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HISTORY AND THEORY FOR ARTISTS

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Introduction: The Question

The immediate reason for my question here - what does it mean: "history and theory for artists"? - is my appointment as associate professor in Art History and Art Theory at The Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen. But the question stems nevertheless from the different experiences I have had in teaching art history and theory at different institutions, for university students as well as for art students. Ultimately, it is an epistemological question; a question about the character and form of artistic knowledge and reflection.

This is indeed a question. If I in this presentation happens to sound as if I had an answer to this question - about the character and form of artistic knowledge -, you have to excuse me, as this definitively is not the case.

But the question of teaching art history and art theory for artist is ultimately linked with the question of the art and nature of an artistic professionalism.
1. The Problem

The problem with teaching art history and theory at an art academy is in one sense easily identified. It is a quantitative problem. History and theory is in total limited to maximum 2-4 weekly hours, when it goes wild, usually the weekly ratio is considerably less. But, even a moderately increased ratio of history and theory in an artistic syllabus could - in my opinion - easily prove to be contraproductive, as we shouldn't forget that we are discussing a praxis-oriented education.

This further implies, that we can't expect the students to have any art historical competence worth mentioning, especially when compared with an university syllabus of three to five years of full-time studies.

The situation in relation to art theory, a field which is becoming more and more important during recent times, especially for artists, is even "worse" (speaking in these quantitative terms). I would guess it would be impossible to find an art academy with any self-esteem which did not offer any course in modernism (Greenberg, Fried), postmodernism (Lyotard, Baudrillard, etc.), art criticism / critical theory (Benjamin, Foucault, Adorno, Frankfurt-school, October: Krauss, Foster, De Duve), philosophy of aesthetics (Platon, Hegel, Kant, Danto), museology, feminism, video and visual culture and maybe post-colonial studies as well.
To this conglomerate of fields usually associated with art theory we have to add a suite of disciplines which hardly anyone would deem irrelevant for any higher artistic education: history of ideas, philosophy (Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Deleuze, Agamben, ...), anthropology (Levi-Strauss, Mauss, Victor Turner), sociology (Weber, Bourdieu, Luhmann), psychology (Freud, Jung), history and theory of literature, politics and a couple of some additional fields and/or texts which a teacher would consider pertinent to an artistic syllabus.

It goes without much further saying, that even if we just focused on one of these, we wouldn't achieve much more than a weak version of an university course.

On top of this we have to add the curious circumstance, that irrespectively of how the academy chose to focus, we can be dead sure that the student will chose a completely different area of study and readings, like computer games, alchemy, the financial crisis, Extra-Sensory Perception, history of submarines, recent Iranian history or whatever subject-matter not included in any syllabus when the "ought to" spend their time on any of the above mentioned relevant subjects. Anyway, it is not relevant subject-matters that are lacking.

The Universal Compromise have typically been - and this is admissibly a caricature - an "art history light" and "continental philosophy for dummies".
In any event it is a **defensive** strategy.

Nevertheless, and in spite of all these "impossibilities", I have personally met artists with a profound art historical knowledge, albeit within a restricted field of the history of art (but art historians themselves do specialize as well), and I am sure we all have met artists with considerable knowledge within a specific theoretic field, artists with a certain political knowledge; and, most importantly, most artists we have met, do operate with a well-founded conglomerate of knowledge, know-how, historical data, and theories which indeed make sense in relation to their artistic practice.

The question then has to be re-phrased as: how could this be possible?
2. The Background

The Background for this "defensive" approach to the historical and theoretical part of the collected syllabus at the art academies is of course, on the one hand, rooted in their history as disciplines of skill and pedagogics of a master/adept-relationship, and, on the other hand, a consequence of the recent historical dismantling of the very same master/adept-pedagogy and a certain skepticism with regard to skill as such.

In this traditional form, let us call it skill-based pedagogics, historical and theoretical subjects are treated \textit{ad hoc} based on the conception and mind of the master; a method thoroughly reasonable in such a guidance based course or process.

If the teacher or the student is interested in lithography or in recent Polish history, it is not only possible, but almost inevitable to put a great deal of effort in studies in lithography and recent Polish history, and consequently be correspondingly relaxed with regard to, let's say Warhol or October; if the teacher or the students are interested in netherlandish sixteenth century painting, a considerable amount of teaching could be devoted to iconography and theories of the grotesque, and thus be correspondingly slack to feminism, modernism or museology.
The method has many obvious **advantages**: the matter can be directed very precisely to the individual student; there is a high degree of **freedom** and **flexibility** in approach and methods; each approach is only locally canonized, but has to compete with other - equally - locally canonized approaches. This is what is meant with the art historical terminus "school". This skill-based pedagogics could thus be viewed as a patchwork with relative high degree of local idiosyncrasies. The disadvantages is typically a rather authoritarian local canon and dogmas with limited potentials of development, as it is hung up in a tight symbolical competition between other local dogmas. Roughly and rudely speaking, such a pedagogics would manifest itself as a local indoctrination.

During the successive modernization which, more or less, followed at every European art academy during the second half of the twentieth century, we note a relative lessened focus on the capital M in master classes, with its dangers of nepotism and idiosyncrasies, towards a capitalization of the C in master classes, with its orientation towards a certain **art-historical and art-theoretical consensus** that seeks to establish a common professional basis, which all students could be part of and participate in. **The advantages** of such a "generalized" approach to the history and theory of the profession is that you could establish a global canon and dogmatics with very limited authority. This generalized history and theory has the property of being very portable and communicable, and an effect is that students without problem can jump between academies and still be sure of that "Manet", "the Greenberg-paradigm", 
"Readymade", "October", and "the Guggenheim-effect" all are intelligible concepts. The disadvantage is correspondingly a high degree of global monotony and a dogma without competition.

1) Thus, on the one hand – the traditional skill-based pedagogics – we have a high degree of coherence with the individual artistic practice, but is low on professional validity (i.e. verification, relevance and communication).

2) On the other hand – with the recent dismantling of the Master towards a consensus-based Class founded on a portable Canon we have a high degree of professional validity, a professionalism that is communicable and open for criticism with the cost of low coherence with individual artistic practices.

I can't help having the feeling that the historical and theoretical part of the artistic practice is being deposited in a kind of universal art theoretical Federal Reserve.

A historical allegory could illustrate this point. When Luigi Lanzi and Christian von Mechel restructured the collections in Florence and Vienna respectively during the late 18th century and replaced the traditional "aesthetical hanging" with a modern "historical" arrangement of the items, where the paintings are arranged chronologically after epochs and schools.
This rearrangement was hailed by scholars and art historians, and is now of course standard in any art museum, but was criticised by artists, which found this historical hanging "anti-aesthetic" in its focus on historical narrative at the cost of aesthetic comparision and apprehension.
3. The Symptom

It is my hypothesis here (if its correct or not is of minor importance), that this global monotony without competition in general is a symptom of an externally applied module to the artistic practice (locally I am sure there exists excellent teachings in history and theory at academies around the world, and not necessarily in connection with courses in art history or art theory).

In any case there is as if art history and art theory is distilled out of already available scholarly disciplines into a table top edition as art history light or continental philosophy for dummies.

Anyone who has done some teaching at art academies have certainly also noted that a certain percentage of the students are absolutely uninterested in the historical and theoretical part of the syllabus. A majority is very interested, but uses idiosyncratically the parts of the teachings they find relevant and ignore the rest. And a large minority is seemingly equally interested in any historical and theoretical discussion with an indifference which I wouldn't characterize as entirely comforting.

This is by no way a bad or in any way unreasonable result, but neither is it satisfactory. Disregarding the recipients of the students, that is, the art market and its derivates, the students themselves could reasonably
expect a certain professional identity, a certain amount of knowledge in the history and theory of the profession.

If the academy isn't primarily founded on the personal teachings of a master, then the academy has to offer an identity or a professional level corresponding as the Danish painter Franciska Clausen could say she was "a pupil of Fernand Léger".

The test that this isn't the case, is that the statement that "Jeppe Hein is an assistant of Olafur Eliasson" makes more sense than "Jeppe Hein studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Art 1996–2003".
4. The Hypothesis

It is our hypothesis, that the students are right, or more precisely, that the students are in their right when they shop around in the art historical and art theoretical on more or less idiosyncratic grounds.

This because the students are perfectly well aware of the fact that they get art history light and continental philosophy for dummies at the respective courses. And as they typically have no intention of any degree in art history or philosophy, they take what they can use and ignore the rest. Art students, as artists in general, take interest in anything between Russian submarines, sexual behaviors, speaker’s voices, bibliometry, or apocalyptic phantasies. Therefore they rarely take notes, at least not in any educational sense. Instead they practice drawings, doodlings or are just sitting off a lecture with the benefit of an useful idea or two.

This is meant as self-criticism, but not in the sense that the courses in history and theory ought to be subject of examinations (which just would fix the lack of educationally relevant notes). An this self-criticism is something I believe courses in history and theory should do something about.

1. History and theory for artists is not the same, nor does it necessarily correspond to, Art History and Philosophy (History of Ideas, Cultural Theory, etc.)
Art academies are first and foremost an education oriented towards production, praxis, and creation. The primary aim is to assist the students to create works (or "pieces" if preferred) of the highest possible quality, whatever that may mean. The courses at an art academy, which don't have this focus will at the best be utterly harmless and a waste of time, but at the worst, ultimately spoil the very will for art, which is the raison d'être for the academies at the first place. Art History, for instance, is not, and should not be, concerned with any question of how should this piece be done, now and here. Nor is Art Theory. The question "What did Rafael do wrong?" is a flat stupid question in the context of Art History; in the context of art history for artists it could be just at the point.

James Elkins (who did spend some time reflecting these kind of issues), wrote once:

"... the MFA program at the University of Chicago, where I was a student, is committed to the conceptual, philosophic, and historical side of art production, so we artists were all made to write long theses on our work, and we all took courses that included Gombrich, Wittgenstein, and even Heidegger. I'm still not convinced that helped our art".

That is:
2. History and theory for artists is an instrumental discipline, which aims at providing tools, examples, and methods for a better understanding of the production and functioning of art works.

But as it is the hypothesis that art works, and art in general, actually do something for the sum of human cognition, and that a historical and theoretical consciousness about the production, consumption, and distribution of art in effect do contribute to the qualification and precision of the art work:

3. History and theory is (or have become) such an integrated part of the work, that it is necessary for an artist, not only to have a certain knowledge about, but in reality be an expert in, the history and theory of art.

This last statement is probably the most controversial, and which I fear a considerable part of the students would oppose against (implicitly or explicitly). Nevertheless I believe this is the crucial point why we discuss the position of art history and art theory within the context of art academies at all. Thirty years ago this was not an issue. It is an issue now, just because the artists themselves have put the production, distribution and consumption of art in a relative position, where the history and theory of art have become irreducible qualities, so to speak, within any art object.
Le douanier Rousseau

(Le douanier Rousseau er et værktøj for Matisse, Picassos, Apollinaire eller Félix Vallottons; hans berømmelse skyldes kun dem, og han fik intet ud af det (døde i fattigdom)).

fra Alberti, Rafael og Leonardo er alle været eksperter i kunstteori og historie.

Marcel Duchamp: Louis M. Eilshemius (1864 - 1941)

The last one, that "it is necessary for an artist to be expert in the history and theory of art", implies that is is necessary to define this history and theory beyond art history and philosophy and irreducibly link this history and theory of art with the artistic praxis. Else would the statement not make any sense. The alternative would be that the artist is a universal dilettant - in no way any unsympathetic position, but a position which a priori disqualifies any discussion about an artistic professionalism and indeed any such thing as an artistic profession.
5. The Experiment

The question is now: If history and theory is an intrinsic quality in the art work, of which "substance", then, is this history and theory?

An austrian student of architecture I met some years ago criticised his studies of having to much focus on aesthetics and theory. But when it came to the actual building is was clear that economy had everything to say. His conclusion was intriguing: Economy was a material on the same level as concrete and glass, and should be taught as such a material.

Many years later a run across this quote from the American artist Sandro Chia,

- Sandro Chia-citat.

Today, works of art imitate and are inspired by the economy. The economy has itself become the work of art, acquiring all the qualities a work of art should have: pitilessness, ruthlessness, cynicism, grandiosity, communicativeness, abstraction. Economic systems and economic values rule the art world, especially in New York.
What I want to underline with my anecdote and the quote from Sandro Chia is that economy here not is considered as a subject (of interest), but rather as a matter (of composition).

The "light editions" of the university disciplines (art history or cultural theory or what ever) can not consitute such a matter.

Firstly because art history, for instance, then would consitute a subject of interest and not at all a matter of composition.

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I believe that the key to this matter in part could be traced to two events during the late 1960s:

a) The effects of konceptualism and installation.
   - John Baldessari: Everything is purged (1966)
   - Jörg Immendorff: "Hört auf zu Malen" (1966)
   - Kabakov (1988)

Secondly:

b) The discussions of art theory and philosophy (Danto, Dickie; Bourdieu, Luhmann)
   - Andy Warhol: Brillo (1964)
Together these two events could give a key to the characteristics and qualities of the historical and theoretical matter of art. The Swedish artist and art theoretician Lars Vilks have drawn a cynical-descriptive consequence of this by regarding the institutional framework of art as the only truly artistical. Most explicitly in

- Vilks og Martin Schiblis Hvordan man bliver samtidskunstner på tre dager (2005):

Before it took a long time to be an artist. Long technical training was demanded to learn to create art with a capital A. Today has it become significantly easier. It is possible to install yourself as contemporary artist on three days if you follow the advice the authors give. "ORIENTATE YOURSELF IN THE ART WORLD AND YOU KNOW THE ART", is one of the key phrases for to create a successful strategy for an artist. Art itself is not the thing, but THE ART WORLD, IT'S MODES AND HABITS AND ITS AGENTS who constitutes anything relevant. Artistic quality corresponds perfectly to AN EFFICIENT NETWORK. Artistic techniques can be reduced to one and only: THE READYMADE.

I do not disagree with Schiblis and Vilks provocative theses. The artistic "material" is the art world. It corresponds to the concrete and glass of the architect or to the canvas or oil paint of the painter. But they forgot one thing: art has never been reduced to its material, neither the most retinal impressionism, nor the most dry conceptualism: Titian was never only his colorism and Duchamp was never just his gesture. Schiblis
and Vilks forgets all these idiosyncratic arrangements and obsessions of Danish Social Democracy, alchemy, car design, lingvistisk problems in translation or social customs in suburbs.

They forget the artistic subject, or subject-matter, which never have been, never is, and never will be separated from the artistic material, or artistic matter.

[dålig övergång]

If we choose to consider art, not as an essence, but more like an onion, we see that art essentially, doesn't exist, but that it is constructed, or held together by many integrated layers or epi-phenomenons. The historian - an not art historian - Joseph Alsop gave in 1981 his bid for what constituted these integrated layers, in prioritized order:

- Art Collection
- Art History
- Art Marked
- Art Museum
- Art Forgery
- Revaluation of taste
- Antiquities
- Super-prices
There is where the *artistic material* is located and at the same time gives a kind of answer to Baldessaris question.

- Purged ...

And this is the point, this matter, consisting of the integrated historical and theoretical layers.

Men dette materiale skal lignes ved det materiale som de andre laboratorier her på stedet: Computer, Metal, Plast, Serigrafi, Sten og Bronze, Træ, Video, Dybtryk, Farve, Fotografi, Gips, IT, Keramik.

Det er som den type af materiale vi bør anskue kunst- og kulturhistorie som.

Men det er altså et *materiale* (matter) og ikke et *emne* (subject)

Hvis man formår at holde fokus på dette materiale så vil en sådan fremgangsmåde ikke udgøre et svøkket universitetsfag, men en specifik kunstfaglighed.
VI. SPEKULATIV AFSLUTNING

Det er også en to-vejs strategi. Dvs. de studerende er selv forpligtede på reflektionen. Det skal "skrives". Dvs. det skal reflekteres i praksis.

De studerende skal arbejde med dette materiale – på samme niveau som de arbejder med computer, metal, plast eller keramik – i forhold til deres emne. Forskellen mellem det "kunst- og kulturhistoriske" materiale og "sten og bronze", er at alle kunstnere er nødt til at arbejde med det.

Vasaris idé om disegno.
Tegneteknisk laboratorium.

Spørgsmålet om Ursproget
Sproghistorien 1600-tallet
Kunstsprogen (volapyk - esperanto)

Billedkunsten omvendt:
Konventionel ikonografi (kulturbestemt kodificeret og middelbar)
Avantgardets forsøg (visede sig være lige så kulturbestemt osv.)

Man har ledt efter identiteter ikke relationer.

Aby Warburg.