodern" hybridity,[5] and the "a-disciplinarity" proposed by Jacques Rancière,[6] among countless other formulations, all acknowledge the highly dynamic and complex interactions that are characteristic of contemporary art practice and propose their own structures for making sense of its unwieldiness. And while there is much disagreement over the relationship between *medium* and the practice of contemporary art, it is widely agreed that the term can no longer be understood as a discrete and meaningful category.

It is natural that theorists will search for frameworks with which to make sense of contemporary art; after all, the job of the art critic is to contextualise and evaluate. As Thierry De Duve has noted in his essay "When Form Has Become Attitude – and Beyond," the restless temperament of contemporary art requires a comprehensive reappraisal of the educational models upon which almost all university art schools are based.[7] De Duve's article was published in the mid-1990s, a decade that saw major changes to visual art schools in our region, courtesy of their incorporation into a financially malnourished university sector with an increasingly vocational agenda. Despite the significant reappraisal of curriculum that has occurred as a result of these external forces, virtually all metropolitan Australian art schools continue to preserve discipline-based teaching approaches in their undergraduate degree programmes.[8]

Before I discuss how the "open" studio model forms a distinctive and appropriate alternative to this status quo, I would like to briefly summarise the character of the discipline-based structure as a way of partially understanding why it has been such an enduring pedagogical model.

THE DISCIPLINE-BASED STUDIO

Discipline-based studios define themselves according to the specifics of studio areas: for example, painting, sculpture, photography, drawing, printmaking and ceramics. There are many different structures, but the overarching organising principle revolves around specificity of skills base (that is, in sculpture studios, students explore sculptural form through workshops that revolve around technical processes – for example, casting, welding, carving and foundry). While theoretical aspects of the discipline may be addressed, the main emphasis is on *techne*, learning about a medium by practicing its craft.

As an educator, I can understand why the discipline-based structure is so common. Originally, it reflected the way in which art was organised historically, culturally and economically. Breaking art down into medium-based skills areas was highly appropriate to the medium-based nature of most modernist and pre-modernist art. But, equally important to studio pedagogy, discipline-based structures provide a structural framework with which to evaluate a work of art. The centrality of *techne* provides clear ways of evaluating performance, not merely in technical terms (for few would claim craft as a key arbiter of expression these days) but also according to the theoretical imperatives of *medium*: the ontological corpus accumulated by the discipline through history. But perhaps most significantly, the discipline foundation also provides a useful way of dealing with the complexity of art – by providing a constrained field via which experimentation can commence. Indeed, many course structures reflect this principle as students progress from externally imposed exercises in the first two years of study to more self-directed approaches in their final year. The discipline structure endures in art schools due to the convergence of historical and pedagogical factors.

However, despite such advantages, the discipline-based studio can be said to organise "studio thinking" in ways that are at odds with the complexity of contemporary studio practice. The act of arranging students according to medium/discipline imposes a tacit organising principle upon the kinds of experimental thinking that students will do. Despite the best appeals to open-endedness supplied by teachers, the structure of a studio will necessarily determine the range of forms it produces. Having previously taught in discipline-based studios, I have seen the way that *discipline* – as the term itself suggests – constrains the scope of the lateral, experimental thinking ostensibly championed by most art schools. In fact, I have come to see that the emphasis on skills-based learning, in defiance of the open-ended processes applied in contemporary art, is to convert the function of the art school from education to *conservation* – reducing the art studio to a place where a range of skills with an increasingly narrow range of applications in art or beyond are maintained for their own sake. I now believe that the logic of the discipline model transforms the art school to the very opposite of the dynamic, creative crucible it should be.

THE "OPEN" STUDIO

How then might the art school better reflect the conditions of contemporary art? How can the art school curriculum apply the interdisciplinary, process-based and collaborative logic of much contemporary art practice? One alternative to the discipline-based model is that of the "open studio" practiced at QUT. The open studio marks a significant departure from the structure of the conventional art school in a number of ways. Firstly, the open studio is non-disciplinary in its approach to art-making: students are not streamed according to medium or discipline. In preference to notions of medium, students are encouraged to engage with the more urgent issue of *practice* – that is, the way in which subjectivity and process unfold as a continuum of enquiry in the art studio. That is, students are immersed from the outset in a studio framework that prioritises the essential problem of developing and sustaining an art practice. The tendency of most discipline-based courses is to introduce

independent practice in the final year of the undergraduate degree. Independent practice is treated as an advanced competency that develops out of the sound grounding in a specific medium, to which most undergraduate attention is directed. This lack of immersion in the highly complex process of art practice may account for the fact that relatively few students proceed to independent practice directly from undergraduate studies in Australian universities.[9] The alternative that the QUT open studio proposes is to engage students in the complex challenges of independent practice from the moment they arrive on campus as first-year students.

Instead of discipline-based studio clusters or workshop areas, all students work under the same roof in a continuous network of studio spaces. While students have access to computer labs, recording equipment and workshops, their cubicle is their own "patch of turf," a nodal point in which all their interests and materials, regardless of medium, are collected together. These studio areas are surrounded by a number of satellite exhibition rooms that allow experimentation with scale and site, and provide a venue for collaboration and the documentation of works. Students inevitably work across a variety of sites – for example, the computer lab, library, workshop, home garage and installation room – the outcomes of which come together in their cubicle. The open studio is not a singular space but a network: a complex of sites in which the cubicle is the chief point of convergence.

Importantly, students are encouraged to recognise the advantages that the communal environment of the open studio provides. The lack of medium-based differentiation means that multiple art forms occur alongside one another, allowing the studios to act as genuine sites of incubation and cross-pollination as students are able to consider art-making in a variety of forms. Students are able to observe and consider the different processes and durations involved in different fields of activity and the variety of meanings that different processes elicit. This enables students to develop implicit understandings of art-making in a broad range of circumstances, an aspect of learning that is difficult to obtain in discipline-based studios.

However, this is not to say that the open studio model advocates a completely self-tailored approach to learning where "anything goes." Indeed the opposite is the case, for the success of the open approach to art-making depends on being able to provide students with frameworks for understanding studio practice, building visual literacy and developing a language with which to communicate the forms and objectives of their practice. The three-year undergraduate structure adopts a scaffolded progressive approach as follows:

FIRST YEAR: MEDIA AND SUBJECTIVITY

The vast majority of students arrive at university with a very narrow understanding of media and a very conservative view of art. One of the chief tasks of the first-year studio is that of "deprogramming" the content-driven approach to art-making fostered by the instrumentalism of most Australian secondary art classrooms and the reactionary nature of the mainstream media. In order to make the most of the course and be suitably prepared for a career as a practitioner, students need to relax their dependence on the familiar, to understand the discursive, experimental nature of art practice and to begin the process of self-examination that art-making requires. To achieve these objectives, students are required to experiment across a number of materials framed by a series of guiding tasks that revolve around the analysis of notions of subjectivity – the sense of belonging or differentiation that comprises their identity and how this is dynamic and contingent on a variety of forces.

SECOND YEAR: MATERIAL, PROCESS AND FORM

The experience of first year provides students with a growing folio of works and a broader spectrum of experiences from which their art-making can now commence. Moreover, students are now expected to be able to articulate the personal preferences and prejudices that inform their relationship to practice. This enables students to start considering the notion of practice in deeper terms – as an experiential, experimental continuum that is therefore largely process-driven. This principle of self-reflexivity is accompanied by a programme of lectures, tutorials and

critiques that analyse the formal, material and process aspects of content that occur in a work of art. In so doing, the second-year studio provides students with an apparatus for both interrogating their own works in studio, and interpreting works of art more generally. As a result, the second-year programme not only reflects the principles of visual analysis applied in history-theory units, but provides in-action case studies that deepens students' understanding of the interpretative process – a visual literacy that has application well beyond the domain of art.

THIRD YEAR: CRITICAL CONTEXTS

By the time students reach third year, they have developed a sense of the "connective tissue" that defines their practice (whether based on material, formal, processual or thematic factors) and a capacity to analyse their own work and communicate this to others. Attention then turns to notions of context, the setting of art in institutional, cultural, political and economic terms. In third year, the more rigid structures of lecture/tutorial/critique are relaxed, and a more discursive model is adopted. Group critiques take on a greater centrality than in previous years, and student works are used as case studies for engaging with the raft of issues that proceed from notions of position/location, providing entry points to the complex critical terrain of postgraduate study.

ASSESSMENT

The structure of the studio programme, by focusing on critical method and self-reflection, provides a means via which the experimental abilities of a student – his or her tolerance of "openness" – can be progressively cultivated. Of key concern through this process is providing each student with structures that compensate for the lack of qualitative measures that exist in professional practice. To enable this, students' works are assessed in relation to a "studio rationale," an exegetical document in which a student performs a visual analysis of their work. The exegesis provides a way of seeing whether students have a genuine, thorough and critical understanding of their activities and, as far as is possible, avoids issues of relativism and the "gut feel" that has historically driven the studio assessment process.

For myself, as the coordinator of the second-year studios at QUT, this has forced me to seriously scrutinise the kinds of value judgements that can be made in the face of a body of work, often incomplete and highly idiosyncratic. The process of developing lucid assessment criteria has enabled me to differentiate between value judgements about the *quality* of a work of art and the assessment of experimental method and visual literacy. Issues of quality are poorly served by summative assessment, as inevitably complex and often indefensible issues of substantiation are raised. Instead, these aspects of assessment are engaged with through the formative avenue of critique and consultation in which the speculative, discursive process of what "works" is much better suited. Creative and critical process, on the other hand, can be assessed in terms that are considerably more objective and defensible.

The four main assessment criteria I use when assessing the student's performance in the studio are as follows:

Involvement (30%): Whether the student has demonstrated a level of studio activity that reflects professional expectations. Generally, studio staff require that students devote around 24 hours per week to their practice, a "minimum" figure that balances the need for sustained studio activity with the demands placed on students by employment and other aspects of their studies.

Creative Development (30%): Whether the student is applying him or herself to the process of experimentation. In general, we expect to be continuously engaged in a developmental process: working through concurrent strands of enquiry, experimenting across material, process and form, testing ideas and adapting these based on self-evaluation.

Research and Analysis (30%): Students need to demonstrate a capacity to move beyond their intentions

to analyse the complex of meanings produced by his or her work. Students are required to prepare a "studio rationale," a paper that sets forth these ideas in a clear manner and considers the work in relation to selected relevant examples of contemporary art.

Communication (10%): The minor component of the assessment relates to the clarity of the student's use of language and documentation. Students need to observe correct academic form in their written papers through the use of suitable tone, clear expression (including grammar, punctuation and spelling) and correct referencing style. Folios are assessed via documentation alone (for example, Powerpoint, CD or DVD), not *in situ* inspection, so the quality and composition of documentation is a critical aspect of their folio.

As the above assessment criteria indicate, the exegetical component of the folio becomes a crucial aspect of evaluating students' understandings and connecting the studio process with the standard modes of academic enquiry. The exegesis thus takes the place of the discipline-based theory base, by providing external referents with which to judge student performance. Unlike discipline-based frameworks, the "studio rationale" provides an evolving critical glossary, tailored to the specifics of the student's practice. We encourage students to treat the document as a speculative one – a vehicle for deepening their engagement with practice rather than a dry "stocktake" of encoded content. The exegesis provides a lens through which the student may view his or her own work, enabling the document to function as a vital critical tool in the studio.[10] Developing communication skills also has professional benefits too, given the importance of written communication to funding and exhibition applications.

Moreover, the correlation between theory and practice inherent in the *exegetical folio* prepares students well for the conditions of postgraduate study, and QUT enjoys very strong honours and HDR progressions from its undergraduate cohorts. As Noel Frankham notes in his 2006 ACUADS conference paper, "Attitudes and Trends in Australian Art and Design Schools," [11] professional success in the art industry is largely determined by the completion of higher study. If this is the case, the exegetical approach to studio training can be said to produce a stronger likelihood of professional success.

CONCLUSION

As has been widely acknowledged by Australian university art educators, the fiscal imperatives of the contemporary university are highly disadvantageous to the conventional mode of discipline-based teaching and compel all tertiary art schools to radically rethink the way in which art is taught. In this climate, the "open" studio as practised at QUT is a highly economical model that focuses increasingly scarce art school resources in the areas most useful to creative development and professional success. In so doing, the QUT "open studio" produces graduates with the capacity to proceed to postgraduate study and establish dynamic careers in the art studio and beyond. It incorporates the complexity of contemporary art and fosters a strong sense of independence, inquisitiveness, criticality and community through a balance between structured and discursive learning.

To not provide young artists with the critical and creative skills to cope with the real world of practice is to deny art its unique role as a cultural, technological and economic form; but, more importantly, it is to deny the student access to the essential richness of art-making – its openendedness and ambiguity.

Charles Robb is a Brisbane-based artist and educator. His work has been seen in numerous group and solo exhibitions in venues that include the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, The Ian Potter Centre, NGV Australia in Melbourne, and Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art. He currently holds the position of associate lecturer in visual art in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, Brisbane.

1 *Current : Contemporary Art from Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Art & Australia (Sydney: Dott Publishing, 2008).

2 See Victoria Lynn, "Current Fragments," in ibid., 8-10.

3 Lucy R Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

4 Rosalind E Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

5 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Britain, 2009).

6 See "On Medium Specificity and Discipline Crossovers in Modern Art: Jacques Rancière Interviewed by Andrew McNamara and Toni Ross," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art*, 8:1 (2007), 99.

7 Thierry de Duve, "When Form Has Become Attitude – and Beyond," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, eds Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 19-31.

8 Based on published course information, ten of the 11 metropolitan Australian tertiary art schools observe a discipline-based studio structure: Victorian College of the Arts, RMIT, Monash University, ANU, Curtin University, University of South Australia, Sydney College of the Arts, College of Fine Arts (Sydney), University of Tasmania and Queensland College of Art (Griffith University). QUT is the only art school in this field to offer a non-discipline-based undergraduate model. (Survey conducted by author, 30 September 2009.)

9 Noel Frankham, "Attitudes and Trends in Australian Art and Design Schools," *Refereed Papers from ACUADS 2006 Conference: Thinking the Future: Art, Design and Creativity. Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University: School of Art, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Victoria,* ACUADS, 2006, 8, http://www.acuads.com.au.

10 See Barbara Bolt, "The Magic is in Handling," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett (New York: IB Tauris, 2007), 27-34.

11 Frankham, "Attitudes and Trends."