

Foundations as Triage

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Introduction:

I don't currently teach in foundations, but I have done so from 1999 - 2004, at the SAIC, before the First Year Program there was restructured. Consequently, I am not speaking about that restructuring, or for the SAIC, but about my attention to Foundations as part of my interest, as an artist and as an instructor, in the values, structures and belief systems that constitute the current state of the arts.

Outline:

This is what I propose: Positions in the visual arts have become so manifold, that in teaching foundations a central theory curriculum that maps the arts should be augmented by an instructor guided, personalized group studio practice that is coupled with extensive feedback, to support students in discerning their particular perceptual, cognitive and representational preferences.

I will proceed through three questions.

1. What do artists do?
2. How do artists know and how do they choose how to communicate what they know?
3. What do artists need to know first, and how might they learn it?

1. What do artists do?

Artistic practices today constitute a broad field of idiosyncratic approaches. Artists lay claim to owning and performing single or multiple practices. They may define themselves as the nexus of their multiple activities which, importantly, are not perceived as either hierarchal or as presenting a conflict of interest. Self-designations that include any of the following, singly or in any combination, are possible: painter - sculptor - printmaker - photographer - performance artist - installation artist - fiber artist - conceptual artist - designer - crafts person - writer - educator - curator - poet - critic - administrator - organizer - researcher - activist - editor - homemaker - filmmaker - entrepreneur - programmer. Some of these terms center on materials, others on activities.

Activities that may have been framed primarily as service to others are now in the process of being re-examined and claimed as creative practices. That includes domestic and community building practices like cooking, the collecting of oral histories, arranging and participating in swap-meets or craft-circles, fixing and hacking appliances; it includes entrepreneurial, administrative and clerical activities like the re-shaping or creation of organizations, fundraising, curating, supportive writing and the collection and presentation of information; there are educational and therapeutic practices with adults and children carried out as docents, lecturers and advisors in professional and personal contexts; there are social and political practices like the organization of meeting locales, of public performances, marches and parades and the creation and distribution of posters and websites.

At the same time, activities that have traditionally been foregrounded as professional, creative practices are being reframed as nodes in networks. Artists carry out reevaluations of artists' roles, of authorship and of the function and status of art objects. They do this through studio and exhibition practices that use appropriation or consumption, become collaborative, cooperative, open-ended or destructive, call on experts from other fields, rely on audience participation, or include processes that allow chance.

This array of practices can no longer be presented as a progression through concepts and/or materials. There are too many overlapping constructs. Art after modernism cannot be conceptualized through history. It is no longer necessary to kill one's predecessors. It isn't possible either. In fact, the idea that painting is dead is just ridiculous. In theory and in practice, art has been reframed as cumulative, as a field with many, expanding, halting, intersecting, multidirectional, braided branches. The many mapping efforts of the 20th century illustrate this growing realization of non-linear interdependence and dialog.

images 1- 4

In his text "Discours de la Méthode", Henk Slager, dean of the Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design, asks the question "What is the function of an art school?" and

responds that “it should predominantly focus on cultural preconditions, the circumstances for art making.” He suggests to implement a “self-guided, experimental curriculum”. The reason for those demands are that “we cannot escape relativity and contingency. The awareness of heterogeneity requires that artistic research explicitly appeals to a tolerant, open attitude and multiple, interpretative models.” Thus positioned, “artists will be able to provide a critical, non-disciplinary contribution to the topical debate on knowledge”. (Balkema, Annette W. and Slager, Henk, eds.; *Artistic Research*, Lier en Boog, Amsterdam, 2004)

This graduate school mission that much appeals to me has much better chances of being implemented successfully if its elements are known to students early on, particularly, if the tolerant attitude and an expectation that contribution to potentially cross-disciplinary debate can be expected to be part of a professional artists’ practice. Henk Slager sees artist as contributors to the framing of knowledge. Forty years earlier, Arthur Danto claimed knowledge as a prerequisite for seeing art.

“To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.” And “It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible.” p 580, 581
Danto, Arthur; “The Artworld”. The Journal of Philosophy, Volume 61, Issue 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting (Oct. 15, 1964), 571 – 584

Does all that mean that artists need to know what they are doing and why they are doing it to produce art?

2. How do artists know?

It seems that Martha Rosler’s observation parallels Henk Slager’s request for attention to the cultural context of production. “... artists have uncertain epistemological bases for their art. Transcendence is gone, along with ties to religion and the state, leaving an ever-changing rendition of philosophical, scientific, social-scientific and cultural theory ...”

Rosler, Martha; “Place, Position, Power, Politics”. pp55-76. in: Becker, Carol, ed.; The Subversive Imagination. Routledge, 1994. p. 64

The growing variety of non-canonical, social and cultural frameworks now available has made it harder for artists to anchor their practices. What to base one's choices on? Are there foundations, either in the arts or in the broader culture? Is there anything below? As the horizontal axis, linear history, has been abandoned in favor of a field of simultaneous instances (artefacts and narratives about artefacts which are artefacts as well; museums and libraries), the vertical axis that describes hierarchies of knowledge with foundations below, apprenticeship in the center and mastery above that is ready to join the stream of history may have to yield as well. Absent any authoritative construction, an entire array of ways to make sense is now thinkable, of which individuals are instances. The many methods listed above are an outcome of that.

The theory of multiple intelligences may be helpful in looking at how an individual goes about intersecting with artefacts. "No intelligence is in and of itself artistic or non-artistic; rather several intelligences can be put to aesthetic ends, if individuals so desire. No direct educational implications follow from this psychological theory; but if people differ in their intellectual profiles, it makes sense to take this variation into account in devising an educational system". p. xv

Later in the same, new, 2004 preface to his 1996 book "Frames of Mind - *The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*" Howard Gardner writes: "I think it would be worthwhile to study in detail the differences between those who deploy a focused laser intelligence and those who display an ever-vigilant and shifting searchlight intelligence." p. xxi

Gardner, Howard; "Frames of Mind – The Theory of Multiple Intelligences". With a new introduction. New York, 2004

Different Intelligences Gardner lists are: Linguistic Intelligence, Musical Intelligence, Logical-Mathematical Intelligence, Spatial Intelligence, Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence, Interpersonal & Intrapersonal Intelligence, Naturalist Intelligence, with others to be added as they become conceptualized.

Before I became aware of Gardner's theories, and based on my own experience as an artist who is as interested in the Literal as in the Visual, I had devised the notion that

there is such a thing as perceptual preference, paired with cognitive preference, that, just like sexual preference, can be situated anywhere on a spectrum. Based on those, a third preference can be developed that I have not seen described anywhere, representational preference. It is the way how a person likes to communicate how she makes sense.

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It seems that different fields of investigation accommodate those preferences differently.

image 6. In an extremely simplified model, I am assuming that there are three basic languages that can be used to make sense. Logical language or numbers, natural language, or words, and material language, or stuff. Mathematicians aim to develop a non-ambiguous language, philosophers seek to minimize the use of ambiguous language, and artists develop highly ambiguous languages. An important distinction is that both mathematicians and philosophers are expected to follow or propose shared methods and methodologies, while artists expected to develop individual methods. It seems to me that Natural Science draws on all three languages, using numbers as data, words as reasonable theories, and stuff as experimentation. In a recent development, the three languages seem to be joining under a new guise, that has been called “Art as Research”. Philosophy contributes ethics, Mathematics forms of abstraction, and art provides ways of incarnation. As Natural science has spawned technology, Art as Research is associated with applications of art. As these joint ventures have formed and are forming, the explorations of the ‘pure’ strands have by no means become outdated. In fact, they keep providing new inspirations.

There should not be a conflict between traditional, studio arts and an expanded model that is here called “Art as Research”. There is no need to declare studio art dead. There is no more history. The field of art is cumulative. Sculpture, Painting and Printmaking and how they think with stuff is not losing validity only because others base their decisions to cook, diagram books or guide tours through cities on non-material considerations, all according to perceptual, cognitive and representational preferences in intersection with

specific environments. That there are conflicts indicates that besides artefacts and preferences, we also have to contend with questions of power. This power is embedded in structures, in how participants in the field administrate opportunities, including those for dialog and for decision making.

3. What do artists need to know first, and how should they learn it?

Here are the premises:

- a) The arts constitute a field within which artefacts are produced (studio), existing artefacts are placed, evaluated and administrated (primary and secondary markets, museums, libraries, audiences), and the production, placement and evaluation of incoming artefacts is guided and administrated (schools, magazines). It is interwoven with other fields in multiple ways.
- b) Artists enter the field in a desire to intersect with it. Existing perceptual and cognitive preferences are in place that they may or may not be aware of. Their representational preferences may be satisfied by existing methods, but they also may only be viable if the medium that allows for their expression is claimed by them for inclusion in the field.

As a first exposure, both areas, a and b, need to be introduced. That means that students need to be introduced to the state of art and to its institutions. In the absence of history, the art history survey lecture often found in the framework of foundations has become an insufficient tool. Courses that actively map the state of art need to be devised to show how studio, critique, markets, administration and instruction can function.

Students also need to be introduced to themselves. In the absence of hierarchy, common bases or foundations can no longer be determined. Of course that does not rule out that similarities are found. This is not a solipsistic model, but one that acknowledges contingency. Questions all artists not only need to ask, but importantly may need to ask in that order are: 1. How do I look at the world, what engages my attention - what are my perceptual preferences? 2. How do I make sense of what attracts or repulses me, what are my most useful research and notation systems - what are my cognitive preferences? Only

after those questions have been explored, the next step should kick in. 3. How do I best employ available or develop new media - what are my representational preferences? Given the multiplicity of media available, the following years of study may address that.

In a radical reversal from traditional curricula, students' particular aptitudes, interests and expectations need to be teased out at the beginning of their formal education, to then point them towards those who either have knowledge they may need or who proceed along related, traditional or hybrid trajectories. To adjust to an enormously diversified environment, new curricula are needed that delay the teaching of specialized skills, point to the importance of research, and focus first courses onto the first step of the triad, onto eliciting students' individual, perceptual preferences. I have not prepared a curriculum here, but to bring it down to earth I can give two examples of assignments I developed that served particularly well to focus students' attention on their own perceptual and cognitive preferences.

1. "Make one beautiful object and one ugly object. Later, you will make the beautiful object ugly, and the ugly object beautiful." That assignment is preceded by a museum visit during which students make ugly/beautiful selections and give reasons for their choices. This assignment investigates personal and cultural predilections and prejudices and as a side effect, the assignment challenges attachment to the things one creates.

2. "Find a way to depict or present something you always wanted to do, be or have, but that seemed impossible to achieve so far." This assignment urges students to carefully observe themselves, and to take their perceptions and desires seriously enough to act on them. As projects take shape, it is possible to give personalized reading suggestions.

Based on the results of assignments of this kind, particularly if they were paired with maps of the state of the arts that could contextualize students' efforts, for example through role playing exercises,

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students could be “triaged” into areas of in depth, material and/or theoretical investigation throughout the school. I also think that they had developed quite a bit of respect, for each other, and for the diversity of approaches they were able to witness as they were beginning to take shape.