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Political framing of the arts in education

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ABSTRACT

It has become increasingly urgent for educators in the arts to be cognisant and critical of the political framing of their professional sites as discourses of education are determined through the globalised marketplace. This essay claims that there is a need to exercise a criticality towards questions of curriculum policy and practice in order to engage a workable politic of difference in art education. Political framing of the arts in educational sites is interrogated through three sets of conceptual categories - three Cs: concept, context, criticality; three Ms: modalities, marginalisation, markets; and three Es: excellence, efficiency, educators. In a postmodern and globalised world it becomes the ethical responsibility of arts' educators to formulate an accessible criticality towards normative and reductive solutions to curriculum design and philosophy. Critical attention must be paid to the conditions of discourse through which power is exercised if a politics of difference is to be adduced.

I took part recently in an educational strategic planning meeting to formulate an integrated curriculum for a tertiary level programme in the arts. The focus of the meeting was to elucidate the programme philosophy in order to proceed with the curriculum document.

"Cultural difference" was put forward as a significant philosophical basis. Immediately the cry went up: "No, you can't put cultural *difference!* That's a *theoretical* position!" *Difference* was interpreted as a provocation for the charge of theoretical or critical thinking. Replacement of the word *difference* with the safer word *similarity* or *sameness* was then proposed, implying that *sameness* is somehow more workable in the educational context. But upon close inspection, is this *sameness* inherently neutral, devoid of political implication, or rather, as Rizvi (1994: 63) said, "an ideological notion that obscures the exercise of power"?

The charge of being "theoretical" had been levied against *difference* yet not against *similarity* or *sameness.* Was that not also a theoretical position, but a different one from that of *difference?* Where lie the sites of antagonism in this interchange? Does this story illustrate "the standard argument 'against theory' that is always being made, an argument that sees the fundamental premises of critical methodologies ... [as] detours from the real task at hand-practical analysis" (Carroll, 1987: 1)?

From this semiotic problematic, attention is drawn to issues surrounding approaches to education in "the arts" in a postmodern context, with particular focus on visual arts. In so doing, questions are raised concerning art as a disciplinary subject and the way "the arts" may be classified and constituted in educational policy and practice. Reference is made to *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, Draft 1999, and Document 2000).

Heidegger (1977: 3) advised in *The Question Concerning Technology:* "Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is a way of thinking". Following Heidegger, I do not propose to ask questions relating to "isolated sentences and topics". I do, however, open "the way" of education in the arts for critical examination by positing questions that help cast a critical light on the way assumptions are formulated in order to raise questions of that terrain. Engaging a poststructuralist awareness of theory through questions raised by Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida,[1] David Carroll (1987: xi) addresses what has become the general problem of theory:

> At a time when one hears more and more often from representatives of the most diverse positions that we must limit or even leave behind theoretical concerns and get back to practical analysis again ... it seems to me urgent to look at what is at stake in such demands.

Looking at what is at stake in art education is the project of this essay.

Three Cs: Concept, context, criticality

The exchange I presented at the start represents what Foucault calls the productive power of discourse through which knowledge is formulated. What are the *contexts* of such formulations? And why is a *critical* approach to those contexts advocated in the arts?

When we speak of cultural *difference* or *sameness,* where does meaning lie? When issues of justice are applied to educational practices the question of meaning is not just about semantics. Poststructuralist approaches to such questions have shown that there is no longer any faith in the unity of the stable sign, and that detours to the notion of unified truth are evident through language. When concepts are articulated in specifically-identified contexts, then boundaries of meaning may open to multiple intersections of discursive practice - whether the communication be verbal, as was the aforementioned encounter, or visual as in visual arts practices, spatial as in dance or drama, or aural as in music. The contingency of meaning *per se* as a site of truth may then be adduced. Contextual references may fix temporarily the idea of meaning, or disperse, displace and interrupt the meaning-making practices and formulate questions that might be asked. Following Foucault, it is the *conditions* of discourse through which power is exercised that must elicit our attention if we are to adopt a *critical* approach to those meaning-making practices.

What is meant by *critical practice?* It is a practice whereby attention is given to cultural, social, economic, and political discourses, which throws light on ways power relations may be constituted, reproduced, or resisted as part of the social. It is a pedagogic practice which enables interrogation of how the arts (whatever the arts may or may not be) may be constituted, considered, and legitimated within social relations and institutional systems.

Bringing a critical attitude to the narrated events at the start of this paper, a dissonance is detectable, a disruption of an otherwise consensual process of academics working towards a unified response as a way forward for designing a disciplined programme in the arts. As the meaning-making practices are usually founded in the expectation of consensus, the moment of dissonance acts as a disruption to the notion of unity and stability (the stable sign is displaced). In that displacement may lie the potential for critically examining the limits and boundaries of truth in the way the arts may be politically framed.

Much of educational practice and purpose is about disciplinary action and process which Foucault (1991) has so insightfully shown. In fact the document of *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000) starts by defining "literacies in the arts" as a "central and unifying idea" (10). Immediately, meaning is declared through unitary and stable formations based upon an expectation of consensual validation. But there is no declaration of theoretical premise upon which such an assumption is made. It is simply stated as an uncontested and incontestable truth. Knowledge is thus framed in formations of rationally ordered and normative prescriptions.

This is one example of many where the definitions upon which the new arts curriculum is based call loudly for more consultation and critical debate. The argument I follow here is that if art educators do not engage a critical attitude towards normative assumptions, then art as a site of practice will be disciplined indeed. Yet art is surely the very site of practice which calls for the enabling of post-disciplinary pedagogy with traces of indeterminacy, displacement, surprise, risk and transformativity in its formations? As Deleuze has shown us, the "play of repetition and difference has supplanted that of the Same and representation" (Lechte, 1995: 102).

In my earlier narrative, as in the stable formations of the aforementioned new arts curriculum document, the concept of *difference* has been put under control, disciplined by the consensual preference for unity through which the group might progress in some sort of pragmatic and harmonised efficiency. What is lacking in both these examples is a critical attitude towards those assumed positions. Practices aimed at normalising, neutralising, and a-politicising difference might have been discernible had such criticality been brought to bear upon the discourse. Then the conditions of power through which discourse is determined might become visible.

A critical approach to such practices would establish a procedure through which processes of signification may be adduced. As Bhabha (1995: 34) puts it, "statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity". Thus the utopian ideal of *sameness* identifiable through separate cultures living together in an harmonised state or zones of original identity, safe and "unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations" (34) will be opened for scrutiny and contestation. *Difference* may then be examined in its political potential for enabling a speaking position. It follows therefore that, rather than submergence, at the end of the day the appraisal of *difference* is an appraisal of justice (see Grierson, 2001: 551).

Does a normalising procedure underlie the notion of a curriculum document when pedagogical categories are defined and prescribed in normative formations? If "questioning builds a way" as Heidegger (1977: 3) said, then let us embark on some more questioning. In the official definitions of seven essential learning areas for New Zealand education, what is the process through which classifications and boundaries have been established and why embed four different art forms as one essential category, equal to the inclusion of technology as a whole category? Each of the four arts is now undertaking separate implementation strategies, having acknowledged that they are each different from the other. Yet the effect of the unification of the four-arts-as-one is to prescribe one quarter the valid time to each of them! Looking at the broad terrain, educators are already implicated in an ideological context of power relations through which the performative effects of globalisation are played out. If we are to comprehend how the immediate practical problems of curriculum design, management, and implementation are to be adduced, then attention is required to the conditions whereby practices of postmodernism and globalisation are made visible. As Cherryholmes pointed out:

> We are as much a product of time and place as are the texts and discourse- practices around us ...
> A vulgar and naive pragmatism, functionally reproducing things for good or ill, plays itself out if
> we remain uncritical and unreflective and attend to only what is "practical". (1988: 185)

Meanwhile prescriptive procedures suggesting packaged solutions to pedagogic practices are "sold" to educators through their appeal to pragmatism of curriculum structure and design. I would suggest it is the ethical responsibility of art educators to exercise a criticality 'towards reductive solutions to educational change. Opening the curriculum ground to critical review calls for engagement with the theoretical, historical, and philosophical contexts within which and through which knowledge formations have been generated and venerated.

When educators in the arts engage a critical attitude towards the design of *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000), the lack of a declared theoretical position or epistemology might become visible. Questions of *what* and *how* must be accompanied by questions of *why.* It might then be asked, for example, on what basis is the generalised claim

sustainable that the arts are "artistic and aesthetic dimensions of human experience" (9)? This might indeed be so, but the statement is profiled on the page and then left hanging like many others in a neutralised space of non-disclosure. What is an "aesthetic dimension", and how does it relate to "human experience"? What is "human experience"? Nowhere are these statements located in educational or cultural theory. The questions are endless, but were they debated fully before normative assumptions paved the terrain?

Three Ms: Modalities, marginalisation, markets

"What are the modes of existence of this discourse?" asks Foucault (1977: 138). Questions of language and meaning are about more than just semantics. They are about *modalities* of thought and ideation. The replacement of the word *difference* with *similarity* or *sameness* in my introductory story, and the selection of language (which implies deterministic knowledge formations in curriculum documents and pedagogic practices) constitutes a series of "discourse events" in Foucauldian terms. What is contained or signified by these events? It is interesting to note that in the aforementioned strategic planning meeting no one jumped to the defence of *difference.* Could it be that the term *difference* signifies a practice which unsettles an homogenous modality of thought whereby the logic of consensual validation finds its purchase in neoliberal sites of knowledge-formation? Does the recounted event represent a consensual desire for a seemingly sensible and unified response to political questions of difference in order to normalise the Same in institutional policies and practices?

Two modalities of thought are presented through this event, and two modalities of thought inform the difference between modernism and postmodernism, when approaches to education in the arts are considered. Applying the modalities to visual representational fields (views which may apply also to dance, drama, and music), Bryson *et al.* (1996: 1) outline two positions:

> (1) The first position argues that representation is always a matter of convention, not of essence. It refuses to ground representation either in perception or in the phenomenological experience of the world. According to such a view, the work of art is wholly defined by its historical conditions of origin and reception.

> (2) The second position seeks, in Aristotelian fashion, to define an essence of art. By reference to perceptual and/or phenomenological assumptions putatively shared by all human beings, this approach is designed to be independent of issues of historical variation. Consequently, artistic truth is often constructed as trans-historical.

If these modalities articulate alternative framing devices of knowledge formations, then it matters how the transmission, production, and assessment of knowledge is determined by policies and curricula prescriptions. In the first modality, *difference* may be situated; the second makes unified appeal to *sameness,* suggesting a metanarrative appeal to humankind as a unified schema through such rhetoric as the aforementioned "human experience".

Even today modernity's philosophical expectations of meaning tend to pervade the history and present practices of visual arts education. The search for unified responses to meaning-making practices persist through the idea of excavating some sort of certainty or unmediated truth, which might be embedded in aesthetic form and high art's authorising functions. "Human experience" is seen consistently as an unmediated proof of truth, and chronological accounts of history continue to be presented through art history programmes in many schools and universities where academic resistance to revisionist methodologies of art history still occurs. In such a scenario, the notion of history is presented as a neutrally assumed process of causal succession, which nominates certain artists and establishes the worth of artistic practice through categories of style and influence. Art education is thus inscribed through a certain way of knowing and perceiving truth and value which is devoid of theoretical examination of epistemological assumptions.

I contend that in postmodernist approaches to pedagogy the art educator needs to be fully aware that there is no longer a sustainable unitary inscription of what art is or should be, nor even of what history is or should be. Victor Burgin (1986: 164) reminds us that "the 'political' and the 'aesthetic' are the inseparable, simultaneously present, faces of the currency of the postmodern problematic". Burgin uses the term "political" in the broad sense of "political/philosophical/cultural considerations" (164), drawing attention to modernity's progressive accounts of "faith in reason" with "three autonomous spheres of reason - science, morality and art - as engendering *discrete* bodies of discourse, which could then be separately institutionalised" (my emphasis).

Marginalisation

In "the postmodern problematic" so defined by Burgin (164), binary separation of distinct and autonomous spheres of knowledge may be contested through deconstruction of prescriptions which order, frame, and categorise "otherness". Postmodernity may then open the terrain of knowledge to (tacit) acknowledgement of multiple and discursive practices in the discourse of "the arts" in education. Yet no such mention is made in the new arts curriculum document (2000). If education is about training the mind, then we must be concerned with the way human subjects are produced as effects of the discursive practices and relations of power in pedagogic policy and practice. The idea of pre-existing individual and autonomous human subjects occupying a pedagogic zone of sameness must be opened for interrogation through critical attention to historical conditions of discourse. If practices of pedagogy constitute the framing of subjectivities, then it matters whom the pedagogy serves and how mechanisms of pedagogic practice are constituted and legitimated within that terrain.

How are practices inscribed as dominating (normalised) or marginalised through policy and practice in educational sites? Foucault (1994), Rizvi (1994) and Bhabha (1995) bring pertinent forms of analysis to this question through drawing attention to the conditions of discourse which marginalise difference. The historical conditions of categorisation are appraised through an understanding of the way curriculum policy and practice may be inscribed through the *politics of difference.* Then "otherness" may be rescued from its binary separation and negative connotations, and there will be exposure of conditions which normalise the metanarrative appeal to unified truth (consensually agreed), which is signified by the concept of sameness. The interests of *difference* as a workable politic will then be invigorated.

Consistent with the rise of globalisation (most conspicuous in a European and American setting by the end of the Cold War, and in colonised nations like New Zealand, marked by the renaissance of indigenous cultures and post-colonial political sensibilities), identity as a multiple and flexible category has taken centre-stage in recent social and political discourses. An educational aim in shaping identities must be, as Jonas S. Soltis (cited in Cherryholmes, 1988: ix) put it, "to help us to see how to live and work constructively in a social-cultural-educational world of human making". But if those multiple narratives of "human making" are already assumed and subsumed through the defining processes of a dominant monologue, then how will *difference* have room to breathe?

Through a Cultural Studies approach to political questions in art education, cultural theorists have shown how normalising strategies embedded in Eurocentric practices have evinced unified processes in education. Educational rhetoric is often strategised to appeal to sameness-in-diversity rather than inscribed through the *politics of difference.* In spite of any glimpse of hope for the "new kind of cultural worker" engendered by West (1993: 11), policy and curriculum documents tend to be characterised by reductive and homogenising language. For example, *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000: 71) makes broad appeal to "include the art forms of all cultures, past and present". That is a gargantuan claim! In real terms what does the statement represent? Inclusive, well-meaning, humanistic, the diversity of culture in time and space is homogenised through a reductive strategy of identification. Bhabha shows that the appeal to

diversity is merely a way of giving permission for expressions of cultural difference without re-examining the framing and defining structures which categorise and define difference as a political project.

Thus the politics of difference is easily obfuscated. Rizvi (1994: 62-63) references Bhabha (1990) who is critical of the implications of diversity, "which is used in liberal discourse to give an illusion of pluralistic harmony". Calling attention to the politics of signification, Bhabha brings a critical approach to the construction of identity through a social norm. "He argues that this supposed harmony is achieved only on the tacit terms of social *norms* constructed and administered by the dominant group to create an illusion of consensus. It is an ideological notion that obscures the exercise of power" (Rizvi, 1994: 62).

Throughout the new curriculum document in the arts, there appears to be studious avoidance of any references which might pertain to a declared theoretical position or epistemological practice, such as the terms "cultural difference", or "politics of knowledge", or even that most politicised category of "other" (see "The Visual Arts Glossary" in *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum,* Ministry of Education, 2000: 83-85). In the New Zealand terrain West's (1993: 11) "new kind of cultural worker", who is politicised through the violence of globalised marginalising practices, seems to have expired before birth. An omnipresent assumption inscribes curriculum through neutrality, as though neutrality was even possible as a condition of knowledge construction. Appeal is drawn to consensual logic without any declaration of that aim. Again, I draw attention to Bhabha (cited in Rizvi, 1994: 62) who argues that the "universalism that paradoxically permits diversity masks ethnocentric norms".

Furthermore Rizvi shows that:

> The concept of difference ... does not assume such a consensual logic. It seeks to make problematic the very norms which are used to identify difference. Differences, then, do not constitute either clearly marked areas of experience and practice or a unity of identity, as is so often assumed by teachers seeking to implement multiculturalism. (62)

How then is difference to be inscribed in educational practices for a multicultural population? It is through the politics of signification that differences may be understood, "that is, through practices which are both reflective and constitutive of prevailing economic and political relations", Rizvi concludes (62). Yet is this politic addressed as a principle or potential in the new arts curriculum (2000)?

Rizvi's (1994: 62) main point is that "there is no such thing as a self-evident permanent cultural obviousness which defines cultural boundaries that can be administered by the state in the interests of social harmony". Thus idealistic statements such as "the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of human experience" (Ministry of Education, 2000: 9) demand to be questioned. An astute implementation of the politics of difference is required if a practice of social justice is to be inscribed through this official curriculum document.

If Rizvi's (1994: 62) notion of a "new politics of resistance" is to be possible in our sites of practice, then it would appear vital that art, music, dance, and drama educators engage critically with the proposition that sites of knowledge formation are not neutral. Critical attention to the politics of signification holds the key to unravel discourses which are, after all, constructed through historical and contingent practices. Following the logic, a critical approach to *difference* is required.

Markets

The neoliberal state follows its liberal antecedent, which guarantees the individual's protection within the ideal of consensus in institutional practices. Such protection is implied through the ideological rhetoric of individual choice for the free market subject, which is exercised as the social norm to unify national and global spaces. There is no space here to discuss the reconstitution of the

subject as free market individual other than to draw attention to the unified neoliberal notion of "enlightened self-interest" as a site for critical interrogation in teaching teachers how to teach.

In the interests of economic efficiency, the essential learning areas of the arts have been defined by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Te Tahuhu o te Matauranga, through a national curriculum which identifies the arts in unified terms as a genericised group. The historical and cultural specificities of each of the arts - dance, drama, music, and visual arts - is conveniently papered over in the interests of homogenous identifying procedures. Philosophical positions on which those ideas are based are not disclosed. Although *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000) is now in its implementation phase, some serious questions still need to be asked of embedded assumptions, and of the lack of a declared procedure of knowledge formation in the way the document is politically framed.

For example, what mode of organising hypothesis is at work to categorise and frame "the arts" as one learning area or disciplined site? In whose interest is such a classification made? Are the conditions of discourse prescribed through teachers as "knowing individuals", or students as "commodity consumers", or clients as "autonomous choosers", or ideologues as "disciplined agents of the state"? What form do the institutionalised politics take? Was this debate thoroughly thrashed out by art educators, whose curriculum space was diminished before their very eyes? Perhaps art educators did not have the political will, the language, or the questions to ask?

An increasing conflation of economic and cultural spheres demands acknowledgement. To separate them is an attempt to de-politicise processes of identity-formation and neutralise discourses of institutional practice, in which educators are implicated. Competing for space in an already overcrowded curriculum furnished by diminishing institutional budgets, how will a genericised framework of "the arts" win market attention alongside science and technology's increasing demands? No matter how enthusiastically art educators might speak of diverse postmodernist approaches to visual practices and idealistic notions of multiculturalism, which may be instituted through various devices by individual teachers "doing their own thing", at the end of the day, will the global market determine the place and position of "the arts" as an "essential learning area"? If this is so, then what is this "global market", and how does it operate in the local terrain? These questions must be asked by art educators in the interests of their subject. The new arts curriculum document appears to confirm such an economy.

Three Es: Excellence, efficiency, educators

Bill Readings (1996: 22-23) writes of the new university in this technological age as the "University of Excellence", showing that "excellence" as a unifying principle in the educational institution "allows for the increasing integration of all activities into a generalized market". In terms of the arts what might this mean?

Excellent arts?

If the arts in New Zealand schools are integrated as "a disciplined way of knowing" (Rizvi, 1994: 56) in one "essential learning area" (by official definition), then what will be the "structures of cultural authority against which excellence can be judged and developed" (56)? With excellence as an organising principle promoted as the transcendental guiding principle of institutional activity and purpose, questions must be asked of premises underlying quantifiable standards of judgement.

In the interests of input-output matrices of educational efficiencies, defined through objectives to which teachers are accountable through management audit, curriculum practices tend to become increasingly reductive and over-determined. Levels of task-oriented skills and criteria-based assessment methods promote an inclination to define the value of the art, or dance, or music, or drama event as a packageable object or measurable skill, a prescribed site, or quantifiable task. If

educators' attention is focused primarily on practical skills and the achievement of a measurable step-by-step approach to learning in the arts, then will we witness a return to the privileging of practice over theory? If so, the practice will not be the critical practice of which I have spoken. In the interests of efficiency, it will be a practice based on quantifiable skills and technologies through which educators in the visual arts, for example, may find themselves judging "how neat is my apple?"

How are the arts framed? How do the arts and arts ' educators fare when vocabularies of excellence mark the retreat from a critical approach in the institutional formations? In their essay "Vocabularies of Excellence", Kalantzis and Cope (1994: 13) show through the results of a research project commissioned by the Australian Office of Multicultural Affairs (1993) that, when the arts are considered, the concept of excellence is "linked to particular ideological positions", which serve to marginalise some artists and practices.

"Excellence is so complex, contradictory and ill-defined a thing that its application is a matter of contingency" (18). Art of the 20th century has reproduced a sense of itself as "art" through an utopian desire for the original creative presence in the *new* and the *now,* be it inscribed through the subversive, resistant, or experimental. Excellence may be sited there, in, what Kalantzis and Cope (18) call a "bold denial of the canonical". Or excellence may be "artform specific" or culture specific, or "an expression of the national best" (18), which will inevitably exclude or marginalise many artists from legitimate practices via such judgements.

Proffering some arguments to define excellence, Kalantzis and Cope (17-18) suggest it may be a standard attached to "the universal canon and is measured according to the standards of the 'greats' [wherein] excellent art touches upon a timeless, transcendental aesthetic". The charge "of course not!" may be levied at that statement by liberal educators, who wish to make known that it is unsustainable (not politically correct) to talk in terms of the canonical defining structures of Western history in a multicultural teaching space. However, a glance at the packaging of culture in Auckland during Spring 2000 supports the contention that the canon continues to be alive and well as a mark of excellence in the artworld. *His Masters Eye* is the name of an exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery, through which the "greats" of Western art were displayed excellently, albeit in a-politicised fashion. Through this procedure of display, there is a re-presentation and reconfirmation of the generally absorbed liberal humanist notions that great and worthy art is the domain of the male artist, and furthermore that access to visual perception may be gained through the privileged eye of the master, the male viewer, the creator (an alias eye of God). What is this, if it not a reinscription of claims to power and privilege that were contested through decades of feminist scholarship? How many art educators viewed the exhibition as a neutral site of aesthetic value? Or did they debate it in order to test and examine the normative procedures of knowledge formations in the artworld?

In spite of rhetoric to the contrary, the 'artworld' is rife with practices which maintain networks of privilege and exclusion, be those practices evidenced by thought or action, by approbation, appeasement, or abolition through pedagogical practice and policy. Institutional judgements will be made, consensual validation processes will be exercised to normalise, marginalise, and exclude via technologies of power in institutional practices, such as examination, funding application, and curriculum or policy document.

Educators

This discussion asserts that processes of subject formation must be opened for critical interrogation through pedagogic practices in the arts. The final questions of responsibility must be addressed to by art educators and policy makers. Are art educators taught critical ways of approaching the politics of signification through pre-service programmes in art education? Or is there a tacit assumption that expressive or formalist paradigms will "naturally" give rise to diverse forms of practice? Do policy

makers work from a philosophical framework which will elicit attention to the formation of a political will or do they fall in line with normative interests of economic efficiency?

New curriculum content may not, in itself, perform the liberating task of opening spaces for difference. Sameness or unified notions of the whole "human experience" may equally be the result. Let us be awake to the neoliberal narrative grafting reductive procedures upon the host tree of institutionalised formations, thereby redefining identity as sameness in the name of the self-limiting state. This urgent statement comes from the side of disenfranchised identity-formations de-legitimated by the totalising claims of modernity's generalised and universalising practices which too readily reduce and generalise subjectivity to *sameness.*

Conclusion

Joseph Kosuth (1993: 253), artist and critic, shows that art schools are involved in constructing reality through the way art is taught. He reminds us that "when you describe art, you are also describing how meaning is produced and subjectivity is formed".

Through this essay I have shown that although "the arts" might be determined as particular disciplinary practices captured via prescriptive curriculum statements, they are a set of practices embedded in historically prescribed divisions, with inherited hierarchies and socially cemented assumptions of meaning and value. If institutional practices cease to examine the political conditions of educational discourse, then the result will be an easier path of retreat from critical examination of epistemological questions. It presages a return to consensual rhetoric of traditionally inscribed, humanistic references to art as truth, object as bearer of significant form, or art as expressive of a universalised human condition. It signifies a return to creative agency in the interests of institutionally inscribed excellence and quantifiable criteria of judgement; a flip to instrumental (quick to market) solutions to pedagogical practices; or a return to modernity's inscriptions of subjectivity, which frame the human subject or the learning subject through an intellectualised notion of *sameness* while denying the workability of a *politics of difference.*

Exercising the *political* in questions of epistemological and ontological formations in the arts will re-position the educator in relation to curriculum prescriptions and institutional accountabilities. Educators in the arts may then occupy the vanguard of academic research enquiry when they start asking trenchant questions of disciplinary processes and epistemological practices. Even if educators must face some uncomfortable questions about inherited assumptions, attention to questions of justice through the politics of difference is demanded. McHoul and Grace (1995: 111) remind us, "Foucault's lesson is clear: don't make history out of easy similarities; make it out of difficult differences".

I end with this thought, that it behoves educators in the arts to engage critically with "the political" in knowledge formations in order to enable a workability of difference for the multidimensional student populations with whom we work and to whom we are responsible. Furthermore, it is the educators' ethical responsibility to open political spaces for further questions, and look to possible futures whereby the politics of difference will be adduced and affirmed through an effective workability of political understanding.

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Global Studies Association (UK), and contributes nationally and internationally to conferences and publications on cultural identity and the arts.

Notes

Carroll explains that he focuses on Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida "because they are all critical philosophers whose awareness of the limitations of theory has led them not to reject theory but rather to work at and on the borders of theory in order to stretch, bend, or exceed its limitations" (1987: xi).

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