

CODA

Bridie Lonie

As Jim Tomlin's detailed history of the Dunedin School of Art indicates, art education has changed radically over the past century and a half. Yet were David Con Hutton to return to Dunedin now, he would find his thinking more in line with government policies on art education than at any time in the previous century. He would have approved of today's educational focus on vocational outcomes as consistent with the art education he set up as a form of gaining a viable way of living for women and men alike. What was, in the mid-twentieth century, a form of education for those willing to take a chance to work in a field that was generally not remunerative but formed an essential part of the cultural life of the country, is now seen again, as it was in the 1870s, as an industry in the creative arts. Would Doris Lusk and Colin McCahon have agreed with this?

Con Hutton's art school was composed of part-time classes, with some students completing a larger proportion of these, sitting exams assessed in London, and on graduating, becoming teachers, designers or architectural draftsmen. The approach suited that of Polytechnic education, and the school, in its many different forms, sat comfortably in association with programmes in the King Edward Technical College and the School of Education and then in the formal establishment of the Otago Polytechnic in 1967. At that point, the other two art schools were at the universities of Canterbury and Auckland. Design was seen as a pursuit for Polytechnics and Māori arts were taught at Wananga.

When, in the 1990s, the OECD determined that education should be treated as an economic enterprise rather than a common good, New Zealand was quick to set up art schools in almost every centre. From three schools, the number increased to what is now something in the high twenties. Inevitably, competition led to challenges for all the art schools. Rob Garrett's development of an active visitor's programme that toured international artists and art academics throughout the country was an early and significant indicator of Dunedin School of Art's ambitions for difference through networking and research.

The qualitative difference between polytechnics and universities, managed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, and the Universities, under the aegis of the Vice-Chancellor's Committee, was an important factor in such things as class size, studio facility and levels of qualifications but these differences were increasingly contested by art schools, which through their inclusion of both theory and practice bridged the two approaches to learning. Head of Art History and Theory and later Head of School Rob Garrett played a large role in the establishment of this approach with colleague Susan Ballard and others. Later Head of School Bridie Lonie currently still maintain this approach, an approach increasingly endorsed and adopted by the studio areas in the School.

Tomlin's management of the school saw its greatest consistency, stability and extension. His decision in the 1980s to re-purpose the old Normal School and develop the plant rather than create new buildings gave us the foundation of the studio facilities that we have today. During the 1990s the development of degree and postgraduate qualifications became a further marker of difference. The DSA's Master of Fine Arts programme was initiated in the late 1990s, as similar programmes were increasingly instigated across the country. The Tertiary Education Committee sought to manage this proliferation by a demarcation between vocational and research institutions of learning, hoping to corral research into the Universities. But its marker of difference, the

Performance Based Research Fund, recognizes art practice as active research. This enabled the Dunedin School of Art, under the leadership of Professor Leoni Schmidt, to demonstrate its considerable commitment to the active generation of new learning through the visual arts. With the support of the policies of the Polytechnic, the DSA was able to generate considerable financial support for its lecturers who were, unusually for an art school, retained as permanent research staff. Schmidt has extended this approach throughout the Otago Polytechnic, as a leader in research for the institution as a whole. Her approach has also led to the development of interdisciplinary research and Peter Stupples's interdisciplinary research projects have formed ongoing relationships between Otago University and Otago Polytechnic. These strategic responses to the broader governmental requirements of tertiary education have enabled the Dunedin School of Art to play in the wider fields of research as well as in the ongoing development of the creative arts in the studio disciplines it continues to teach.

At the same time, the Dunedin School of Art has retained its workshops for the use of all students, maintaining a commitment to the skill-based, embodied aspect of the visual arts. Material skills, including the digital – and contextual research and understanding, the ability to convey meaning without pre-determining the viewer's response – remain the foundational bases of the arts. The forms that the arts take in different eras and cultures vary and art schools like our own must adapt and respond. Tomorrow's artist may be someone whose thinking is embedded within new ways of responding to urban design, or new ways of forming community. Alternately, she may work with a more traditional form, offering moments of contemplation and critique. As Tomlin's history demonstrates, art schools are institutions that must be flexible in their approach to the content they teach, while they must also give the student a sense of the continuity of artistic practice. The art institution is a particularly contested site and Tomlin's history shows us how art schools have and must continue to be at the same time flexible, adaptive, retentive of their histories and resilient in the face of change.

Bridie Lonie

Head: Dunedin School of Art (2005-2009)