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Conflict and Consensus: Art Dialogues in Rogue Academies.

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Abstract:

This paper considers the growing use of the collective experience of dialogue and pedagogy in contemporary visual art projects. In order to explore new transformative platforms for education, I examine alternative pedagogical modes of collaborative practice, as a critique of academia.

This research is contiguous with ongoing political and historical debates surrounding the reframing of art education in the 21st Century. A measure of this argument is centered on a renewed energy surrounding socially-engaged and collaborative forms of art practice in recent decades; modes of operation that question the authority of the modernist hegemony in art education in this country. Very little research has been undertaken in the field of dialogical and pedagogical practice where artists, rather than academics and other professionals, are infiltrating the field of epistemology.

The subject of focus will be the alternative art school, Our Day Will Come (ODWC), an event that set up a mutually symbiotic relationship with Tasmanian School of Art during the spring of 2011. The collaborative artwork was by Irish-born artist–curator Paul O’Neill who brought a number of international artists to Tasmania, whose work is within the realm of dialogue and pedagogy. The infiltration into the small arts community by outsiders—along with the generative nature of the work, is conveniently framed within the conference topic—‘creative outposts’. At issue, and the basis of my PhD thesis, are the conversational principles of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and an exploration into conflict and consensus; binaries that fueled creative agency between the local and interloper during the ODWC project.

‘Knowledge always means, precisely, considering opposites’ (Gadamer 1975, p.359).

Recently, many opponents of current pedagogical systems have chosen to revisit fundamental texts such as *Deschooling Society* (Illich 1973) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970), in order to evaluate contemporary education within the current frame of global politics. In this paper I will use the current *crisis* in art education and its subsequent educational *turn* as a backdrop to report on an experimental free-school art project called *Our Day Will Come (ODWC)*, presented in Tasmania in the spring of 2011 by Irish curatorial-artist and writer Paul O’Neill.¹

Earlier in the year I was invited to curate an artist within a larger program of public art events called *Iteration Again* developed by Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania (CAST). It was a series of thirteen iterative art projects held over four weeks around Tasmania.² I was just beginning my PhD at the time and decided that it would be an opportunity to develop a project as a preliminary case study. My interest in the Bristol-based O’Neill had emanated from his extensive writing and projects dealing with the consequences of encroaching into curatorial, educational and other formal structured systems. He and I developed the project around our research at the time; for O’Neill having just published his co-edited anthology, *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010) with Mick Wilson, and for me as an exploration into the generative and transformative effects of socially engaged practice, specifically through dialogical and pedagogical art.³

To do this O’Neill sought to bring together a core group of interested participants from the wider Hobart community and invited international artists, to *co-produce* the work. The local participants consisted of staff and students of the Tasmanian School of Art (TSA), local artists, writers, scientists, curators and members of the general public, who participated alongside nine artists; Mick Wilson (IRE), Rhona Byrne (IRE), Annie Fletcher (IRE), Jem Noble (UK) who came to Hobart—each one for a week, while Sarah Pierce (IRE), Garrett Phelan (IRE), Gareth Long (USA), Liam Gillick (UK), David Blamey (UK) delivered works remotely.

ODWC was effectively a ‘school within a school’—housed in a small 1950s portable council tea hut, complete with wooden verandah and awning, and strategically located in the courtyard entrance of the TSA. Here it had access to a body of learning-ready participants, which helped to locate the work within an educational frame. The four-week iterative structure of the parent program, *Iteration:Again*, lent itself to the idea of a syllabus or curriculum which *ODWC* developed around four key questions which the participant body addressed, one per week; What is a school? What is usefulness? What is autonomy? and, What is remoteness?

The visiting international artists produced discussions, readings, dinners, dances, installations, open radio broadcasts, and other performative and social works of art, with a clear intention of generating a learning experience and subsequent knowledge gain for the participants. Invitations to the events were delivered mostly through word of mouth, public promotional material, and through weekly email bulletins.

¹ These two positions in education have been well-documented elsewhere and will not be considered in depth in this paper. For more information see Rogoff (2008, 2009), Madoff (2009) and O’Neill & Wilson (2010).

² Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania (CAST) 2011 *Iteration:Again*
<http://www.iterationagain.com/hub>

³ Socially engaged art practices are collaborative and participatory. They tend to be seen as a derivative of ‘relational’ art and include other post-studio practices such as dialogical and pedagogical art, community and littoral arts (Bishop 2012).

The only planned and formal components of the school were t-shirts (as uniforms or perhaps bribes to get participants in), designed by Liam Gillick, David Blamey and Paul O'Neill, and a schedule of semi-planned events that changed and flexed to the needs and availability of the participants. The main regular features of the schedule were the workshops to introduce the weekly questions, which were organised and run by one of the visiting international artists first thing on Monday mornings. Flipcharts were produced during the sessions to record key words for the participants to work with during the week.

On Tuesday evenings Mick Wilson hosted *School Dinners* at the Writers Cottage in Battery Point, which was where the artists were staying. Conversations with the local guests at the dinners were loosely based around each one of the weekly questions, and in the week of *What is Remoteness?*, the *School Dinner* hosted a Skype discussion with the organisers of *Tranzit.hu*, a free-school in Budapest Hungary.

Another approach to generating discourse was at the two-seater, 'conversation table' designed by New York artist Gareth Long, which provided a stage for one-on-one conversations. It was located on the verandah of the school and participants could arrange to meet one of the visiting artists for a half hour discussion, using the week's question to initiate the conversation about their own practice—or life in general. In week three the question was *What is Autonomy?*. Curator Annie Fletcher, visiting from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands drove the discussion around issues such as 'independence', 'emancipation' and 'freedom'.

In the last 2 weeks, a series of 7 hour-long broadcasts were transmitted live from Edge Radio, (which is located on the University's main campus some distance from the School of Art) between 3 and 4 pm each day and played over loud speakers back at the *ODWC* van. The work, by Garrett Phelan, involved participants from the group of regular followers to broadcast a live dialogue called *one truth teaches another/common sense...*—where the contributors had to speak *on his behalf* for an hour on a topic of *Phelan's* choice (Such as the colour black or commonsense). No notes or readings were provided to aid their dialogue.

Sarah Pierce presented the performance work, *Exaggerate! Strengthen! Simplify!...*, developed with five of the school's participants over series of workshops via Skype from Dublin. Other events included an invitation to Professor Jeff Malpas from the School of Philosophy, to host a philosophy café; a local scientist/participant, Tisham Dhar from the CSIRO, gave a lecture on remote sensing in orbit; Irish artist Rhona Byrne held a series of humour workshops with members of the Hobart Laughter Club; and, British artist Jem Noble worked with footage from old technologies such as VHS and audio cassette tapes—predominantly of fitness exercises from the seventies.

Artists, writers and theorists from across the world gave further input remotely into the weekly 'zine' which acted as a catch all for the material generated from the week's question.⁴ Sessions concluded each week at 4.30 on a Friday with a zine launch at the van and a celebration for the week's efforts in compiling information. To round up the school 'term' on the last night of the project, Paul O'Neill and a group of the participants presented *Death of a Discourse dancer* at the Halo nightclub in Hobart. The proceedings included a series of art lectures in one room that intermingled with DJing and dancing in another and participants were given the opportunity to learn how to DJ by Jem Noble and Paul O'Neill.

The rise in pedagogical and dialogical forms of production, can be identified as beginning in earnest in the aftermath of a political dispute in Cyprus in 2006, that forced the cancellation

⁴ A 'zine' is a term for a small magazine or publication that O'Neill uses as a way to record and distribute text and visual material generated through his dialogical projects.

of an experimental art school being developed for Manifesta 6. Claire Bishop identified that the subsequent reincarnation of the school as *Unitednationsplaza* (2007-08) in Berlin was a major highpoint in art's educational 'crisis' and precipitated the widespread 'turn' in art (Bishop 2012, p. 241.).

In the wider definition of socially engaged practice there is a long history, yet despite this there are shortcomings within current art discourse to adequately address concerns surrounding these practices—most particularly the *quality* and *affect* of their outcomes (Bishop 2012, p.174). In summing up the *ODWC* project, I would like to present some observations in an attempt to address these concerns and to place them within a critical framework for discussion.

QUALITY AND EFFECT OF SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ART PRACTICES

ODWC was a durational project that used a pedagogical framework to facilitate a democratic stage for generative discourse; a mode of production that was entirely contingent on the collaboration of others. The potential for audiences to engage in the project was provided by a multitude of events and happenings that afforded numerous points of entry—a strategy O'Neill used to not only engage those who were well-versed in the arts, but to attract new prospective audiences.

This plan of action was used by O'Neill in employing the concept of Socratic dialogue—based upon the asking and answering of the four weekly questions—that would drive discourse and thus its potentiality; the intention was not so much to have these questions answered definitively, as to set up the possibility for further engagement and discourse amongst the cohort of participants.⁵

These interrogative forms of art production can be traced back historically to many early avant-garde practices such as DADA, the Surrealists' and in particular Joseph Beuys' social sculpture; projects such as the *Organization for Direct Democracy by Referendum* in 1972, and *Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research* (1972), which were deliberate critical responses to hegemonic education and political structures, seen as inhibiting free-thinking and thus—potentiality.

These issues were played out in the week of the question *What is Autonomy?*, which drew much discussion about education and art practice. Autonomy in art production and consumption has been a subject that the Vanabmuseum has been considering for some time. Conferences, publications and exhibitions have been produced over the last five years and Annie Fletcher involved the school in workshops and lectures around this topic.

Local academic Jeff Malpas, was critical of the School's idea of actually asking questions, suggesting that instead of a question it should provide a statement to put to the participants. So in the week of *What is Autonomy?*, he ran a philosophy café at the school that rephrased the question to—“People should be autonomous whether they like it or not”. This he felt was not as open-ended as a question, yet offered the freedom to respond. It likewise gave participants a position from which they could base their argument.

Voicing discontent within education systems through acts of protest is common, with universities often being the places where some very violent incidences have occurred. Historically, the *Hornsey Art School Revolution* in Britain during the summer of 1965, is an example of such collective dispute—that sought to draw attention the dire circumstances in art education at the time. Sarah Pierce's series of five short performances within the TSA,

⁵ 'Potentiality' is a term coined by Irit Rogoff suggested as an open process of knowledge production as opposed to the more closed modalities employed in higher educational systems. (Rogoff 2006)

presented in contrast, more subtle versions of protest that were designed to ‘interrupt’ rather than ‘disrupted’. She chose to employ dialogue from the repertoire of terminology used regularly in a typical sculpture class. Working with local performers, via Skype from Dublin, she coached the group to chant the words as instructions—in the style of a ‘Brechtian chorus’. Rather than cause anarchy and disorder, she merely sought to break peoples’ train of thought by disturbing the regular routine of a normal working art school.

One of the outcomes from the Hornsey affair was that the energy and vibrancy around that particular protest generated an array of valuable texts and ephemera about the production and teaching of art.⁶ O’Neill employed similar strategies to capture and generate material to supply the four weekly zines. This demanding production schedule set the contributors a narrow frame of time to edit and review their material, which left some question over the quality of the content, however this to some extent was overlooked in the spirit of the event. As an action of discourse in themselves, the zines provided an avenue for the participants to produce their own individual act of public dialogue, within a collective environment. The zine produced from the school for the week of What is Autonomy? was presented at a major conference in the Netherlands the following week, allowing the small school to add to the Van AbbeMuseum’s growing public dialogue on autonomy.

In support of O’Neill’s strategy for open-ended approaches to dialogical exchange as potential for new knowledge, German philosopher Han-Georg Gadamer’s (1900-2002), observations, noted in his seminal work *Truth and Method* (1975), may give some validation. Gadamer, in a discussion with serial interviewer and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, acknowledged that ‘a conversation always reveals new perspectives and that it can therefore never be the last word’ (Boutoux 2001, p. 247). Likewise in another interview with Richard Palmer, Gadamer maintains that ‘where two horizons fuse, something arises that did not exist before’ (Palmer 2001, p. 45). Important conditions therefore are needed to engage someone in a meaningful conversation and various modalities were employed in *ODWC* to enable such situations of exchange to occur.

Generosity and hosting were methods Mick Wilson has been employing as part of his ongoing research at GradCam in Dublin.⁷ His four *School Dinner* evenings became not only a stage for gathering and feasting on traditional Irish fare, but participants would volunteer to present an aspect of their art practice in a PowerPoint presentation to all the guests. They were offered in return—the opportunity for critical engagement and reflection. Around 30 people were coming and going during the evenings, which sometimes became so lively that they teetered on the verge of disintegration. It was a stoic effort on the behalf of Wilson to maintain the group enough to garner the ‘knowledge experience’ for the participants.

Wilson’s attempt to engage in dialogical exchange during his feisty evenings was in stark contrast to experiences felt by the school participants who broadcast for Garrett Phelan on Edge Radio. Ironically, dialogue within this format was predominantly a monologue—the contributor spoke *for Phelan* continuously on air for exactly one hour—in what was often a self-consciously humiliating performance. Struggling to maintain concentration, while at the same time battling off Phelan’s intrusions via Skype from Dublin, the participants’ voice vacillated. Edge Radio listeners would have no understanding that this was a highly anxious situation in the broadcasting room; sweat would often pour from the speaker’s forehead as they struggled to keep the flow of information alive and continuous. Participants (who were all highly confident, erudite individuals), reflected that there were times when the seeping agony of self-doubt and embarrassment arose—of not knowing their topic in front of an anonymous audience—of ‘lacking in intellectual capacity’ to talk continuously about

⁶ This was placed in context in the publication by Lisa Tickner, (Tickner 2008)

⁷ Wilson is the Head of GradCam, which is a postgraduate research school in Dublin. He runs *The Food Thing*, http://www.gradcam.ie/food_thing.php

something as simple as ‘the colour black’ or ‘breathing’ for instance. The discomfort was etched across their faces as they avoided the radio technician’s face; he sat there bemused at their pain. The dreaded moments were—being chastised by a sometimes disinterested, sometimes angry Phelan, who at 4 am in the Irish morning—was clearly in no mood to let them be errant with *his* words. Not one of the contributors enjoyed the experience, and all were highly relieved when the ordeal was over.

While *ODWC* was not formally part of the TSA however, they did agree to host the project. In this way the alternative school contributed to the TSA, but nevertheless remained *outside* its formal system of operation. Rather than this oppositional situation being potentially confrontational or antagonistic, it fashioned a form of symbiotic affiliation—where the big school fed off the little school and vice versa. One such example, and a popular event with the TSA students, was the individual one-on-one conversations that took place at the ‘conversation table’. This intimate platform for dialogical exchange became known throughout the wider participant community as a place where you could (along with someone else) test theories, play with ideas and question your own practice. It set up a unique opportunity for the university students to situate their own practice within a wider context, something that is essential in a regional creative outpost.

It may be safe to say that emerging theoretical frameworks developing within current literature will help to place socially engaged practice more within mainstream practice; it will then be rewarded with a suitable language within which to evaluate its potency as art. In the midst of these vagaries however, my understanding of *ODWC* in terms of overall affect on a small community, was that it resembled something similar to Pierce’s subtle protest. It interrupted rather than disrupted and caused a few to stop and think for a while.

ODWC, in a sense, represented the ‘carnavaesque’; there was no doubt that the magenta caravan appearing the school courtyard, and the *mêlée* surrounding the daily events, evoked the impression of a carnival-type event.⁸ This ran the risk of it being seen purely as entertainment, however, there have been ongoing ripples of restlessness within the arts community experienced in the year since, which have created small changes in the way art is viewed in terms of education, process and display.⁹ Of course the desire to be educated by difference, rather than mainstream, may well have played a part.

⁸ Merriam-Webster dictionary identifies *carnavalesque* as ‘being marked by an often mocking or satirical challenge to authority and the traditional social hierarchy. A *carnavalesque* protest. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/carnavalesque> however is noted earlier in Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings, where he equated it to the chaos created in the wake of an outburst of energy such as a carnival, where citizens suspended their everyday behavior to be caught up in the moment or current. This also forms part of conference paper by Kunda & Lee (2012).

⁹ In the wake of *ODWC*, participants have maintained valuable connections with the international visitors; the TSA subsequently developed a Complimentary Study Unit on collaborative practice, and two new projects separate their core business—*The Plimsoll Inquiry*, a major collaborative, exploratory research project and, *Dimensions Variable*, new platform for connecting alumni and undergraduates. In the wider community, members of a small local artist-run-initiative, *Inflight ARI*, were reinvigorated by *ODWC* model—enough to change their programing to include dialogical and pedagogical forms of art.

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