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THE THING SEEN

Reimagining Arts Education for Now

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.
—Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation"

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1.

Stein's mantra, *nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition*, has long resonated with me as a way for contemporary artists to think their present moment in relation to their subjects, materials, and forms. I have taken the phrase "the thing seen" in its widest possible construction: the way the world's variety comes into focus through myriad events and facts, near and far, in an artist's work; I call

this focus "pressure." How, I ask students, does *world* press on your consciousness? It is of course an abstraction, this *world*: it holds in its five letters both the inscrutable and the illimitable. But artists find ways to make *world*, through subject and material, scrutable and, through form, limited.

You cannot plan for the new, since by definition it arrives out of the conditions that give rise to it. *Now*, on the other hand, also arrives out of the conditions that give rise to it, but instead of these conditions being akin to the prow of a ship (the Great Ship New), they are more akin to the buoyant waters that hold the ship up, in which horizontal surface (space) and vertical depth (time) are in a mutable, ambient relation—the relation, we might say, of scale. Where your particular ship is on the waters of *Now* is what you need to discover when you are making a work of art.

Of course, *the thing seen* does not have to be composed only of what is in the foreground. This is the mistake of the new. In his seminal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), T. S. Eliot talked about the incident of the contemporary "individual talent" in relation to the past, which he called tradition. He spoke quite powerfully about the notion that new art alters how we know the past: "The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new."[1]

The flaw in Eliot's argument is his insistence on the idea of an "existing order" as a "whole," a coherent trajectory that implies an accepted historical canon, whereas we now know that history is a plurality in which many traditions may be found. The social philosopher Jürgen Habermas (in conversation with Michael Haller) offers a compelling description of a more contemporary experience of time. Speaking about Derrida's notion of difference, Habermas says: "Derrida's . . . conception of difference [expresses] . . . the fantastic unbinding of cultures, forms of life, styles, and world perspectives that today no longer simply encounter each other, but mutually open up to one another, penetrate each other in the medium of mutual interpretation, mix with one another, enter into hybrid and creative relationships, and produce an overwhelming pluralism, a decentered, hence obscure multiplicity, indeed a chaos of linked but contingent, nearly undecipherable sounds and texts."[2]

Habermas's description of Derrida's difference is, I think, a vivid and apt characterization of our present age, with its vast global interconnectivity. Within this fluid matrix, this "unbinding," the object of Stein's singular *the thing*

seen becomes an almost phantom distillation. If we do indeed now live within "an overwhelming plurality," then what structures are needed to teach artists to respond to it? As a corollary, how are we to think about, or teach, "history" within an arts context?

When I was in college in the 1960s, I was confused by the way the study of literature was contracted around the Department of English. In those days, that designation was almost exclusively for the writers, present and past, from Great Britain; it omitted even the writers from all the colonies of the British Empire that had helped to establish English as the dominant world language. Indeed, even American literature was a suspect, separate category. Other languages and literatures were, and still are, passed off into "comparative literature." *Compared to what?* I remember thinking. *English* literature?

In the intervening years, the academy has shown itself to be responsive to the various claims of specific cultures and cultures within cultures that form the "other traditions." But even so, the academy still thinks about learning as subject to categories, the way journalism thinks about daily life as divided into sections. The academic epistemological frame suggests an implicit ontology: ideally, you can know everything there is to know about your subject. The academic paradigm is depth of knowledge/discrete subject. As persons ascend the academic ladder, they focus increasingly on their chosen subject within their chosen field of study, hoping at last to add to the critical discourse.

This academic categorization of epistemology, however essential for scholarly mastery, is in my view anathema to artistic thought. Artists approach knowledge as a field of disparate potentials, only partially based on the animation of textural discovery; they move across and through the hyperbolic landscape of information, processes, and materials to find what they need to know in order to make something as yet unknown, unseen. Here we might want to recall Theodor Adorno's remark: "In every work of art something appears that does not exist." He elaborates: "Quite possibly the non-existent suddenly rises in works of art, but they cannot take hold of it bodily in one fell swoop. In art, the non-existent is mediated by fragments of the existent, gathered up in an apparition." We can teach Adorno's text, but can we teach the ways in which the existent and the non-existent are gathered into a work of art? In this same section of his aesthetics, Adorno wrote: "The afunctionality of works of art has something in common with the superfluous tramps of all ages, averse as they are to unmovable propriety and sedentary civilization."[1] His image implies that works of art embody simultaneously Beckett's characters' (and also, I think, Chaplin's) ingenious, itinerant poverty, an essential superfluity, and an ecstatic

freedom. This suggests a difficulty of cultural designation that still pertains to how we think about art and artists.

Adorno's implicit image of the artist as indigent outsider, uncontaminated and uncontained by "sedentary civilization," has been joined in recent years by another, antithetical, figure. Along with the stunning expansion of the international art world, the proliferation of art schools (and their graduates) has established the notion of art as a professional career—not unlike an academic scholar, a doctor, an architect. This is a potentially exhilarating development in a culture long dubious about the efficacy, desirability, or importance of art. But new questions arise with the new dispensation. If being an artist is a career, then by what criteria of achievement is it judged? What does it mean to succeed, and what does it mean to fail? Is it simply to read success through the same magnifying lens as the culture at large: wealth or fame and their accompanying signs of social status and material ease? To become an artist, what do you have to know?

And so we might then need to ask: Are artists experts? And if they are, what is the nature of their expertise? Or to put it another way, what is the relation between the how (as in: let me teach you how) and the what (the thing seen) of the artwork? The artwork, we might say, occurs at the juncture of how/what, the transfer of mere materiality into articulated form; the complex negotiation of subject/subjectivity into an object that allows alterity to recognize itself as such. The artwork: not you, not me, but the thing that makes a kind of elastic pulse that keeps us in relation to each other and to the present presence of our shared world.

If artists focus only on their specific genre (its precedents and its forms) to find their sources and do not delve into other discourses—science (which one?), philosophy (whose?), ecology (in California? In Bangladesh?), current events (legal decisions? floods in Iowa?) economics (supply side?)—not to mention the other arts, then the artwork is likely as not to be a frail, etiolated remnant. We need, then, to teach artists to think across and through the boundaries of discourse, and we need to encourage them to look behind the immediate landscape of art world annunciations into potential resources in both the historically removed and the culturally other.

Indeed, as the Internet continues to flatten time and space into a scan that erases the "horizon" (the classical metaphor of both spatial depth and temporal aspiration), young artists are faced with a deracinated landscape. How to steady this mobile map, in which one's own presence—one's personhood—is without discernible evidence or locale? Artists need to find ways to treat history

as a layered palimpsest whose "transparency" is at once an illusory trap and an unlimited resource. Perhaps more urgent, they need to find ways to claim a physical, embodied presence within the increasingly dematerialized modality of connection. As Gilles Deleuze tells us, "Only bodies exist in space, and only the present exists in time." Deleuze elaborates: "Thus time must be grasped twice, in two complementary though mutually exclusive fashions. First, it must be grasped entirely as the living present in bodies that act and are acted upon. Second, it must be grasped entirely as an entity infinitely divisible into past and future, and into the incorporeal effects which result from bodies, their actions and their passions."[4]

As we know, the Internet's dominant trope is one of ubiquity and homogeneity: it does not make distinctions or set priorities; there is no way of knowing what to trust, since without bodily presence, intonation, and inflection, without the specific architecture of legible difference, we no longer have the means by which we have learned to measure our choices, decisions, and judgments—of both individuals and artworks. Young artists, faced with and embracing this new virtual iconicity, are challenged to invent ways to articulate its inexhaustible, mediated immediacy into structures that engage our capacities to make meaning.

2.

In 1991, Arthur Gibbons, recently appointed director of the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, asked me if I would be interested in joining the faculty in the writing discipline. I did not at the time know much about Bard's M.F.A. program, but I was familiar with the undergraduate school's commitment to the written and visual arts, as well as to music, through the activities of its president, Leon Botstein, a musicologist and conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra. I accepted the offer and have been a member of the faculty, as cochair of writing, ever since.

Although I have taught in a number of graduate writing programs, including those at Iowa, Columbia, and New York's City College and Graduate Center, and have, more recently, been a visiting critic at the Yale University School of Art in painting and sculpture, most of my thinking about arts education is grounded by my commitment to and experience in the Bard M.F.A. program. I shall briefly outline the structure of the program and suggest why what I take to be its mission might be useful and pertinent to thinking about arts education at the start of the twenty-first century.

Prospective students apply to the program in one of six disciplines: painting, sculpture, film-video, writing, music-sound, and photography. Applications are reviewed by members of the faculty in the applicant's chosen field, and those selected in all fields are interviewed on campus on a single day in early March. We have found over the years that our most successful candidates tend to be older than the expected age, averaging between twenty-five and thirty-two. These students have been away from undergraduate school for long enough to have found some focus for their work, some bearings in their personal lives. Increasingly, the program attracts students from a number of nations around the world, adding both complexity and variety to the evolving ethos of the community. The program has no endowment, but we are able to offer some scholarship help to students in need.

The program takes place over three years but is in session for only eight weeks, in June and July. During these eight intensive weeks, students in each discipline are in contact with students in the other five disciplines, as well as with the faculties in each. The faculties are drawn from artists active in their individual fields, painters and sculptors, filmmakers, poets and novelists, and so on. They represent a range of aesthetic approaches to their medium and, like the student body, are also generationally and ethnically varied. The faculty includes those who are enjoying some prominence and those who are less well known. Members of the faculty are present for varying amounts of time, from three weeks to the entire eight-week session; many, but not all, return from year to year. Each discipline has a chair or cochairs, and these individuals are responsible for choosing and inviting their faculties. The discipline chairs, with the director, form the Graduate Committee, responsible for the ongoing workings of the program. We meet, we discuss, we change the program as and when we see the need. Over the years, many changes, small and large, have been made, giving the program an inherent flexibility, an organic and transparent structure. During the summer session, the entire faculty meets and discusses, in detail, each student's work in all three stages of their three-year journey.

There are also visiting artists who give presentations on their work, and each summer, a seminar is devoted to a theme or subject, with readings, presentations, visiting artists or scholars, discussions, and conversations. In summer 2008, the seminar was devoted to the idea of "translation," in both its specific or usual meaning, from language to language, and its broader implications:

crossing cultures, genres, and so forth. There was a packet of readings distributed to the faculty and students, and invited guests presented to the entire community; seminar groups of fifteen to twenty students and faculty met to discuss these readings and the presentations.

The core pedagogical approach of the Bard program is conversation and critique. Students are asked to make appointments with at least thirty members of the faculty, across the disciplines, to discuss their work. These sessions are up to an hour long and usually take place in the studios provided to each student. In the late afternoons, the entire body of students and faculty meets in critique sessions, in which three students show or perform works in progress, and verbal responses are offered for twenty minutes each. Once a week, each discipline holds a caucus, during which specific issues and methods germane to that field are addressed. Visiting artists attend these caucuses.

During the other ten months of the year, students are expected to continue to work in their chosen fields. When they return, their "winter work" is evaluated. At the end of their third, final, summer, students prepare a thesis statement and presentation, and a board of five faculty members, three from the core discipline, discusses and evaluates the work. This final session is recorded, and the recording is given to the student.

3.

The aim of this program is to create a school in which the sites of "authority" are multiple and mobile, moving across and through myriad synapses in an open structure, so that criteria for judgment can be calibrated to allow maximal heterogeneity within a close-knit community.

The flow of information is based on articulations of accumulated knowledge centered on a given faculty member's set of interests, on her or his specific practice and experience. This reliance on individuation gives the program an intimacy, a nearness, as if all things brought to bear were being tried immediately, in the foreground. Students, exposed to an astonishing variety of voices and arts practices, must decide what is useful or important to them. And because students meet with many artists who are not in their chosen field, they become aware of the ways in which all arts share a discourse and the ways in which a particular discipline is unique. The student painter becomes conscious of the difference between meeting with a poet, a filmmaker, a sculptor; she becomes aware of the varieties of aesthetic experience. Together the faculty and students comprise an informed congregation, a responsive and responding community. When the program is not in session, students and faculty continue in their "real" lives—jobs, relationships, families, studios. Art, school, and life are congruent and contingent. During these months, students get to sort and ponder.

The Bard M.F.A. program emphasizes layers of individual articulation over theoretical constructs or the jargon of coteries; it collapses normal expectations of the hierarchy of power into the mobile temporal ephemera and unique individuation of the speaking voice. Students learn to speak and learn to listen, not only to what is being said but also to cadences of sentences, tone, quickness, volume, repetition, pause, vocabulary, reference. It is a new rendition of the old notion of oral history as a place of authenticity and integrity. Indeed, history as such forms and re-forms around citation; from time to time, a thematic content emerges out of the intersecting arcs and acts of an unsteady verbal commentary. If you listen, you can hear certain refrains that percolate through and across the vibratory incidents of attention and response. (This past summer, I thought I discerned a shared set of concerns around the intersection of personal and historical narratives: a renewed emphasis on themes of personhood and identity within the unfixed boundaries of a cultural disapora, which is attached to an increased anxiety about responsibility and efficacy within an arts context.)

The voices of authority, neither static nor singular, thread through and across the social fabric. Words are spoken, ideas are set in motion, and these float, like pollen, in the summer air until they land on receptive ears or are forgotten. It's an experiment in the efficacy of attention and articulated response, in the possibilities for critical discourse, based on and in experience, as an active critical tool. Students are encouraged to take risks, a pedagogical cliché, which means to question whatever habits have formed, to resist early closure to work that has not yet found its mark, to think about the dynamic relation between subject, material, and form. In a time of increased hybridity, the faculty is challenged to allow students to depart from genre-specific work while remaining accountable to sites of knowledge necessary for, and pertinent to, accomplished work in a given field. Just because you are taking pictures does not mean you are a photographer; the edge between "expert" and amateur blurs.

The program fosters mutual interest and support that are underwritten by a sense that making art and making a life in art are challenges that can be met in diverse ways. Success is not understood as a single outcome but as an

alert receptivity to possibilities that range from a show in a gallery, the publication of a book or the performance of a musical composition to teaching third graders to draw or prisoners to write. We are not naive about the desire for overt recognition, and we celebrate those who get it, but neither do we center our discourse on the means to that goal. Strong and enduring friendships are made, and the Internet has provided the means by which students and faculty can share information that ranges from the announcement of job openings to available studios and apartments, upcoming readings and shows, and so forth.

As I have indicated, this idea of teaching and learning as a quixotic intensity of articulating presences is antithetical to how the academy traditionally formulates both its relation to knowledge and the ways in which that knowledge is judged and disseminated. There is no teacher, no expert, no mentor, but rather a contingent of artists—exemplars—whose accumulated knowledge represents the obiter dictum of achievement. Indeed, it occurs to me now that there is a suggestive interface between the methodology of the Internet and the structure of the Bard program. In each, the present is animated, and various sites of authority are in constant flux, and the possibilities for contact are mobile, immanent, plural. In a sense, the Bard program mimics aspects of the Internet's most radical reformation of the ways by which we acquire and disseminate knowledge, but these processes are anchored in the actuality of physical presence. The immateriality of the virtual, as it were, becomes embodied, real. The hope is that such grounding demonstrates how content occurs at the juncture of specific subject matter with discovered form, by a praxis conditioned by individuals and their very real contexts, which cannot be abbreviated into avatars of illusory presence or abstracted into theoretical constructs. Meaning making is, after all, still an act of human interpretation: *the thing seen*.

4.

> To my mind, democratic patronage would, first of all, support the arts as widely as possible. It would preserve artistic treasures from the past and enable both institutions and individuals active in the present. It would be egalitarian, a patronage not only for the rich, or the well connected, or those whose careers are well under way, or those living in centers of power, or those who went to certain schools, or those who practice one aesthetic and not another. It would seek to empower a meritocracy of artistic thought.[5]

Lewis Hyde's utopian vision of a "meritocracy of artistic thought" is exhilarating to imagine, but it evades the crucial issue, which is how to go about shifting the ground of privilege that the arts in America increasingly occupy. How to forge links between the local high school and the expensive art school, between the underpaid art teacher and the fashionistas of the international art brigade? How to convince the young painter, graduating from Yale's School of Art (and heavily in debt from it), that she does not need to move to New York City in order to succeed? If she believes that New York City is the only place, no matter how high the rents, how small the space, how arduous the work she must do to support herself while she also paints, then she inherently accepts the notion that the art world is circumscribed by sites of institutional and financial power and their facilitators: curators, collectors, dealers, critics. This vortex of economic power eschews the local: the small gallery in Hudson, New York; the museum in Columbus or Minneapolis or Ridgefield; and the cadres of local artists and writers in Los Angeles, Chicago, Kansas City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington D.C., not to mention the extraordinary proliferation of such institutions and communities across the world.

In the early spring of 2008, the artist Ann Hamilton arranged for me to spend a week in Columbus, Ohio, where she lives with her husband, Michael Mercil, and their son, Emmett. Ann and Michael teach at Ohio State University and are active members of the arts community, often through the programs and exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts. I was invited to give a reading at the Wexner, to give a seminar to some of the writing students, to visit some student artists' studios, and to work with Ann at the Wexner on a collaboration (in relation to her Tower, a permanent structure for contemplation and performance, at the Steve Oliver Ranch outside San Francisco).

Ann and Michael have their studios in a large one-story industrial building in which there are many large tables, collected over decades. These tables serve their ongoing art projects, but also, as on the evening following my Wexner reading, as a kind of dining hall. Members of the audience, friends, and students are invited back to the studio building for a simple dinner of soup, salad, bread, and wine. At a certain moment, Ann tapped me on the shoulder and invited me to sit on a stool and converse with the guests. This engagement and dialogue was the high point of the visit for me. Our conversation moved over a range of issues and ideas, from poetics to politics, and I felt that arts

practice and community were in an active relation, whose ultimate effects and proliferation were unknown. I did not feel myself to be an expert or a fount of knowledge, but rather a vehicle for a continuing dialogue—one that began before I arrived and would continue after I left. This kind of real-time intimacy and communication is possible only at the level of the local.

The fear of not being a player on the game board of New York City's cultural elite pushes the young artist to accept circulating ideas, however inadvertently, of what is hot and new, and to forgo the very elements that endow artworks with the power to alter the way that we think about ourselves and our world. Those elements are drawn from experience—not only of the trajectories of artistic practice but of incidents, observations, exposures, and memories that are unique to our lives.

Ever since the so-called culture wars of the 1980s, with their lethal brew of politics, "moral" values, and tax dollars, during which art became the whipping post for antiprogressive social thought, there has been a discernible retrenchment from problematic or controversial work and a movement toward a market-driven consensus of aesthetic merit. The once influential mediation of available, informed (if at times polemical) critical thinking has all but vanished, replaced by theory-based (academic) writings on the one hand and user-friendly journalism and opinionated blogs on the other. In any case, the connections among the public, arts education, and art have become at once more extensive, more tenuous, and less provocative.

These developments are not necessarily nefarious, but they may have contributed to the perception of art as a privileged enclosure, nurtured and maintained by the proliferation of expensive graduate art schools, and their inevitable projections into predominantly urban-based art scenes, where the art market is on everyone's threshold. This is not the place to rehash the many critiques of art as the final stronghold of investment capital. But it is, I think, a place to begin to reconsider the basis for arts education in relation to art in the culture at large: to think as clearly as possible about the paradigms we have created and those we need to create. We need to answer the question of whether artists are necessary to the workings of a liberal democratic state. Unless we can answer this in the affirmative, and support that affirmation with reason as well as belief, we will continue to erect institutions that are halfhearted in their commitments, uncertain of their mandates, and vulnerable to evaluative systems that are anathema to creative thought and process. As long as we believe that art is an inessential luxury, that museums and galleries are playgrounds for social and cultural elites pandering to "the public," then the idea of arts education will continue to be a risky, potentially spurious enterprise.

How do we inform the public that art is not a luxury, not mere entertainment, that artists are not the spoiled children of an indulgent culture? Perhaps most important, how do we slow down our responses so that our opinions are aligned to judgments that are informed by what we know? How do we convince the public that neither complexity nor difficulty in art—in thinking about and responding to art—is a formula for estrangement but an invitation to imagine solutions to seemingly intractable problems and predicaments in contemporary life? To teach persons to make art is to teach them to resist the commodification of their wills and desires, to use flexibility and ingenuity in the face of adversarial forces, to build a capacity for the attention and response to that which is not like them or belongs to them.

I believe that arts education at all levels is now more critical to the vision and fabric of democratic social space than ever before. If we construe arts practice as not limited to professional achievement within the structures of the culture industry, but as a way to invigorate dialogues across boundaries—like to unlike, local to local—then our sense of a diminished landscape of personal efficacy will be at least in part alleviated. If we understand arts practice as a means to formations of new constituencies of inclusion and belonging that, in Emerson's great phrase, "unsettle" our assumptions and realign our relation to the intersecting arcs of our presences, then we will be less vulnerable to the received habits of thought that continue to threaten and curtail our liberties.[6]