

## On Not Knowing; how artists think – Symposium Introduction

I would like to thank Lizzie Fisher for giving me the opportunity to put today's event together. I am tremendously excited about the prospect of listening to today's speakers. All of them have been very important to my evolving thinking about today's subject and I am very curious to see how their articulations converge in a more public space than my own head! I think today will be quite intense as we have so much to listen to and think about, but I am sure, given the quality of our contributors, that it will be worthwhile experience.

I thought I would introduce the day by saying something about the research that has led to my 'curation' of today's event.

At the AAH conference in 2008 (LOCATION: the Museum, the Academy and the Studio) my contribution to the strand The Teaching Studio was a rather impassioned case for maintaining the studio in the contemporary art school. Using material from interviews with both artists and artist-teachers I explored the art school studio as a **social site of ongoing process**. I attempted to evaluate the studio's pedagogical function as well as analyse its role within creative practices. Taking my cue from the writer & artist Brian O'Doherty's eloquent description of the studio as a 'mobile cluster of tenses' – and with an awareness of the contested nature of the studio within contemporary art practices - I examined the studio as a 'living' room, a container or arena for creative acts. What became apparent in this investigation was that the studio allows the artist to live *with & in* the process, staving off resolution or closure. Artists leave things in studios in order to return to them. Often reference materials are left visible to the artist as he or she works. Usually the studio contains past work, often left to serve as a prompt to the future, perhaps a key thought not yet explored sufficiently. This was brought home to me the other day when I visited an artist's studio and saw two works in proximity on the studio wall. Later that day the artist gave me a catalogue where I saw one of the works reproduced with a date 10 years earlier. But in that careful or perhaps casual juxtaposition – a gulf of a decade – the artist was trying out an unknown possibility and in doing so had made a past work 'present' – a new work. The studio thus 'holds' the process non-sequentially and makes it 'present'. A plethora of stuff - evidence of initial explorations, unfocused desires, material experiments, blind alleys, slight asides as well as labours of love, moments of sheer boredom and utter playfulness – can be simultaneously present. Artists will often collect objects and images not knowing why and 'live' with them for a while before utilizing them or not. The studio can afford the artist an encounter with this accumulated material that, initially at least, may not be articulated. What became clear to me as I wrote that paper was that the worth of the studio was as a device, a technology if you will, that allows artists to dwell in their process and that this dwelling was important because it is only over time that an artist comes to understand why and how they do what they do as well as what it is they have done (and I shall return to this).

Since 2004 I have been engaged in studying the creative processes of visual artists. My work for the Visual Intelligences Research Project at the Lancaster Institute of Contemporary Art, Lancaster University and more recently How Art Thinks at International Centre for Fine Art Research, University of the Arts London has led me to explore different forms of examining what it is that artists do, often working with artists to find appropriate, creative and useful ways to document their processes. Something that emerged very early on in the research was that the artist's own

sense of discovery – or revelation if you will – is a dominant driver for making art-work. While the outside observer may find the results of the artist's process utterly predictable from 'inside' the process a sense of not knowing quite what is being done urges the artist on. In material/visual practices often it is the material processes of making art unfold in unexpected ways. The artist Christine Borland says,

"It's always important to me to be working with materials and often surprising things might happen that may throw me."<sup>1</sup>

The making process conjures challenges that the artist responds to. The artist's perception of their physical encounter with material is rarely characterized as adversarial one of mastery these days but artists do continue to re-instate the notion of bringing the unforeseen into play. On occasion, when difficulties and doubts about suitable subject matter or procedures arise it may feel as if the medium has come to the artist's rescue. The artist may 'suspend' their conscious deliberations, creating a sense for them that the medium has its own volition and that the work 'talks back' to them. Although the artist might feel lost or that they are encountering the unknown, the strategic use of this 'wild card' of 'not knowing' is often carefully (if not necessarily consciously) orchestrated. Mike Jarvis writing about the painter Alex Katz says,

"...the expertise of the procedure is located in the balance between the process of planning and intuitive action.....it is precisely because of the amount of preparation that Katz is able to make, that the final performance can be an intuitive and spontaneous exercise."<sup>2</sup>

This transaction with the unknown also extends beyond the process of making to the work's final form. Listen to an artist featured in the Kettle's Yard exhibition, Ian Kiaer:

"I don't like to be too prescriptive as the work needs a certain openness. This openness is not just to do with a feeling of being incomplete, that things are left unsaid, but also that in the making there is something being found. In this sense the introduction of a new material or a found object that jars the harmony or destabilises the rapport is important. Included in this is a Romantic sense of grace, that something unforeseen can rescue the work."<sup>3</sup>

As the artist advances towards an unknown resolution, it is quite often with the purpose of finding something 'new' to them. In my conversations with artists the conclusion to making quite often coincided with a sense that the artists feeling they had found something they had not known before. I believe that this questing does not have to be seen as a reinstating of a belief in the avant-garde - rather it is led by the artist's desire to make a work they do not fully recognize or understand – a work that may 'be better than it should be' (to use my colleague Jeff Dennis's phrase) that is more than the sum of the artist's intentions. Most crucially this is for many this is a mark of an autonomous work, a work that can operate in the world independently of the artist.

Before I conclude I would like to briefly return to the notion of the artist's own understanding of his or her art-work, particularly in relation to the issues of knowledge, reflection & accounting in creative practice. One thing all artists do know is that, to use Richard Woolheim's words, "we cannot produce a work of art to order"<sup>4</sup> and the attachment to the 'mysterious' nature of creativity runs deep in our culture. But beyond this I believe that at the heart of this question of 'knowing' lies a deeper 'blind spot' in the artist's relationship to his work. At the AAH conference one

presenter, the artist and writer Andrew Warstat, remarked on the artist's desire to 'dispossess' their work,

“[artists] want to know the result of their work. They want to know that what they think they have done is what they have actually achieved”<sup>5</sup>

But, as he carefully explains, this desire to understand, to know what the work is and does can never be fulfilled. With recourse to the writings of Blanchot, Warstat tells us,

“ What the artist believes they are doing when they are making a work will never be available to them as a final achievement”.<sup>6</sup>

I take this to mean that an artist can never enter their own work as others can or will do. In many ways I think as artists we understand this instinctively very early on in our endeavors but often we need to act as if we don't, particularly if we want to engage in critical or reflective practices. As artists we learn to live with this precarious sense not knowing what it is we are making, and though it is rarely discussed within the institutions and markets of art sometimes, amongst artists, an admission of this lack surfaces. Indeed the academy and institutions of art are complicit in this very necessary fiction of resolution. As teachers we urge our students to 'step back', to become the first 'audience' of their own work. We know that this attempt to understand what we have done should not be shirked, because the tension it creates is most often **productive**. As artist-educators we try to demonstrate to artist-students how they might evaluate the difference between 'intention' and 'outcome'. As artists we collude to make ourselves accountable for our creative practices; on research and other grant applications, on exhibition press releases, in the critical discourse that emerges from our practice. But we also know that as artists we can never fully align what we are doing with what we have done. This will to know or quest to have knowledge of the completed work and its ultimate failure means that, as Warstat states, 'the activity the artist is engaged in is infinite'. The artist is thus in a continual state of process, compelled to repeat because he can never know how (or even if) he has achieved his intention.

This day is about exploring from different perspectives how we can articulate this productive to-ing and fro-ing between knowing and not knowing in the creative process. For me it is also about resisting the easy instrumentalisation of notions of knowledge that the collusion with the institutions of art I mentioned can engender. As an artist I am interested in being held to account on more fundamental level. My hope is that if we understand more about the kind of 'spaces' we need for 'not knowing' (and their relation to knowledge) within the creative process - not just of artists' processes of course - we might make them more visible in our public accounting.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Studio and Cube: On The Relationship Between Where Art is Made and Where Art is Displayed*, Princeton, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Christine Borland in *Contemporary British Women Artists in their own words*, IB Tauris, 2008

<sup>3</sup> Mike Jarvis in *Articulating the tacit dimension in artmaking*, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 6.3, 2007

<sup>4</sup> Ian Kiaer, in [www.visualintelligences.com](http://www.visualintelligences.com)

<sup>5</sup> Richard Woolheim in *The Dynamics Of Now*, *Issues in Art & Education*, Tate, 1998

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Warstadt, *Teaching the Unteachable and Learning the Unlearnable*, paper for AAH conference, 2008