There are no formal elements; why we need a historicist pedagogy of Art and Design

Recent years have seen the demise and then spectacular revival of History of Art as an 'A' Level subject. Rescued by the energetic campaigning of teachers, academics, the Association for Art History and much high-profile support in the media, this near-death experience quickened debate about the place of the subject in schools and, along the way, highlighted contrasting views. For while many celebrated art history as enriching and mind-broadening (e.g. Parker 2016), others characterised it as the elitist preserve of independent schools (Jones 2016). The whole episode has generated discussion in the art education community and, in some quarters, galvanised moves to make art history with a global perspective more accessible to school students of all ages, for example, through the work of the organisation Art History in Schools (www.arthistoryinschools.org.uk). In this chapter I argue that art historical awareness should be recognised as crucial to the Art and Design curriculum because it enables learners to develop a richer understanding of the categories of art and design, an understanding that is adequate to their current complexity and heterogeneity.

In claiming here that historical awareness is central to the study of Art and Design in schools, my argument takes a different tack to those who would celebrate the mind-broadening and empathy-building virtues of studying other times and cultures, though those are strong arguments too. Rather, I draw on writing that combines history of art with philosophical aesthetics to argue that historical awareness is central to the subject because art itself is essentially historical (Wollheim 1968; Stock 2003; Elkins 2006). The view needs unpacking and I pursue this further on. It follows, I claim, that art educators would do well, not only to emphasise art history through the curriculum, but, more strongly, to orient their practice around what I call a historicist pedagogy of Art and Design, a pedagogy which emphasises the historicity of various concepts of art and design and related methods of teaching. In short, we should demonstrate the big historical ideas underlying practice *through our teaching methods*. I claim that this can provide a needed pedagogical foundation that is sensitive to difference and open to change.

To illustrate the approach and the problem that necessitates it, I discuss a project which is often run in the first year of secondary school as an introduction to the subject under the title 'the formal elements'. This project, which introduces line, tone, colour and so on as basic components of art practice, a kind of ABC of art, has weathered decades virtually unchanged and remains popular in secondary Art and Design departments. I describe it below, in a somewhat generic form, characterising it as a bad ahistorical approach to teaching the subject. But I also want to show, by pointing to an earlier discussion of the issues (Podro 1966; Wollheim 1973), how it could be redeemed by making visible the modernist paradigm that frames it, and then how this historicist approach could be extended to provide a conceptual scheme for the whole Art and Design curriculum.

As Peter Bürger (1984: 15) points out, the term 'historicism' has been used in various ways by writers, sometimes with conflicting meanings. By historicism I mean the view that contingent historical circumstances condition our conceptual categories and cultural practices. It is not merely that art has a history, but that the *concept* of art develops and undergoes shifts and switches within changing historical contexts. For example, we might point to the complex, fluctuating relationships between the ideas of 'art', 'craft' and 'design' in European and other contexts (Shiner 2001; Kristeller 1951). Or we might highlight, as Peg Zeglin Brand (2000) has, how discourses of art have been dominated by successive generations of Western, male philosophers of taste, then art historians,

then art critics (p. 186; see also Battersby 1989). A historicist pedagogy then is one which emphasises the historically contingent character of the conceptual categories it uses, as well as related teaching practices. It demands that Art and Design teachers have a critical awareness of the historicity of the subject's pedagogy, certainly to be aware of the patterns of biases, blind-spots and deliberate exclusions, but also of the inventiveness, intelligence and ambition of past approaches. It follows that historicism does not automatically invalidate earlier views; indeed, I hold that reflecting on, revising, and sometimes recuperating, past debates can provide a powerful corrective to what I consider as the narrow temporal focus in current educational thinking and policy.

It is worth mentioning that renewed discussion of the place of art history in the Art and Design curriculum follows a long period of relative neglect. In the 1980s a vigorous and well-informed conversation was conducted in the pages of the Journal of Art and Design Education (e.g. Garb 1984). It is true that there has been a steadily developing literature using the broader term 'critical and contextual studies'; a helpful review is provided by Richard Hickman (2005). If art history is mentioned at all in more recent literature it is usually to equate it with an exclusive patriarchal and/or Eurocentric canon. Such a summary treatment in recent literature scarcely does justice to the changes that have taken place within art history as a field of study. In her 1984 article Tamar Garb could already state that the 'paradigms of art history, on which most writing about art is based, have been cracking for the last few decades' (p. 348). At that time, she was referring to the critique of the subject from Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist perspectives labelled 'the new art history'; this has continued with work on queer, post-colonial and critical race theory. Moreover, in the context of art schools, art history has sometimes been a force for radical change against the backdrop of relatively conservative studio practice (Walton 2018: 5). It is not my purpose to expand on this here or revisit the arguments about art history and critical studies. Suffice to say that while various commentators (Swift 1998; Addison 2015) have expressed their concern that art history in the Art and Design curriculum is too often equated with superficial and conservative approaches such as the transcription and pastiche of historical examples, or a perfunctory survey of the greats of Western art, art history as it now stands could do much to enrich rather than diminish the scope and critical depth of the Art and Design curriculum.

If the place of art history in schools had dropped off the curriculum agenda until recently, it may be because it was seen as at odds with a growing emphasis on contemporary art. In the past twenty years, initiatives and commentaries advocating the integration of contemporary art in classroom practice have gained considerable momentum (Hughes 1998; Addison and Burgess 2000; Burgess 2003; Atkinson 2006; Downing and Watson 2008; Adams et al 2008; Adams and Owen 2016). Some of the most compelling recent writing on Art and Design education has focused on how teaching through contemporary art, with its transgression of established orthodoxies, can open new, more democratic and pluralistic possibilities for how we conceive the world (Adams and Owen 2016; Atkinson 2018). These writings sharply focus attention on the fundamental question of how far the existing frameworks that we use to introduce and lay out our field of study act to constrain creativity. But the emphasis on transgression is incomplete unless it squarely addresses the question of how we *work through the past*, in the various senses of that phrase. How do we negotiate the movement between cultural inheritance and innovation? How do we take possession of traditions which may be remote from our own experience? How, therefore, can cultural inheritance be inclusive and not limiting? These are important, difficult and currently pressing questions, and they are at the heart of the relationships between art history, contemporary art and education.

In some of this recent writing on Art and Design education, an emphasis on art history and historical awareness is construed as backward-looking and, therefore, restricted to the more-or-less passive

reception of already completed forms. Learning about the past has been presented, for example, as generating resistance to new possibilities or as delimiting action (Atkinson 2018: 3, 166). Against this view, I want to argue that awareness of concrete histories, not of some abstract eternal past, can be central to teaching about contemporary art and can provide a strong impetus for students' creativity and innovation. A historicist pedagogy addresses these issues by locating contemporary art within a broader temporal framework, by relating narratives that reveal art's contingent and unfinished identity. It explores an extended temporality, connecting past, present and future, and in so doing provides the context that allows pupils, students and teachers to interpret themselves and their place within shifting and multiple cultures. It will be clear then that I understand the historical emphasis as hermeneutical, where hermeneutics is the field concerned with methods of interpretation. Historical-hermeneutic connectedness equips us to be creative and productive, to take hold of and be active and playful with cultural forms with as broad a range of reference as possible.

For the moment I want to turn to a concrete example to make the case for historicising Art and Design pedagogy. In what follows I reconstruct a somewhat stereotyped school project for the purposes of developing my argument. What I describe may or may not coincide with, or do justice to, the detail of actual projects run in real schools. Nevertheless, I am banking on my semi-fictional project being familiar enough to give the subsequent criticisms and recommendations a degree of force.

'Introduction to the formal elements' is a staple project of the Art and Design curriculum. It runs in the first year of secondary school to provide a common grounding in techniques and a shared vocabulary, something like a universal toolkit for the whole range of projects that follow. The list of formal elements included in the project varies. It always begins with line, tone, shape and colour, but may go on to include some or all of the following: pattern, texture, form, space, rhythm and composition. The project consists of a series of exercises to highlight, illustrate and explore each of the formal elements in turn. Students might start by filling a sheet of paper with varied lines and marks using pencil, ink or charcoal. Or they might start by using pencil to create a tone ladder showing an ordered sequence of tones from light to dark. They might develop this by drawing a series of solids using the range of tones to represent differently illuminated planes or curved surfaces. Students might be asked to paint a colour wheel and annotate it to show an understanding of simple colour theory; primary, secondary and complementary colours, warm and cool colours and so on. Further exercises could be listed, for example, to explore geometric and organic shapes using paper collage, exercises in pattern and texture on clay tiles, but the general idea is probably clear by now and doubtless already familiar anyway.

The appeal of these exercises, beyond their unifying accessibility, is the sense that they provide a grounding, a foundation, for the whole field of art and design. There is the suggestion, the promise at least, of analysing the raw matter of visual phenomena as the basis of subsequent explorations. That is the promise that underwrites the whole approach, its primacy in the curriculum. However, the practice falls short. The project is typically run, not in the spirit of experimentation and discovery, but as the rehearsal of already known routines. Tone ladders and colour wheels, even pages of mark-making, are often copied without much discovery in observation of their dynamics or interaction. Rather than sensitising students to their visual experience, colour exercises are reduced to the illustration of orthodox theories and recited like catechisms. My point here is not just that the project can be run well or badly, but that when run without reference to larger conceptions of art and design and their relationship it has lost its rationale.

Of course, introductory form-based exercises *can* have a strong underlying rationale, and this has an important historical provenance in the elementalist theories of modernist movements such as de Stijl and Constructivism, and especially the Bauhaus with the teachings of Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Josef Albers. Itten's *vorkurs* or preliminary course has been called 'the backbone of Bauhaus pedagogy' (Wick 2000: 92). Conceived as elementary instruction in form combined with analysis of materials, its aim was to 'liberate the creative forces in the student…avoiding any binding attachment to any style movement' (Wick 2000: 67). This emancipatory aspect was crucial to the Bauhaus programme, a programme in which the analysis and synthesis of formal elements was invested with profound political and spiritual significance. But can we still believe that the study of formal elements frees students? If this idea makes sense at all it is within the local paradigm of the modernist practices and theories which provided the justification for an elementalist approach.

To draw out the point out more fully I want to refer to two writers, Michael Podro, a philosophically-informed art historian, and Richard Wollheim, an art-historically-oriented philosopher. I summarise a few points from their respective writings. In 1966 Podro wrote a paper entitled, 'Formal Elements and Theories of Modern Art'. In it he examines the search for basic constituents of visual art, focusing especially on Kandinsky's art theory. Podro shows how paradoxical this search was in claiming to be free of past assumptions while also being steeped in the milieu of nineteenth-century post-Kantian philosophy and psychology. He further argues that what counts as a basic constituent of any art system depends on its use in context. In another context the very contrast of simple elements and complex wholes might be incoherent, or the definition of an element might show up differently. For example, the eighteenth-century Swiss neoclassical painter Angelica Kauffman (my example, not Podro's) identified four elements of art; invention, composition, design and colour, in a suite of allegorical pictures that reveals telling insights into women's place in academic pedagogy (Roworth 1994: 50). Here, the social and historical context is crucial.

Writing in response to Podro in a paper entitled 'The Art Lesson', Wollheim (1973) agrees with and extends this line of argument by claiming that, in learning art, students cannot be learning a pre-existing set of elements as something like a basic universal language. This is because, as he writes, 'it seems quite arbitrary what we pick out as the elements of art. Where one element ends and another begins is a matter of mere whim or decision unless there is something that we intend to do with these elements' (p. 147). Can colour be separated from tone or shape? To think so is to impose a sophisticated convention, never acknowledged as such in the classroom. Although students of art *can* discover features in working with particular materials that can be made into elements, the coherence of this depends on two factors: 1) elements only show up as such by being used in the context of a specific artistic practice; and 2) students must already possess a more general conception of art, functioning as a background. It is important to note that this general conception of art is not static; rather it is continually subject to contestation and change over time.

I have rehearsed this perhaps familiar material to illustrate what I see as the problem of learning in Art and Design without reference to a historical-conceptual framework. The formal elements project provides a prime example of conceptual categories treated as if they were basic and universal when they are historically and culturally specific. However, the same project *could* be approached very differently, by stressing its history as an important pedagogical approach in early modernism, or in relation to the more recent adaptation of these pioneering experiments by the Basic Design movement of the 1960s (de Sausmarez 1964). What I am suggesting here is not merely setting students to skim the internet for bullet-pointed facts about the Bauhaus, but to structure the Art and Design curriculum so that a project like the formal elements is presented as a paradigm, as one

historical conception of art among others that can be introduced and contrasted as such through the means of teaching it. This would entail situating the project differently in the curriculum and not as a general introduction. It would mean foregrounding the *teaching practices* of the Bauhaus, highlighting the historical idea of art that underwrote them. A parallel approach could be taken for other paradigms of art and accompanying pedagogies. Embedding historical references in pedagogy in this way avoids art history being merely a superficial supplement to practice.

Both Podro and Wollheim argue, convincingly I think, that the framing context of some historically specific notion of art is needed to make sense of even seemingly simple technical exercises. This raises the question of whether it is possible to provide a conceptual grounding for Art and Design without foreclosing on innovation. Is there any equivalent to the formal elements project that can provide a preliminary course for the full range of art's heterogeneity now that art can be a painting, a urinal or a dinner party, now that there is no particular way that art must look or function? How do we introduce to learners the scope of these categories in all their current complexity without foreclosing on their wide range and future possibilities? What foundation can there be for Art and Design pedagogy?

One pedagogical response to the diversity of what counts as art now has been to deny that any foundation is needed, to embrace its openness as a concept, to celebrate that art can be anything and to deny that any definition of art is either necessary or desirable (Adams et al, 2005: 22). Those who argue in this way are advocating, either implicitly or explicitly, anti-essentialism about art, the view that no set of necessary and sufficient conditions can define art. Morris Weitz (1956), in an influential philosophical paper, claimed that art is an 'open' concept, with no property common to all instances, only a web of resemblances (Weitz 1956). Arthur Hughes (1998: 43) commended this open concept view as a way of renewing and liberating the school curriculum. More recently Dennis Atkinson (2018) has called for a 'pedagogy without criteria' (p. 5). On these and similar anti-essentialist views, any imposition of a definition on art is a constraint on innovation and on art's transformative potential (Atkinson 2018: 104).

The strength of anti-essentialist approaches to pedagogy is in challenging boundaries and taken-for-granted thinking; but these approaches bring their own problem. Is a pedagogy without a definition of its object possible? I doubt that, for the following reason. No educational context can be a *tabula rasa*, and I suspect that where we attempt to do without criteria, implicit definitions will always be covertly imported. Beneath many varieties of anti-essentialist pedagogy lurks a myth of the learner as a pure point of origin, the idea that the event of learning can be wholly immanent. This echoes the problem with the formal elements, another approach which promises to liberate students while constraining them to a local paradigm of art. In this new case, the paradigm is that of contemporary art, the received conceptions of which are especially likely to shape practice where they are left unexamined. To draw on an idea from psychoanalysis, we are most likely to be possessed and dominated by past stories when they go untold (Grosz 2013: 10). I argue that a more authentic and sustainable openness would result from working through a historically-grounded definition of art, one that recognises a plurality of paradigms, is flexible enough to encompass the current heterogeneity of art and does not foreclose on unpredictable future developments.

A range of such definitions is now well established in philosophical aesthetics, but these definitions have not yet been drawn on to inform Art and Design pedagogy (variations have been provided by Wollheim 1968; Levinson 1979; Danto 1997; Carroll 2000; and Stock 2003). Summarising roughly, these accounts reject both the alleged indefinability of art and the claim that defining art closes off the possibility of future unforeseen innovations. What they share is the view that something qualifies as art by virtue of standing in a recognised relationship to some earlier set of artworks. The

definition of art, on this view, is recursive and open-ended. It is acknowledged that what counts as art has changed and continues to change, at times radically. According to one historical account put forward by Kathleen Stock (2003), although there is no property or set of properties common to all artworks, including future artworks, the identity of art is given by some plausible narrative linking a current candidate to historical precedent. On this view, art history is really a field of multiple and interweaving stories of the concept of art. It is this open-ended, historical narrative approach that I believe has possibilities for grounding the Art and Design curriculum in a way that is accessible and nonconservative.

Engaging with historically-grounded philosophical theories might seem like a tall order for younger learners, but a schematic narrative framework can be laid out quite simply. I want to suggest one such framework briefly here, but I take it as axiomatic to this approach that many narratives are possible. The tripartite scheme that I sketch out is based on Thierry de Duve's brilliant and biting analysis of art education, 'When Form Has Become Attitude and Beyond' (1994).

We live at a time when several competing conceptions of art have currency. For shorthand, let us call these; the traditional, the modern and the contemporary. Each conception of art has a distinctive pedagogical orientation that reflects certain values and commitments. For traditional art, continuity across generations and socially shared understandings are what lend its forms and meanings resonance. For the traditional conception, to teach art is to transmit the inheritances of the culture, its forms, skills and meanings. In response, the modern idea of art rejects recent orthodoxy and instead values new forms or ones that are discovered anew by the individual. Their force depends on the sincerity and perceptiveness of the artist. In the modern paradigm, to teach art is to facilitate experimentation and discovery, to break down the habits and conventions that overlay the sources of art. The contemporary conception of art radicalises the modern challenge. Its force is in destabilising, deconstructing every aspect of art, its mediums, conventions of viewing, institutional settings, and the boundary between art and everyday life. The contemporary conception of art is undoubtedly the most radical in pedagogical terms as it questions all institutional framings. Democratising and merging the roles of teacher and learner, it conceives of education as a non-hierarchical, collaborative enterprise.

Although, as I tell the story here, there is a logical sequence to the way in which these three distinct notions of art relate to each other, I do not mean to imply that this shows evolution or progress towards a goal. The sequence can be periodised in various ways in art historical terms, but for my purposes the key points are, firstly, that there is a sequential narrative of the appearance of these notions, and, secondly, all can be currently found in the variegated fields of artistic practice and of pedagogy. I suggest we would do well to structure the Art and Design curriculum around these contrasting notions of art, explicitly using different pedagogical approaches to convey the values that are deeply embedded in their respective practices. I also suggest that as teachers we do not need to judge between their competing commitments.

If the narrative I have sketched here is too linear for some tastes, perhaps others could be told. The art historian James Elkins has explored some interesting variations in his book *Stories of Art* (2002). What matters most is that we recognise the historicity of the conceptual categories that underpin various Art and Design pedagogies and the helpfulness of explaining these with stories. Of course, the conceptual scheme I have sketched is simplified, as it must be for younger learners. But I believe this little narrative of big ideas can be shared with and made accessible to students, and I think *some* historical conceptual scheme is needed to provide a foundation adequate to art's current complexity. Demonstrating these paradigms of art through our pedagogical practices is a more vivid and honest way of introducing them to students than bolting on an art history timeline or adding

piecemeal references to individual artists. And a narrative of shifting paradigms like this one surely opens a wider and deeper horizon of possibilities for learners. A liberating pedagogy, I believe, will look as much at the past as at the future.

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