

## Spaces of indeterminacy: Towards a theory of praxis in visual arts pedagogy

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical perspective and reconsideration of arts practice and theory, in institutional frames of visual arts degree education. With reference to postmodern interpretative procedures of J-F. Lyotard, questions of legitimation and exclusion are examined, canonical claims of art and defining strategies of meaning addressed. In spaces of indeterminacy art is reconceptualised as discursive language in which difference may be legitimated through praxis, theory and practice working together as a continuously interactive process of inquiry in discourses of tertiary art education.

And so the anger, the pride and self-healing had to come out as Chicano art - an art that was criticised by the faculty and white students as being too political, not universal, not hard edge, not pop art, not abstract, not avantgarde, too figurative, too colorful, too folksy, too primitive, blah, blah, blah! - Carmen Lomas Garza, *Pedacito de mi corazon* (A little piece of my heart) (Bright 1995:1).

What is being spoken here, what silenced? What political disclosures oscillate in the disjunctions of the artist's voice and art academy's legitimations? Do modern discourses<sup>1</sup> of art's classification and containment affect a covert violence through a process described by J-F. Lyotard as 'silencing- or eliminating- a player from the game' (Lechte, 1994: 248).<sup>2</sup>

In his preface to Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis*, C.N. Candlin refers to *praxis* in context of Fairclough's formulations allowing practitioners

a means of describing, interpreting and explaining how their practices are discursively accomplished ... [which is] not application of some pre-set codes of principles, it is *praxis* and as such constantly re-engages theory and practice in a continuously self-informing process of inquiry (1995: ix).

This paper looks at processes of renegotiation and rethinking historical narratives of legitimation in today's tertiary art schools. It proposes a reconsideration of relationships of practice and theory in the pedagogy, 'to help students become aware of the problematic nature of knowledge and become critical of external experts whom they have come to see as "'authority" across their lives' (Hollingsworth, 1997: 490). In this paper, 'theory' is identified as interpretative procedures which engage with aspects of ideology, history and culture, in a generic sense rather than specific adherence to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. It is a term used rather loosely in art schools of

the 1990s, to include (or exclude) any of the following: critical theory, art history, art theory, design history and theory, cultural and contextual studies, literary theory and philosophy. 'Art practice' is used as in art schools of the 1990s, to include (or exclude) any range or combination of painting, sculpture, installation, ceramics, jewellery, drawing, photography, video, film, printmaking, processed image, textiles, fashion, printing, text, graphics, illustration, design, and combinations of multi-media, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, performance, time-based, digital or analogue technologies and processes.

Art schools are redefining current thinking about art and its purpose in today's considerations of 'how we give meanings to things, how thoughts and ideas become realities' (Wentworth, 1999). Questions of legitimation catapult to centre stage as inherited discourses, received attitudes of art and its history, are prised open. 'Legitimation', defined by Lyotard, 'is the process by which a legislator is authorised to promulgate such a law as a norm' (1979: 8). The question, 'who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?' (1979: 9) calls for a particular sort of response from artists and arts institutions. Joseph Kosuth (1993: 253), speaking from an artist's view point, shows that 'the discourse, when it is the choosing of how art is to be made, takes a certain form, prioritizes certain meanings.' Questions of meaning and legitimation inaugurate a new focus in the education of artist, designer, writer, art teacher, museum curator, researcher or any form of cultural protagonist in the field of visual arts and cultural production, for today's 'graduates with on-going capability for asserting leadership roles in the integrated field of art and design' (Jervis, 1995: 1).

It is time to look critically at our tertiary art programmes and the curriculum through which such questions may be addressed. At the International Society of Education Through Art (InSEA) Conference (Glasgow, 1997), British art educator Arthur Hughes made a strong case for revitalisation of philosophical and practical approaches to art education as we move towards the Millennium. His research was based in British secondary schools, but the case calls attention to the wider field of arts education. Advocating a reconceptualising of curriculum and rethinking of 'procedures and practices which cling to a comfortable and uncontentious view of art and its purposes', Hughes (1997: 1) slates art education which has become 'moribund, safe and predictable.'

In context of rethinking the project of knowledge as a political act, Canadian feminist Dorothy Smith (1987) writes that knowledge is 'the economic commodity produced by academics ... constitutive of relations of *ruling* as well as of relations of *knowing*' (Hollingsworth, 1997: 486). Hughes (1997: 13) demonstrates the need for revitalisation of art education 'at a time when the dawning era of interactive multi-media is opening for young people a world in which traditional subject boundaries are becoming utterly meaningless', and in an image-saturated world, a time when claims of meaning and judgement are made increasingly without attention to the rules upon which such meaning might be founded. In conditions of postmodernity<sup>3</sup> a play of uncertainty exists towards art as a subject in the art school context. If, as Kosuth (1993: cover) suggests, 'art begins where mere physicality ends', then the question of the subject becomes paramount in 'the linguistic nature of art propositions' and the way relationships of theory and practice may be approached in tertiary art education.

Kosuth (1993: 253) shows that tertiary art school is involved in constructing reality through the way art is taught, 'and in this sense an art school is a political institution as much as a cultural one (insofar as one can separate them to begin with).' Postmodern attitudes and art practices invite contestation of 'institutionally controlling and politically disempowering stance(s)' (Hollingsworth, 1997: 485) invested in the ways inherited knowledge is packaged and delivered. Kosuth (ibid) points out that in tertiary art schools 'the presumptions and prescriptions that are taught there are a *de facto* description of what art is', reminding us that 'when you describe art, you are also describing how meaning is produced and subjectivity is formed.'

The question of subjectivity calls for attention in the teaching of art beyond inherited institutional assumptions and presumptions that art is identifiable in formalistic and prescriptive

terms of media or style. Art as a discursive language of political, cultural, social and institutional contexts is an academic subject through which discourses of subjectivity are operating. Subjectivity is interpreted as historically contingent, 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak' (Weedon, 1987: 33). If language is the point where subjectivity is most enclosed and disclosed, and art functions like a language, then art is implicated in the formation of philosophy's speaking subject, escaping the borders or fixed frames of philosophy's knowable (material) object. Art becomes a contestable site, reframed by the postmodern, within the political economy of knowledge in the university setting.

There is a call for critical re-engagement with philosophical structures of modern discourses in art practice and theory-history. Through closer intertextual strategies of practice and theory the making of art may produce structures, rather than the artist finding or interpreting them from an outside or pre-existing *a priori* presence, (meaning known to be true in advance of experience of subject matter). When art is conceived not as a defined object to be copied and consumed it becomes like active text, in play as in production, composed of references to other texts, quotations, translations, associations (Barthes, 1979: 74-79). Art may then acknowledge rhetoric as the site of contingent knowledge, validating the critical and political, articulating difference while opening spaces for the exercise of scepticism. Contestation and conflict may herald competing narratives. Recognition may be accorded to diverse ways of speaking and giving meaning to the world. But if art educators cling to consensual canons of art as a locus of meaning and value-judgement, then marginalisation will surely follow. On consensus, Peters (1996b: 11) writes, "'Consensus" disguises the conflict among players within and between language games and, more importantly, it disguises the fact that consensus can only be established on the basis of acts of exclusion.'

With obligations of internationalism educators are implicated increasingly in challenges of cultural difference, political discourses demanding responses. Considering 'the multiple, even contradictory, identities that shape people's lives' (Stanley, 1998: 50), strategies surrounding claims of legitimisation clamour for attention as artists bring different historical and locational narratives to the institutional table of art. The historical disciplinary narratives of fine arts and art history are not the sole arbiters of meaning. Their rules, merely some of the many possible stories of art, are founded in a modern intellectual practice which has exercised the ability to, colonise people and the meanings they seek to make (1998, 49). One set of legitimating principles cannot be used to judge the other's value, and 'one side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy' (Lyotard, 1988: xi).

The art student constructs 'reality', speaking meaning through art. If 'reality' is already categorised and institutionally prescribed through inherited 'rules' of art, then articulation of *difference* may be silenced. The *theory of praxis* advocated here, acknowledges historical contingency. It frames a discursive approach to theory and practice for the artist, enabling meaning to be constructed through 'the unknowable and the indeterminate' (Lechte, 1994: 249) which in Lyotard's terms are beyond the ken of the cognitive (ibid). Meanings may be made in spaces of indeterminacy (Lyotard, 1984: 36-43), where negotiations of theory and practice oscillate in the artist's struggle of thought, paralogy (Lyotard, 1979). Through an altered enlarged photograph, 80" x 100.5", an artist speaks in and of indeterminacy: 'xxxxx What seems to be constructed here ( when you can see the surface) makes an order from the parts not yet read and the locations not yet seen' (see *Cathexis 9*, 1981, Joseph Kosuth, Lia Rumma Collection, Naples, in Kosuth, 1993: fig. 30).

Through paralogy (*para*: beside, beyond; amiss, irregular) truth claims about art may be displayed as art is made (and displayed). In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1979: 61) defines paralogy as 'a move (the importance of which is often not recognized until later) played in the pragmatics of knowledge', which Fredric Jameson (1984: xix) describes as 'a search, not for consensus, but very precisely for "instabilities", a practice of *paralogism*, in which the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine from within the very framework in which the previous "normal

science" had been conducted.' He acknowledges the site of 'struggle, conflict, the agonic' in 'the rhetoric in which all this is conveyed.'

The *theory of praxis* advocated here, rests in ground rules of *indeterminacy, paralogy*. Pondering the equation  $y = x + 1$ , the combination of two unknown variables  $y$  and  $x$  disallows a determinate solution. Language, art, thought, speak in indeterminacy, variable rules of reason proliferating. In the postmodern turn, art and theory recombine in 'the creation of the conditions for a post-aesthetic realm beyond the reach of value judgement' (Sim, 1992: 1). An example of this may be witnessed in The Turner Prize<sup>4</sup>, arguably Britain's most contentious contemporary art event. In the most recent exhibition (Tate Gallery, London, October 28 1998 to January 10 1999), Cathy de Monchaux presented work that disturbed assumed notions of categorical definition and value. Her cross-media installations included brass, leather, photographic lightboxes, enamelled and rusted steel, recycled fur, scrim, chalk and thread. The work oscillated across borders of possibility: neither painting nor sculpture while speaking of both, neither figurative nor abstract while questioning their canonical claims, not sexual yet most sexual, taut, alluring, repellent. Contemporary art defies fixity or definability, concepts of 'reality' are not matched exactly by objects. In Lyotard's (1979: 78) terms 'we have the Idea of the world ... but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it.' The artist struggles to present the unrepresentable, presenting a version of reality which may speak to its unrepresentability. Viewers are disturbed. Cathy de Monchaux's work echoes indefinability, yet critics clamour for meanings to be concretised. Speaking in and of possibility and paradox, 'They remind you of something you once saw somewhere else, as you passed it by in the street or in a dream', said Cathy de Monchaux of her work (Parkin, 1998: 6). With titles like *Wandering about in the future, looking forward to the past* (1994 Tate Gallery Collection), *Cogent shuddering* (1997), and *Fretting around on the brink of indolence* (1998) the work disturbs, disrupts, displaces consensual pre-conceptions of art, truth, beauty as neutral, stabilising forces in our intellectual and cultural landscapes.

Between genres of discourse, conflict and struggle oscillate in 'the heterogeneity of rules and the search for dissent' (Lyotard, 1979: 66). 'Dung, tears and rude bits called art' exclaimed *The Daily Telegraph* headlines, announcing Arts Correspondent Nigel Reynolds' revelations of his own received assumptions of art, reinforced by his slating attack of the exhibition: 'rude bits, smelly bits, silly bits and inevitably lots of video bits' (Reynolds, 1998: 12). Nigerian British artist Chris Ofili spoke of being black and urban. His introduction of elephant dung onto painted resined surfaces was 'not intended as an assault on painting, rather a friendly challenge and an embellishment' (Parkin, 1998: 8). But in spite of the artist's claims, public doubt persisted in *The Times* with 'Great works of art or just a pile of dung?' (Alberge, 1998) and Michael Gove's lamentations of 'the anal obsession of contemporary art' in 'Between the stools at the Turner' which relied on many lavatory and official references such as 'When the Turner Prize exhibition is not anal, it is banal' (Gove, 1998: 18). In the same article there was an assured justification of this one critic's position with his claim of incipient objectivity, 'That is not a value judgment ... merely a factual reflection of the material on display' (ibid).

By dazzle and dung, popular culture and historical reference layer their explosive humour and savage cries, to proclaim a deadly serious political voice of being black in urban Britain today, at the same time as announcing a return to painting's validity. From the funky *Adoration of Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars (Part 2)* 1998 (Warren and Victoria Miro) to the pathos of his homage to murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence, *No Woman No Cry*, the viewer cannot escape the insertion of local and particular difference in the 'world of art' at The Tate.

In seeking to mobilise a workable *theory of praxis* for the arts educator and the artist-practitioner through which *difference* is not silenced via truth claims of consensual knowledge, and public desire for determinate meaning and value, I contend that an operational dissensus and paralogy must be realised. McLaren and Giarelli (1995: 5) assert 'the concept of difference is crucial to educational practices, especially as it relates to recognizing how identity, subjectivity, and

"otherness" are shaped.' Through enhanced political engagement, rules of legitimation of art and its canonical practices may be seen then as vulnerable, contestable, open to discussion and dissensus through which the particular may speak. Through postmodern 'proliferation of forms of reason' (Peters, 1996b: 9) foundationalist consensual truth-claims about art, education and knowledge may be disclosed and debated. It behoves the contemporary art school to provide the conditions whereby such disclosures may be possible. Teaching art and theory as a series of shots from 'loaded canons'<sup>5</sup> is an exclusive curriculum approach with serious implications for art education.

In a recent article Molly Nesbit (1998: 625) sets up a dialogue between artist Marcel Duchamp and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein which draws attention to their 'play of uncertainty in which neither that which can be positively known nor the object of speculation can be endowed with any privilege in art's discourses.' She draws attention to artists' and writers' textual strategies at a time in the twentieth century when the primacy of meaning in work and text was being overturned. Nesbit's writing is symptomatic also of the demise of systematic historicising mythologies in the disciplines of fine art and art history.

In the Bachelor of Visual Arts Degree, ASA School of Art and Auckland Institute of Technology, *Aotearoa* New Zealand (1992)<sup>6</sup>, enhanced discursive theory-practice relationships were developed in the curriculum in an attempt to move towards addressing these questions. The aim was to empower practitioner research through a visual arts degree which opened new spaces of knowledge-generation appropriately responsive to the postmodern condition. To put this situation into historical perspective, with the 1990 *Education Amendment Act* institutions other than universities could confer degrees (Butterworth and Tarling, 1994). Challenge was mobilised to infiltrate academic practices inherent in the disciplinary separation of fine arts and art history in the New Zealand universities. Combining history, theory and philosophy via critical theory for the artist, and encouraging an interdisciplinary media approach in studio practice, boundaries that had been more or less taken for granted were being dismantled. Grappling with traditional philosophical and epistemological problems in the realm of art and aesthetics, a critical pedagogy was emerging in visual arts education which challenged plausibly modernist metanarratives of style and aesthetic prisms of truth in reframed epistemological sites.

## Praxis

*Greek*: doing, acting, action, practice: (a) the practice or exercise of a technical subject or art, as distinct from the theory of it (b) habitual action, accepted practice, custom. 1581 Sidney. *Apol. Poetrie* (*Arb.*) 39'For as Aristotle sayth, it is not *Gnosis*, but *Praxis* must be the fruit' (OED).

The *praxis* advocated in the contemporary art school challenges the notion of art education as 'the practice of a technical subject' as it questions 'habitual action, accepted practice' (ibid). It provides space for

a questioning process as to art's nature. [*Such inquiry*] constitutes an institutional critique because the art student then sees his or her activity as being less one of learning a craft or trade (how) but rather as one which is fundamentally philosophical (why) (Kosuth, 1993: 254).

If we turn to what *praxis* is *not* in the given meaning, we might clarify what *praxis* is. By dictionary definition *praxis* is not *gnosis*, that which is born of 'other', that which rests in uncertainty. Yet the *praxis* advocated here opens the way for uncertainty, paralogy, through which concepts may be articulated. A *praxis of paralogy* opens the way for contestation of obligation to received metanarratives. In 'Legitimation by Paralogy', Lyotard writes,

We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives - we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse ... the little narrative (*petit récit*) remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention (1979: 60).



A discourse of *praxis* situated in discourses of modernity excludes a theory of *gnosis*, identified as knowledge of spiritual mysteries, that which is unknown, 'other' to the mainstream of reason. Art and its value from Plato were constituted according to the priority of absolute forms. The realm of belief, illusion, and representation, presented as second rate, is the realm of artists and mystics (*gnosis*) occupying the sphere of shadows. With Newton and Galileo, the Enlightenment project of reason posed a shift from supernatural conventions and 'false' beliefs to a mathematical view of the universe, with *praxis* predicated in the known. The establishment of the Royal Academy in London (1768) serves to underlie the significance of art's role in the propagation of public standards and values through endorsement of classical modes of order and beauty. High value was ascribed to replicating that which we see or aspire to (or ought to, in an ideally ordered world). Esteemed painter Joshua Reynolds was elected President and Professors selected for the exact arts of Painting, Architecture, Perspective, Anatomy (Hutchison, 1968: 47). In his first discourse at the opening of the Academy (1769), Reynolds advocated 'an implicit obedience to the Rules of Art' (1968: 49-50). Supported by King George III, a metanarrative *praxis* predicated in 'the practice or exercise of a technical subject or art' (ibid) was institutionally inscribed.

In today's tertiary art school the call is not to provide an answer to what art is, but to question those 'rules' through the making of art anew. This proposition for a *theory of praxis* includes *gnosis* within *praxis*, just as difference is implicated in identity uncertainty in certainty. Reconceptualising dualistic accounts of knowledge, the reidentified *praxis* accepts sites of the unknown into itself, with all the risks this might entail. Universal goals of coherence are contested with a Derridean<sup>7</sup> 'concern to generate effects, to open up the philosophical terrain so that it might continue to be the site of creativity and invention' (Lechte, 1994: 105-109).

A reframed philosophical terrain utters a story of knowledge situated in *praxis* where meaning is constructed in contingency, a *praxis* which eschews the academy's pretensions to art's pre-determined meanings. Artist Chris Ofili 'uses every strategy at his disposal to avoid being pinned down to a particular point of view' writes Louisa Buck in *The Times Magazine* (1998: 46). Ofili's work offers no confirmation of acceptable authority of the 'normative gaze', as defined in discourses of modernity, no confirmation of the Royal Academy's prescriptive norms which

rests upon a conception of truth and knowledge governed by an ideal value-free subject engaged in observing, comparing, ordering, and measuring in order to arrive at evidence sufficient to make valid inferences, confirm speculative hypotheses, deduce error-proof conclusions, and verify truth representations of reality (West, 1996: 479).

Institutional frames of authority constituting and constituted by such discourses serve to marginalise, as evidenced by Lomas Garza. Difference situated in local and particular language is silenced via institutionalised legitimations, difference objectified as '*too political, not universal, not hard edge, not pop art, not abstract, not avant-garde, too figurative, too colorful, too folksy, too primitive, blah, blah, blah!*' (Bright, 1995: 1). What is achieved is exclusion via categorisation in modern paradigms of thought, educational practices through which certain knowledge is deemed legitimate. In such a scheme, judgement is predicated in binary divisions of art-design, practice-theory, subject-object, universal-particular, true-false, framed-unframed, measured-unruly, abstract-figurative, civilised-primitive, white-black, identity-difference, divisions which include and exclude, categorise and contain, structure and silence via ignoble contrasts. As Peter Levine (1995: 189) puts it in *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities*, 'Only by privileging one category can the modern paradigm be sustained.' Conversely, only by questioning the systematising imperatives of what students *should* learn to 'make them artists' from history's cumulative process, may rules of 'normative' reason be disturbed, disordered, deconstructed.

## The question mark

Can one guarantee a smooth passage in the navigation of a new sort of *praxis*? The sea is rough. Disturbance must be declared. Gulfs between artists' and art historians' making-of-meaning have long elicited the problematic question 'what is art?' Today's question may be, 'what is this art that I do, this language I speak?' or 'what does art do?' and 'what might art signify?' Then, might the question be added, 'what does *art education* do to enable art to signify what it might signify?'

How prescriptive are our disciplines? Is the institution there to provide answers or ask questions as to what art is? Are art schools engaged 'in legitimizing the status quo of existing forms and norms' (Kosuth, 1993: 254)? Is art's process political or apolitical? Kosuth takes us beyond the question of 'whether the *content* of an artwork is politicised or not' to consider the more important question of 'artworks that do not leave intact their conception of what art is, and by extension, what an art school should be.' Art questioning its own authority, says Kosuth, is 'a much more political act than the *symbolic* 'acting-out' of the use of political content within an artwork which, as art, does not question its own institutional presumptions' (ibid).

I contend that for art as a subject to survive with potency in the tertiary system, in this present market-driven, input-output, internationalised, visually-saturated climate, it is imperative art educators declare, demystify and deconstruct ideological constructions in discourses of art education. Realigning the priorities of teacher as knower and bearer of knowledge, Kosuth reminds us that 'the teacher of art, as a teacher and an artist, can do no more than participate with the students in asking the *questions*. This, rather than attempting to provide the *answers* as art schools traditionally do, realigns the priorities from the beginning' (Kosuth, 1993: 255). Beyond the dogma, space may be claimed for art as site of the *possible*, maintaining the *political* through which 'thought does not function as an answer but as a *question*' (Readings, 1996: 160).

Ours is an increasingly complex, image-saturated world of visual writing, reading, invention, translation, scanned by aggregated readers in undetermined spaces. Like language, art's coded signs and utterances invent and reinvent meaning through multiple contextual readings. Assumption of art's comfortable attachment to fixed or dominating referents foments in a world of local and particular differences. Our responsibility as art educators is to educate for a writing and reading of this world. Artist-writer-theorist Joseph Kosuth:

When our view of art is limited, so is our view of society. If questions aren't asked in art schools, away from the conservative heat of the art market, where then? If the political responsibility of a cultural reflexivity (*why*) is not taught along with a knowledge of the history of *how* artists have made meaning, then we are doomed to be oppressed by our traditions rather than informed by them (1993: 255).

## The terrain

The case of Garza is not isolated. Lomas Garza speaks for many New Zealand tertiary art students whose cry comes from a marginalised heart, the space of those not-yet-accepted by the institutional canon, not yet 'normalised.' Bringing together theory and practice in associative ways (as Derrida speaks of language working in associative rather than linear ways) goes some way towards providing the conditions for art's political life. New (situated) narratives may then insert their difference, giving alternative meanings to the rules of art and its history, reconfiguring subjectivity and knowledge. Lyotard writes:

a postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he [*sic*] writes, the work he [*sic*] produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done* (1979: 81).

## Art in context

What strategies are in place to ensure that art's political life may be disclosable? In the Bachelor of Visual Arts programme curriculum was devised to empower possibilities of 'speaking across' institutionally inscribed, historical divide of theory and practice, to open spaces for political thought. Courses such as *Critical Journal*, *Art in Context*, *Art as Social Process* and *Postmodernism: Art and Issues* place theory in practical sites of inquiry such as galleries, public spaces, artist's studios, cemeteries, where notions of art may be rethought while historical contingency is mapped. The aim of is to enhance a critical pedagogy through drawing sites of difference into distinction as it posits the political as site of meaning in art's discourses. In the final year, each student works towards 'a body of work' in a studio exhibition, the genre of discourse defined by the student, legitimated through the programme's assessment criteria which seeks contextual relevancy to 'the game rules.' Contingency of knowledge emerges. The programme's evaluative strategies are based upon the notion of *context*, the space in which theory and practice work together to make meaning through art. Critical analysis, selection, and questioning are determined by the student as appropriate to that context, and the results of the artists' decisions are exhibited in a final exhibition (visual) and dissertation (written or oral). The aims are that 'Contemporary Critical Theory' and 'Studio' interact discursively in *praxis*; that neither theory nor practice are reified in the idea of objectified meaning; neither operates as representation, commentator, nor derivative of the other. Each is implicated in the complex interconnections through which new 'realities' may be spoken and legitimated. 'Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for' (Lyotard, 1979: 81).

## Praxis case studies

'Theory is not something that comes from on high' (Davies, 1995: 4) and 'not defined exhaustively by the principles of verification and empiricism' (Giroux, 1995: 27). Both theory and practice are active in the political acts of knowledge-generation through art, 'both exist within a constant and shifting terrain of negotiation' (ibid). How such negotiation might work to enable the artist to speak difference into the discourses of art, is shown through a selection of artists' works and texts exhibited as degree submissions.

### One: VSG 1995

Female. New Zealand Pakeha. Her exhibition, 'Mater Dolorosa', at 'Art Station' a small artist-run downtown gallery in Dunedin, referenced concepts of subjectivity and grand narratives of the maternal. The work engaged discourses of 'motherhood', addressing biblical, social and personal histories through figurative paintings, drawings on paper, found postcards, glazed ceramic tiles, some overlaid with images of Madonna and Child. References to the 'Abject' ('concepts of polymorphous articulations' of corporeality) seeped through situated allusions to the social-ordering of motherhood (Grierson, 1995a).

The dissertation, 'Mater Dolorosa', proposed 'to offer a new way of looking at the maternal body' as it investigated 'the passage of the subject-to-be from the semiotic disposition to its symbolic positionings of identity and social relation . . . as the infant separates from the corporeality of the mother' (Grierson, 1995b). Claiming her speaking space in 'Personal Contexts' VSG writes,

I am the mother of an infant. My personal interest in Julia Kristeva's theories of the constitution of the speaking subject have developed through several years of research and artmaking on issues of corporeality and the female speaking position .... With the acceptance of these pre-signifying, polymorphous articulations (blood, tears, milk, laughter, touch) in their corporealities, we would rid the human subject of the desperate drive for control and autonomy (ibid).



Text was followed by a photographic image taken by the artist of her baby on breast, confirming her political strategies of meaning and methodology. Speaking to the historical contingency of knowledge and social expectation, VSG inserts her *difference* as artist-mother-practitioner into art's discourses through her interactive processes of practice and theory. (As a graduate VSG continues as mother-artist-practitioner, researching Kristeva and the maternal, exhibiting art, and with the birth of second daughter, the situated knowledge of 'mother' in the social order.)

## Two: JY 1997

Female. Korean. Her exhibition, an installation (Auckland Institute of Technology) was entitled *UNcomfortABLE* Facts of History COMFORT WOMEN. The viewer entered

a white room, silence; there is a 'bed' of wire springs and white paper coils sprinkled with talc; a twist of copper wire like hair hangs from the ceiling; on the far wall are rows and rows of white bandages, feathers and "blood" (Yorn, 1997a).

The exhibition catalogue speaks the artist's concerns:

"Let bygones be bygones," an old saying goes. I want to do exactly the opposite - to dig out the past truths in history and let it be known to others as well. The issue of Comfort Women has come into the light only recently, fifty years after the end of the Second World War, following the first testimony of the victim in 1991 ... Koreans accounted for 90 percent of the Comfort Women. Other young victims were taken from China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Seventy-five percent of them died of diseases acquired during the forced prostitution, and suicide ... Art can be an appropriate vehicle for telling people about such hidden facts of history. Ironically, the most notable and active artists with experience in the theme of Comfort Women come from Japan and the United States, but hardly any in Korea, although the country yielded the majority of victims ... I created a white setting with simplicity to evoke sympathy and compassion. We should remember the past so that the past wrongdoing in our history will not be repeated ... Art should not be expected to give straight answers to the viewers. It should prod them to think on their own (Yorn, 1997a).

(Through art education JY engaged social and political discourses as she spoke through her art. Viewers were drawn into political acts of omission. JY continues with postgraduate study of art and design in computer publishing.)

## Three: VG 1997

VG. Male. New Zealand Pakeha. His 'body of work', *YELLOW - CERULEAN BLUE*, exhibited in an installation room in Visual Arts studios, was one minimal painting (engaging the irony that 'a body' can be 'one'). The exhibition catalogue reads,

When I first arrived at art school I was filled with dreams of Picasso, McCahon and Duchamp, of an artistic bohemia, of an already imagined superiority to the everyday, a superiority to an imagined mainstream, supposedly degenerate culture: of course the dream fades as it becomes obvious that art has as much to do with money, survival, status and politics as anything ... Theory can be accused of reducing art, aesthetics and the like to the level of discourse, a discourse that is now at the forefront of our retinal stimulation. This is a complaint of some, but I prefer to get my hands dirty from the beginning. This can render art problematic, but this problematic has a long and glorious history so I feel compelled to continue ... I can only attempt to mark what is already known: mark the tragedy of discourse, of radical art ... I am caught in a hysterical bind, as the critique of market individualism coming from the position of artist - the ultimate individualist with avant-garde pretensions - is inherently flawed. I at least seek to acknowledge the contradictions: to render them viable, by failing to divorce art from context (Gunson, 1997).

Through artwork and text, political discourses of art are engaged and awareness of subjectivity in institutional processes is heightened. VG is engaged in postgraduate study in art and design, researching 'objects of art writing in the political economy of knowledge' (Gunson, 1998).

Each of these artists speaks through interactive relationships of theory and practice. Each invokes questions, prising open social and political spaces via art. In spaces of indeterminacy which are not contained, nominated, or given prior meaning by the institute, contextual spaces are opened by the student - not by history, the academy, teacher, assessor, nor the meta-truths of modernity about art and its meanings. Rules of legitimation are settled in genres of discourse articulated by the student. Reframed, art has shifted from 'the bed-rock of conservative aesthetics' (Burgin, 1986: 31), to signify the possible, the question mark of thought.

Each student establishes the sites of learning and formulates 'the rules of what *will have been done*' (Lyotard, 1979: 81). In each case, through doubt and dissensus, question and contestation, cultural myths are investigated, politicised in a new form of knowledge statement 'deemed worth retaining the moment it marks a difference from what is already known' (1979: 64). This *theory of praxis* is an "'open system", in which a statement becomes relevant if it "generates ideas", that is, if it generates other statements and other game rules' (ibid). By these means, the local and particular may be engaged and difference inserted in art's discourses.

This paper has shown that tertiary art school must operate not as a museum to reify culture, but as a vehicle in which consensual cultural fictions and normalising strategies of knowledge are opened to contestation and critique. The articulation of difference is crucial to art educational practices. It is beholden upon art educators to impede reification of the status quo, however it might be produced and packaged through history's consummate metaphors of meaning, or the present urge towards art's reduction to mechanistic atoms of visual information, convenient by-products of the new totalising projects of input-output education. Art education which calls attention to art as a political space enables the articulation of the social. In spaces of indeterminacy, small stories or *petit recits* (Lyotard, 1979: 60) may then be languaged and legitimated, historical contingency acknowledged. And with art reconceptualised as discursive language, difference may be legitimated through theory and practice intertwining in a new sort of *praxis*.

## Notes

1. The structure of 'modern discourse' refers to the organising principles of modern knowledge in the West, defined by Cornel West (1996) as 'the controlling metaphors, notions, categories, and norms that shape the predominant conceptions of truth and knowledge in the modern West.' Lyotard (1979: xxiii) in *The Postmodern Condition* writes, 'I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making explicit appeal to some grand narrative.' The term 'modernity' denotes the period in history corresponding to the rise of human sciences. Cornel West identifies 'Western discourses of modernity' in the context of modern racism, as 'the creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, Greek ocular metaphors, and classical and cultural ideals' (West, 1996: 477). In discourses of 'modernity', the analytical categories for the definition of art depend upon constitutive dualities with inherent hierarchical values.
2. "'The differend" is the name Lyotard gives to the silencing of a player in a language game. It exists when there are no agreed procedures for what is different ... presented in the current domain of discourse' (Lechte 1994: 248).
3. 'Postmodernity' refers to 'a historical and cultural period, primarily in the advanced information and consumer societies of the West .... At its broadest an expression of a general scepticism towards previous distinctions and certainties, not only in artistic or media culture but in intellectual, political and everyday life' (Brooker, 1999: 197).
4. Since 1984 The Turner Prize has been offered every year to honour an outstanding British artist and to herald new developments in the arts. The exhibition is held at The Tate Gallery, London, in

conjunction with Channel 4 Television. The 1998 Award, 20,000 pounds sterling, was won by Chris Ofili. Finalists were Tacita Dean, Cathy de Monchaux, Sam Taylor-Wood and Chris Ofili.

5. 'Loaded Canons: Whose Art? Whose Histories?' was a one day Conference I attended at the Tate Gallery London, November 27, 1998. A collaboration between Tate Education and the UK Association of Art Historians, it examined art historical canons used in formal art education in schools and university art schools.
6. The four year Bachelor of Visual Arts degree, validated by New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) in 1992 at ASA School of Art (Auckland Society of Arts Incorporated) was the first visual arts degree in New Zealand. The degree was housed and delivered at the ASA School of Art Ponsonby Campus, Auckland, New Zealand, and conferred by Auckland Institute of Technology. The intellectual property of the degree was the sole property of Auckland Society of Arts Inc. who had responsibility for curriculum delivery and physical and human resource management until 1995, when the intellectual property and resources of the degree were sold to Auckland Institute of Technology.
7. Jacques Derrida, philosopher, developed the critical method of 'deconstruction' which 'stands in a relation to philosophy as a critical attitude or way of reading.' 'Deconstruction therefore borrows from the system it questions and vice versa.' 'Deconstruction made its first impact at a now celebrated conference on Structuralism at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, when Derrida read the paper 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (Brooker 1999: 63-65).

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