

THE PURSUIT OF CULTURE AND OTHER FORLORN ENDEAVOURS

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Text of an informal talk delivered to Master of Fine Art (by Research) students at the Tasmanian School of Art in May 1994. At the time the author was Academic Dean of the Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts at the University of Tasmania.

When the Masters Program Coordinator asked me to talk in this seminar series, he said "talk about your research and some of your conclusions that you think are relevant to the MFAs". He then left quickly, taking advantage of the fact that I am slowing down a bit and couldn't get away before he did! Being given a brief like that is a bit like being given a handgrenade with the pin already drawn. You sure don't want it but you can't let go of it! So here I am embarking on my foolish errand.

First of all, I should say that I have been conducting research on more than one front over a long period. For 33 years I have been studying to be a visual artist, though there is, in Western usage, an implied vanity to the use of the term "artist" that makes me uncomfortable claiming it too freely. At least a certain amount of what I have done during that period, nonetheless, has been of a nature that justifies the title "research." For half of that time, I have concurrently been studying, and writing about, the indigenous art of my native Fiji in particular, and the Pacific in general. My studies have taken me to several island groups in the Pacific, to Fiji for extended fieldwork on 6 occasions, and to work with Museum collections all over the world. Most of what I have been doing is concerned with what is called "material culture" (art, craft, design and manufactured goods), a domain that is normally claimed by anthropologists, though few have any training in, or much understanding of, art or artists.

But equally, I am uneasy with the mantle of anthropologist, despite having published books and articles on material and other aspects of Fijian culture. I also persistently wander out of that domain. For example, I have compiled the first small dictionary of the language of the island where most of my work has been done (intruding cheekily on linguists), and the first major article on some unique rock-paintings there (poaching on the preserves of Pacific prehistorians). As you can see, I spread myself around, but "eclecticism" tends to be used as an epithet these days, notwithstanding a recognition of "postmodern pastiche." It certainly does not have the same ring it had for Thomas Aquinas. I am currently in the toils of writing a PhD with the Sociology Department of this University, about social change on the island, with particular reference to tourism and to the role of art in ceremonial and ritual. And finally, for the past three years or so, I

have been involved in trying to define for myself (and for the rest of the Australian art education community through conference papers), what validity the term and concept of research has for a studio-based visual artist, following the move of schools of art into "old" universities with their traditions of publishing their research in words, not images as we artists do.

Since we have yet to reach the stage where I am allowed to use solely drawings or prints, I am inevitably forced to write in various languages that smuggle themselves along under the label of English. While I have learned to read them with only moderate difficulty, I have great difficulty speaking or writing any of these officially sanctioned languages Artspeak, Sociologese, Anthropologish or the more recently evolving general form, Culturanto. Just as the Welsh speak the best English, those of French origin seem to have the best command of Culturanto. Foucault is admirable, but it is Pierre Bourdieu whose work you should make a point of carrying about, since so few confess to being able to read his work, and the suspicion that perhaps you have done will earn you, well, Distinction!

My lack of fluency in this respect is a source of some worry to me. I feel the way early Britons must have felt at Roman social events, trying to appear up on things but unsure about whether *ego* and *ergo* meant the same thing. Or after William of Normandy's arrival, the same Brits worrying about whether the only way to be thought clever was to gargle your vowels and put *ette* on the end of as many words as possible. My writing tends to suffer from two great problems - being fairly easy to understand, and revealing an enthusiasm for my subject that brands me as a sort of academic version of Calvin's ebullient mate Hobbes. I am thus not a model social scientist or a really respectable art theorist. An American reviewer wrote of one of my books that the best word to describe it was "clarity." She meant it kindly I'm sure, but it was like admiring an Anglo-Saxon epic poem for the succinctness of its use of four-letter words. With that one remark she revealed it as not being a book social theorists would brandish. I know many anthropologists still bought it, but I suspect that it is secreted at the back of their bookshelves, perhaps along with the Joseph Campbells, hidden securely behind volumes of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

My other terminal defect is that repeatedly in my life I have felt out of step with currently fashionable trends in thought, have been intrigued with cultures and values not embraced by my own society, and have wallowed happily in the uncertainties of impossibly expanding personal horizons. I seem always to either lag behind, lingeringly taking my leave of much-cherished ideas that are no longer fashionable, or race on ahead to the amused scepticism of friends and colleagues. Daumier asked that his epitaph define him simply as a man of his time. My epitaph might perhaps read that I was a man always slightly at discord with his time.

Anyway, I decided that, since I am standing up here as an example of *Homo researchus*, I should try to talk to you seriously about the nature of research in human studies, since that is such a vague descriptor that it covers everything I am interested in. If you notice in the following that I accidentally slip into speaking Culturanto, albeit with a

thick accent, you will hopefully excuse it as a transitory infection. Long exposure to it means that I succumb periodically despite my strong natural immunity, but I shall no doubt be fully recovered in the morning. If we are both lucky, however, I will display few symptoms, and we will all end up understanding what I am talking about. So let us embark together on this experiment.

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The first thing I should declare is that for me, research is primarily about thought, and only secondarily about method. The second thing I should declare is that I recognise no boundaries to the realms of thought that are appropriate for research, and thus can recognise no boundaries to methodology either. For to suggest that the same methodology is appropriate to all areas of human intellectual investigation and discourse is, I believe, palpable nonsense. In saying this, I clearly set my face and my hand firmly against the self-appointed arbiters of research who accept a definition only in terms of so-called "scientific method." John Stuart Mill in the 19th Century recognised that there were problems specific to research in the human sciences, but he concluded that it was because they had not yet worked out a respectable methodology like that of the so-called "natural" sciences of physics, chemistry etc. His view has been remarkably persistent to this day. It is usual for adherents to cite precedent as determinant, much as a learned barrister will argue for a judgement not in terms of the unique merits of his case, but rather in terms of what previous courts have decided. The strategy is actually one of intimidation, for it takes great courage to declare ancient and longstanding practice irrelevant to a specific issue or class of issues.

Artists who are considering their role as researchers, as certainly all of you must be, should, I believe, have no concerns about there being certain "no-go" areas for research. Whether things are valid areas of concern it is up to you to demonstrate. Nor are the methods of the artist inappropriate for giving form to the conclusions of research, as I shall discuss later. But my emphasis on thought as a primary defining characteristic also excludes activity which has little beyond the rehearsal of the already-known, or the celebration of technique and method. Clearly it is possible to exclude much that is done in the sciences with such criteria, but it will exclude much art practice also.

The relation between theory and practice in the arts is a related issue which offers much scope for debate. I have made several attempts at defining my thoughts on this topic, but have generally felt dissatisfied with my efforts, so I will have another try at it. I have thought often of Barnett Newman's witty and provocative remark that "aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds." Had it come from anyone less intellectual than Newman, such a remark could be taken at face-value, that is, that ornithology is irrelevant to the being or functioning of birds, *ergo* (there, you see, I know the difference between *ego* and *ergo*!) being an artist doesn't require a knowledge of aesthetics. Comfort and reassurance for feelies and crafties, confoundation for theoreticians! But is that all Newman meant? I'm sure he was more subtle. To be sure there are warnings. At least in the past, ornithologists routinely killed birds to study them, since they were too

timid and flew too fast for reflective study. In the act of killing them was the destruction of what we have always thought of as the essence of being a bird, flight and freedom (one might think of this as the death of the author, perhaps?) Today, happily, we have subtler means. Modern technology allows us to study not only form, but movement, and we can enter a bird's nest, follow it in flight, observe and document the most intimate details of its life in a way quite inaccessible before. Without killing the creature. Similarly, the richness and diversity of media available today for the study of the arts allow insights that were never before possible, and culture theory today is a far richer field than the art history of bygone eras. So does that render Newman's remark obsolete? Perhaps.

What of interpretation? For those of us who are not birds, ornithology offers the only avenue. We cannot know what a bird intends when it acts, but we can certainly study that action, deduce its causes and study its effects - and perhaps even use the knowledge to protect or assist the bird in various ways. So while acknowledging the limits of interpretation (good phrase that, must use it for a book title!), ornithology does permit degrees of insight to the non-bird that are not available by other means. And finally, while not wishing to diminish the miracle of birds, almost all of their behaviour is, we believe, instinctive. Wonderful, but limited. Artistic instinct, also wonderful, can be extended and channelled by theoretical knowledge. Unlike ornithology, it can be understood not only by the observer, but also by the subject being observed. It can not only influence the artist as the object of study, but also involve him/her as participant, guide, even director. And while some artists can, to be sure, live out full productive lives without reasoned intent, and produce much attractive work, they are to my mind like the navigators of old who believed the earth was flat. Often wonderful sailors, they made many voyages but seldom far afield, never questioning that they might fall off the edge.

Are the processes and practices of art appropriate tools for intellectual endeavour? I believe that they are, though like any other medium of communication they have both strengths and limitations inherent. The non-specificity and multivalence of visual communication make it a poor tool for collating and calculating. But they also make it a more powerful and ultimately more accurate medium of record for many of humanity's persistent emotional, ethical and spiritual preoccupations, than does relatively literal and specific word-based language. The realm of abstract thought is the realm in which visual art moves into overdrive.

What of theory then? Is it a thing apart from practice, something to think about before and after the event, but not during?

When I was an art student going through a bad patch, about a hundred years ago, I once took off for 6 months and did nothing but work at nights as a waiter to feed my body, and read philosophy books by day to feed my mind. I read everything from Plato to the Bhagavad Gita, from Zen Buddhism to Dewey and Russell. I then returned to art school full of energy and enthusiasm, convinced of the dazzling potential of the human mind, and convinced also that truth could only ever be defined in temporal and spatial terms, relative to when and where. The debate becomes everything, and any conclusion a mere temporary breather before the next round! A poor basis on which to found a religion,

but it will never cause a war, will never sanction the "isms" of hatred and power such as racism or fundamentalism. And though it rejoices in exploring them all, nor can it prioritise (except for the purpose of debate), academic "isms" such as positivism, empiricism, pragmatism, modernism, structuralism, or to the even more dangerous "post-" forms of these.

All of the above may perhaps appear to coincide exactly with the way culture theory exists today, and that is true, at least in terms of its aspirations. A course proposal in this University recently defined Cultural Studies as follows: "Cultural studies does not belong to any single discipline. Indeed, its direction is not so much interdisciplinary as anti-disciplinary, marked by its desire to foreground personal and social experience; its linking of the economic, the ethnographic and the political in its account of diverse modes of cultural production; its challenge to the oppositions of high and popular, public and private, self and subject; its critique of theory and resistance to totalising narratives; its exploration of the problematic of social identity and cultural difference, and its focus on minorities and the marginal. Its subject matter across the cultural spectrum, from language and literature, art and music, mass media, sport and film to cross-cultural exchange and 'the practice of everyday life'." I can think of no better brief for the development of the sort of breadth of thought that I think artists require. But I would sound a caution.

It is not difficult when reading contemporary culture theory to have the feeling that the writers believe they have discovered brand new phenomena, distinct from and essentially unlike those which have gone before. Conversely, the cultural models which are proposed are unquestioningly assumed to be applicable to all cultures, everywhere. The globalising agenda of multinational corporations appears to be echoed in the assumptions of much current theoretical debate. All of my experience leads me to an opposite view. We have always been a self-obsessed species, and the few basic characteristics which could be suggested as universal, we have visited over and over again. What is possible is to elaborate that process, noting the diversity of cultural responses to these things, and realising that however "right" or "inevitable" a thing seems to us, however elegant a theoretical model, it is almost certainly bound to be confounded by the very next society into which we venture. That is not, however, the problem of theorising, it is the fascination of it.

The uncertainties of the postmodern habitat are, to be sure, pronounced by its spokespersons with ringing certainty. But then, it has been said that the production and distribution of certainty is the defining function and the source of power of "experts." It is difficult to assume the mantle of authority while professing only limited knowledge. I am not presenting this as a new phenomenon - to do so would be to join the ranks of re-discoverers of the wheel that I am criticising. The malady appears to have afflicted theoreticians since they first started making people listen to them whether they wanted to or not.

Plato defined a world of ideal typology that has left people ever since judging everything against some hazy perceptions of perfection, and not infrequently suiciding because they felt themselves incapable of achieving it. Aristotle promulgated a system of logic

which the West has accepted so completely that it tends to equate it with common-sense, though entire civilisations had already risen and fallen, and some of the world's most abiding and profound wisdoms had already been explored and written, before he pronounced his dicta. And still today the majority of the world's peoples use systems of thought that are totally functional but do not employ Aristotelian logic.

My plea, therefore, is simply this: that you recognise the limitations and specificity of any conclusions our finite perspectives lead us to. I think we should always approach any theoretical position (particularly one we have developed for ourselves) with enthusiasm tempered by a good measure of the caution, scepticism and doubt that René Descartes advocated. And since I think, therefore I am - or at least, I think I am!

Thanks and good luck with your researches.

Rod Ewins © May 1994

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