

# 'Head & Whole 2: Talking Heads'

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**Unit/Institution:** **UoA34, Coventry University (10001726)**

**Title:** 'Head & Whole 2: Talking Heads' was a group exhibition of work by contemporary artists including Devane. It is the second in a series curated by Linda Ingham. The exhibition included contemporary visual artworks with historic works with a focus on the human form. In addition to the inclusion of two paintings, Devane also presented a lecture 'Competence, craft and crisis in representational art' and a related workshop on 'The Practice of painting: A transformational approach', as part of the Gallery events programme. The exhibition was open from 3 September – 13 October 2012, the workshop held 5 October 2012 and the lecture delivered 6 October 2012.

**Place:** **Abbey Walk Gallery, Grimsby**

**Year:** **2012**

**Output type:** **Exhibition**

## **Description:**

The contribution to this exhibition of the combination of art work, workshop and lecture enabled Devane to give a new articulation to his primary concern with aspects of human form and imagery within his practice. The works exhibited included 'Call of Duty' from his 'Good & Bad Government' series, which depicts a soldier in an ambiguous space which alludes to the notion of a threshold or portal. This painting was shown alongside a 19<sup>th</sup> Century painting by George Monck (School of Peter Lely), also a picture depicting a military figure. The lecture and workshop both dealt with the relationship between painting and photography and posed questions about the nature of accomplishment and skill in relation to a contemporary discourse. This topic was further developed in his paper 'Competence, craft and crisis in representational art' for The Representational Art Conference 2012 (TRAC 2012). The Head and Whole paper focussed particularly on the use of photographic material, notions of chance and the serendipitous connections that are achieved through approaching the act of painting as a method of orchestrating a sequence of layers. The workshop, with 20 participants, was a three hour masterclass in which strategies for developing painting were explored in the context of Devane's oeuvre. The combination of the three elements enabled the roles of practice, reflection on practice and scholarly contextualisation to be realised within one event.

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figure study, 2012, oil on canvas, 95x75 cm



Call of Duty, 2012, oil on canvas, 102x92cm





## Under the Skin . . . Seminar

### Schedule

- 9.30am – Coffee & Registration
- 10am – Introduction – Linda Ingham
- 10.10 Margaret Ashman
- 10.45 Gillian Hobson
- 11.15 Juliet Chenery-Robson
- 11.45 Q & A
- 12.15 lunch
- 12.45 Liam
- 1.30 John
- 2.30 Liz – with questions as needs to leave @ 4.15
- 3.30 Stephen
- 4.30 Q & A

**Margaret Ashman** is a printmaker based in London. She is the Chairman of the Printmakers Council and a fellow of the Royal Society of Painter Printmakers. She exhibits her work in London galleries, national exhibitions and international festivals such as the Douro Biennial, the Krakow Triennial, and the Japan Print Association's 'Tokyo Prints'. She has visited Shenzhen, China, as an artist in residence and for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Guanalan Print Biennial in 2011.

### Signs of the Times

This paper will attempt to explore multiple approaches to understanding art works based on people performing sign language. With consideration of the legacy created by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Bill Viola, Roni Horn and also with reference to the photo etchings of the author, the paper will examine art critical approaches, anthropological and scientific studies.

In Postmodern thinking art can be deconstructed into language – a set of signifiers; so it's rather neat to make art out of signed signifiers. The artwork becomes a commentary on art criticism.

Embedding text into works is a contemporary concern, achieved in a myriad of ways.

Sign language is not just an obscure language used by people with a hearing disability. It is a fundamental language, now thought to be the original language of humans, predating spoken languages. The dominant human sensory modality is vision pointing to the importance of visual language over auditory ones.

With the advent of neuroaesthetics, scientists have been trying to discover the links between art and the physiology of the brain. This paper will discuss arguments based on these hypotheses and re-examine art works which depict sign language, in this new light.

Contact:

**Gillian Hobson** is an artist working independently and collaboratively across a range of different contexts and media. She is involved in practice based critical research surrounding the dynamic relation of person and place, responding to the environments that she and her works inhabit through art making. She is a Fine Art Researcher at Sheffield Hallam University and an associate of CAPE UK specialising in spatial practice and creative development in education. She works independently and in the public realm across the arts, health and education sectors developing place and person specific projects and programmes and is the author of *Recovery*, examining strategies for creativity in mental health contexts.

Title: Tracing the Light Path

This paper is concerned with the physical and psychological dimensions of person and place and how this interplay may be understood, analysed, or indeed, constructed through art-making. Suggesting that space and place are implicit in the production and communication of perceptual information, emotions, and affects – there is a dynamic relation between site and user/dweller – I use artistic practices and theoretical research to examine the interconnected ways through which ‘affect’ causes ‘effect’ in both unconscious and sentient ways. Set in the slippery relation of *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*, livable and unlivable space, my home is the primary site of a quotidian exchange, in which I explore the concept of light as a change agent in the interaction between person and place. Considering tensions surrounding light, shadows, time and our perception of form, knowing, place and space, I speculate on the ways in which our sense perception may communicate information beneath conscious awareness and the ways a person relates to notions of space, place and belonging through and within a particular architecture. In doing so I examine the ways in which the topographies of inhabited space impact on our sense of belonging/unbelonging, and in what ways art-making may reveal and communicate some of this relation.

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**Juliet Chenery-Robson** is currently undertaking practice-based doctoral research, using photography to explore the aura of disbelief and misconception surrounding the medical condition Myalgic Encephalopathy (ME). Working in participatory settings with ME sufferers, carers and medical researchers, her research crosses disciplinary boundaries. It considers how contemporary photographic practice can be made to respond to and explore ME: an illness that is not only invisible, but has also been challenged and questioned in terms of its very existence.

Mimesis

‘Alienation, social exclusion, loss of identity and controversy lie at the heart of my photographic research. Dubbed ‘the disease of a thousand names’ ME affects over 250,000 people in the UK. However, being a complex disease with no visible signs of illness, but rather a collection of symptoms, photography cannot be used simply to record ME, but rather has to be thought of in terms of metaphor. Following my daughter’s diagnoses of ME when she was 13 in 2004 I am now working with medical researchers and ME sufferers to help create a visual interpretation of this devastating illness.

Contact – Email

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**Liam O’Connor** lives and works in Cardiff. Liam recently received his Masters with distinction, leading to him becoming one of *Axis’s* *MAstars*. Liam’s works are part of collections within the UK and internationally, including work in Standard Chartered Bank and The Cambrian Hotel, Adelboden. He has also exhibited widely including shows with the Times Watercolour prize, the Ryder Cup and the Royal Portrait Society.

Under the Skin

Within this Talk I hope to look at how postmodernism has affected the way artists are approaching the idea of a painted portrait. Postmodernism's effect has been equally deconstructive and constructive: Its wide reaching effects have changed the way we perceive the practice of painting, from the way the medium is dealt with itself through to the sitter – his or her roll within the painting - and its construction. Postmodernism's all encompassing range has lead to many new avenues, equally as important and as overtly unimportant as each other. One of the reasons I am drawn to Portraiture is its almost constant presence within the history of art, leading it in my opinion to be good litmus for the wide reaching cultural impact of postmodernism. The portrait is constantly engaging with current movements and ideas within art as a whole. This continuity can be understood by the practice having core features, "While a portrait can be concerned with likeness as contained in a person's physical features, It can quite easily have many roles, "simple definition belies the complexity and contradictions of portraiture" (Shearer 2004: 21) Within this talk I hope to convey where portraiture is currently placed within "the Long Tail" of postmodernism, society and current technologies have created the postmodern portraits that we can find being made today.

Contact:

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**John Devane** is a figurative painter and printmaker who has exhibited widely since graduating from the Royal College of Art. He was a finalist in the Garrick Milne Prize for Painting in 2005, and has work in a number of public and private collections including the Imperial War Museum. John is currently Head of Department of Design and Visual Arts at Coventry School of Art & Design, Coventry University.

#### Competence, craft and crisis in representational art.

This paper looks at the thorny question of competence and skill in relation to pictorial representation in painting. The liberating impact of twentieth century tendencies in the visual arts, through modernism and beyond, has resulted in a degree of anxiety about the problematic status of craft in relation to art in general, and specifically in relation to painting. Whilst the amateur artist might pose the question 'how do I paint?' implying a degree of deference to those in the know, the art student might ask 'why paint at all? Or, what is a painting?' Whilst these questions are perfectly valid in relation to the notion of art as an 'expanded practice', the thorny question remains: Is there such a thing as artistic competence and, if there is, how might we define it and what value might we place upon it?

Contact

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**Liz Rideal** is an artist, curator and lecturer at both the Slade School of Fine Art and the National Portrait Gallery, where she curated *Mirror Mirror: self-portraits by women artists* in 2001. Most recently her commission *Light Curtain/Drop Sari* for the exhibition *Cotton: Global Threads*, at The Whitworth Art Gallery Manchester University (2012) was to animate the Victorian architecture by night and produce a parallel film installation to be viewed by day within the galleries. Rideal's work is held in museums and collections worldwide including, Tate, V&A, The British Museum, Arts Council England, Government Art Collection, UK. The Yale Center for British Art, and The George Eastman Kodak Museum for Film & Photography, USA. La Biblioteque Nationale, Paris, The Vancouver Art Gallery and The Museet for Fotokunst, Denmark.

#### Second Skin: Cloth and identity in Portraits

Cloth bound up with the known personal identity of the wearer.  
Clothes influenced by external influences such as climate and location.

**Paper presented by John Devane at Head & Whole 2 'Under the skin seminar' 6<sup>th</sup> October 2012: Abbey Walk Gallery.**

**Title of paper: Competence, craft and crisis in representational art.**

### **Abstract**

*This paper looks at the thorny question of competence and skill in relation to pictorial representation in painting. The liberating impact of twentieth century tendencies in the visual arts, through modernism and beyond, has resulted in a degree of anxiety about the problematic status of craft in relation to art in general, and specifically in relation to painting. Throughout the twentieth century, artists have had an understandably ambivalent and ambiguous attitude towards the notion of skill for a number of good reasons. Notwithstanding, Picasso, Matisse and Duchamp all shared a formative exposure to art practice which was rooted in what might in contemporary parlance be described as 'core skills'. Even though each in their own way sought to distance themselves from the straightjacket of academicism, it would be disingenuous to imagine that the work that they produced would have been any less significant had they had free reign in their formative years.*

### **Introduction**

This paper looks at the question of competence and skill in relation to pictorial representation in painting and considers whether the problematic status of these things has contributed to a 'crisis' of representation. Whilst the amateur artist might pose the question 'how do I paint?' implying a degree of deference to those in the know, the student of art might ask 'why paint at all? Or, what is a painting?' Whilst these questions are perfectly valid in relation to the notion of art as an 'expanded practice', the question remains: Is there such a thing as artistic competence and, if there is, how might we define it and what value might we place upon it?

Picasso, Matisse and Duchamp all shared a formative exposure to art practice which was rooted in what might in contemporary parlance be described as 'core skills'. Even though each in their own way sought to distance themselves from the straightjacket of academicism, it would be disingenuous to imagine that the work that they produced would have been any less significant had they had free reign in their formative years.

### **Overview**

This is a reflective paper and is the culmination of a fairly lengthy exposure, both as practitioner and teacher, to the field of contemporary art practice and painting in particular. My observations, claims and assertions are very much rooted and coloured by my own experiences as an artist and an educator.

By way of contextualising my thoughts:

- I will refer to two major exhibitions in London in 2012 by Damien Hirst and David Hockney respectively<sup>1</sup>.
- I have also looked in some detail at the work of the artists aligned with the Leipzig School of Painting; in particular Neo Rauch and I have also considered the work of the Rumanian artist Adrian Ghenie<sup>2</sup>.
- I have included a case study of a particular approach to the teaching of drawing which is referred to in a paper by McCarthy and Sherlock, both artists and academic staff at Coventry University School of Art & Design, UK.
- In order that the research is not just located within an Anglo European/American discourse, I have also examined some of the art currently being produced in art schools in Seoul, South Korea and in particular work being produced by both staff and students at Kookmin University in Seoul. This particular aspect of the research was made possible through British Council Pmi2 funding.

## Context

In the nineteenth century, the French Painter Gustave Courbet placed himself centre stage in his huge and ground breaking work: *The Artist's Studio (L'Atelier du peintre) A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life, 1855* (Muse D'Orsay). Courbet, brush in hand sits painting a landscape whilst being admired by a child and a nude model. This display of vanity is in keeping with the persona of Courbet as the defiant socialist realist and thorn in the side of the French establishment. Courbet's skill was never in doubt even though his motives and subject matter were problematic for nineteenth century public and critics alike. As with many of Courbet's virtuoso pieces, one cannot really divorce the vision from the execution and thus, Courbet's stature as an artist is understandably bound up with his authority, skill and competence as a painter.

As we fast forward into the twentieth century, we find that the major figures of the modernist period including Picasso, Matisse and Duchamp all shared something in common and that is an art education grounded in drawing. It is clear when one examines the formative works of each of these artists that there is ample evidence of skill and competence in drawing, painting and composition; in short, the fundamental requirements of picture making in the western tradition. Whilst it may seem almost crass to describe these attributes as 'core skills' that is in fact what they are. It is my contention that the problematic nature of 'skill and competence' is a largely Western

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to an exhibition by Damien Hirst entitled: 'Two Weeks One Summer' White Cube Bermondsey (23/05/2012- 8/07/2012). Designed to coincide with his major retrospective at Tate Modern, this exhibition of Damien Hirst's recent paintings on canvas was savagely reviewed by Jonathan Jones in the Guardian on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The Leipzig School of painting has been accorded significant status in recent years; its most famous graduate being Neo Rauch who has achieved international prominence with his ambitious and complex figurative paintings which often allude to former Soviet style or Eastern bloc stereotypes, albeit represented with surreal and ironic intent.

European and North American dilemma rooted in denial. Furthermore, the pejorative connotations of 'craft' are a legacy of the 'post pop' and 'postmodernist' sensibilities which are inextricably rooted with the migration of the avant-garde into the academy. In recent years one might almost argue that the acquisition of such skills is seen as detrimental to the development of an artistic identity.

### **Debunking mythology**

It is my aim to challenge some of the more orthodox thinking around ideas of competence and skill in the hope that a more measured understanding of those terms might usefully inform the contemporary debate and discourse. The terms used in the paper will warrant some explanation in order to avoid misunderstandings. Firstly, by 'skill' and 'competence' I mean some kind of demonstration of accomplishment which can be recognised by one's peers as being pertinent to a particular discipline. However, I am not just talking about technique, I am referring to skill and competence in relation to the conventions associated with depiction and pictorial representation.

The fear of academicism still looms large in both the educational and professional art world. The fear that an adherence to a body of knowledge might stifle individual creativity is a widely held view of artists and teachers alike. The thought of signing up to a notion of 'teaching art' in a way which might impinge on 'personal expression' has contributed to the idea that the realisation of an art object (and especially a painting) might best be achieved through trial and error, rather than adherence to a particular method or set of skills. Arguably one of the most powerful and corrosive positions of orthodoxy within the art world today, and this is where the mystique and mythology surrounding art production continues to prevail against all the odds. Whilst this kind of freedom can be exhilarating for some, it can be a huge obstacle to others and the mixture of freedom with as yet unknown constraints can prove to be very difficult for most students (Madge and Weinberger 1973)<sup>3</sup>. It is my view that the 'crisis of representation' can be directly linked to the prevailing orthodoxies of art production in which the problematical status of skill and competence is either surrendered to the pursuit of 'self expression' or is relinquished entirely in favour of professionally fabricated artefacts.

The perceived dichotomy between a work of art and a work of craft is very much still a contested territory and (whilst not a new phenomenon) has found fruition in a whole new generation of artists who rely on the expertise of others to give form to their ideas (Petry 2012 p 7). In 'The Art of not making' Michael Petry argues persuasively that in areas like film for example, the film director can legitimately claim creative ownership of the film without having physically made the film. In areas where collaboration is critical, this is quite understandable as the film director will have almost certainly have demonstrable creative and technical insights which will

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<sup>3</sup> *Art Students Observed* is an interesting period document and gives a provocative account of a supposedly 'typical' UK fine art course in the late 60s early 70s. The dominant pedagogies of the period are examined in a way that makes for uncomfortable reading. However, what is especially interesting is the fact that although the name of the art college is not referred to directly, the name 'Midville' is used throughout and the emergence of the Art & Language movement (although not alluded to directly) leave the reader in no doubt as to the identity of the institution in question.

undoubtedly inform the final look and feel of the film. In the fine art arena, this is not usually the case and artists may arguably have little or no purchase on the means of production once the concept enters the production phase. The celebration of the new artist/artisan relationship is an interesting development (although as Petry rightly observes the reliance on technical assistance is not a new idea) but in my view, further exposes the neglect of a 'body of knowledge' relating to the development of an individual art practice. By focussing on the sophisticated levels of fabrication of artefacts, so redolent of the contemporary professional art world, Michael Petry has highlighted an issue which is currently under discussion within the academy, and that is the extent to which one might attribute importance to craft making skills within a fine art curriculum.

### **Can Art be taught?**

Although it is fair to say that a lot has changed in art schools in recent decades, the underlying ethos of self discovery through trial and error still lies at the heart of the fine art project and there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the status of discipline specific skills and competencies. In 2001, a research project entitled; 'A curriculum for artists' was initiated at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. The project sought to examine some of the issues relating to fine art pedagogies by evaluating questionnaires received from 42 art schools in England and Scotland.<sup>4</sup> In a sense the 'jury is still out' in terms of ascertaining what might usefully for an art school curriculum and it is probably fair to say that the Western European model will continue to prevail until such time as a more persuasive alternative can be found.

The view that art cannot be taught (Elkins 2001: p 98) and that it can only be fostered or helped along is a persuasive idea.<sup>5</sup> The fear of academicism in the wake of Impressionism was perhaps the most likely reason for rejecting the more orthodox and hierarchical models of art production which had flourished in previous centuries. The rise of the avant-garde, the migration of European artist to the United States, the Armory Show (New York 1913), all seemed to herald a new age in which new values would replace the conservatism and straightjacket of the nineteenth century atelier models. In *The Museum of the Future*, Peter Weibel talks about a 'crisis of competence' in relation to the rise of abstract art and he describes this phenomenon as an 'exit from the picture world'.

A cursory glimpse of much of the output (referred to as painting) in the current climate will reveal little or no idea about fundamental figure/ground relationships, let alone the subtle and sophisticated strategies employed by artists in previous

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<sup>4</sup> The results of phase one of the project were included in a publication entitled: 'A curriculum for artists in 2004'. Susan Brind looked at the questions, methods and findings of the research project and a summary of the key findings is included in the publication. One aspect of the analysis of the data returned in questionnaires would suggest that 'most art making skills are considered optional'.

<sup>5</sup> James Elkins explores the history and mythology of art schools with wit and insight. His historical survey of art instruction is useful in understanding where we are now. However, his position is largely in support of the status quo in the sense that however flawed and paradoxical the current approaches to teaching art might be, it is difficult to imagine how it might be replaced without shooting the goose that lays the golden egg.

centuries. My guess is that very few contemporary painters will have encountered Gombrich's 'reciprocal neglect theory' (Podro 1998) which is arguably one of the key touchstones of perceptual theory relating to how we actually look at paintings. Kitaj in his introduction to the *Artist's Eye*, described attending art school in New York where everyone was painting with house-painters' brushes, when in fact his heart was set on painting like Memlinc. Kitaj claimed never to have 'chased down those Flemish secrets' which in his view had been 'dumped into the respectable wastebins of history in the aftermath of new sets of instructions by ideologues like Roger Fry .... who mistrusted Flemish 'realism for now shopworn 20<sup>th</sup> century reasons.'

The dominant gene in contemporary art practice is one of appropriation rather than one of representation. Whilst those terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive, it is my view that there is a clear tendency towards appropriation strategies in all forms of art making in mainstream Western art practice, and this is most readily articulated in the term 'installation' which in many ways has become the preferred mode of output for many a contemporary artist. The artist Terry Atkinson (one of the founder members of the Art & Language movement) has suggested that art students might be usefully taught 'avant-garde posturing' as a strategy for dealing with the cut-and-thrust of the contemporary art world. In short, it might be sensible to equip art students by teaching them to make art which looks like contemporary art and also to be able to justify it to their audience, rather than to struggle with outmoded concepts of representation?<sup>6</sup> A contrary view might hold with returning to the notion of an academy and it is evident that academies of art are alive and kicking around Europe and in the States, they are by and large, perceived to be institutions in denial! Why? Simply because they generally espouse a fairly reactionary position in relation to contemporary art and thus fail to enter into a meaningful debate.

### **Hockney and Hirst**

In recent months, exhibitions in London: Damien Hirst at Tate Modern and 'Two Weeks One Summer' at White Cube Bermondsey, and David Hockney's 'A Bigger Picture' at the Royal Academy have attracted the attention of the critics and public alike by highlighting two themes, firstly that of authorship and secondly the issue of artistic competence. In a *Guardian* review of Hirst's paintings, Jonathan Jones does not hold back in declaring that there are deficiencies for all to see.

'At least it can be said for Hirst that he shuns the cheap tricks of other contemporary painters. If he used the glib formulae so common in painting today, such as whimsical abstraction and projected outline images, he might get away, as others do, with a total lack of true painterly knowledge.'

'Each of these paintings – from the parrot in a cage to the blossoms and butterflies – takes on the difficulties of representational painting and visibly fails to come close, not merely to mastery, but to basic competence.'

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<sup>6</sup> Terry Atkinson has written at length about what he describes as the 'avant-garde model of artistic subject' (AGMOAS). In a number of essays he refers to the extent to which the art establishment has embraced seemingly avant-garde practice –in events like the Turner Prize which Terry Atkinson sees as celebratory rather than critical.

One might conclude that Damien Hirst has done very nicely up until now without worrying about issues of competence, and I'm sure he won't lose too much sleep over the critique from Jones. However, at the heart of this assault on his work Jones has struck a nerve and it is one which has been rarely exposed in quite such a vehement manner in recent times. No one doubts Hirst's enormous impact on contemporary art; his stature will probably not diminish much as a consequence of a negative review, but what we are faced with is the simple fact that an artist at the top of their game is woefully deficient in what are fairly rudimentary aspects of painting. If Damien Hirst hadn't bothered to exhibit his paintings, then it wouldn't really matter. Sadly though, for reasons that are perhaps best understood to Hirst himself, he did choose to show them and in so doing has been shot down in flames.

Perhaps unwittingly, David Hockney managed to throw more turps onto those flames by making a declaration about the authorship of his own recent work by designing a poster for his Royal academy exhibition of Yorkshire landscapes reading "All the works here were made by the artist himself, personally". This declaration was initially interpreted, in a Radio Times interview, as a reference to Damien Hirst, and although this interpretation was later retracted by the Royal Academy, the cat was effectively out of the bag. Hockney, unwittingly or not, was making a point about the extent to which his own paintings were the product of his own labour. As far back as 1977 David Hockney in conversation with Peter Fuller declared that 'Modern art generally ignores skills and crafts, or assumes they are not necessary.' He also referred to the notion of 'crisis' as serious and suggested that 'More people can see the crisis, so things will begin to happen. So I am a little optimistic; if you recognise the crisis, something can be done about it. But it is serious.'

Expressivity and authenticity – two touchstones of modernism - have long been aligned with the romantic notion of artistic struggle in the modernist period. Discussion and concern about *how* something like a painting might actually be made is generally viewed with pejorative connotations, because of the legacy of academism in the professional world and the preference for technique over substance in the amateur domain. The liberating impact of twentieth century tendencies in the visual arts, through modernism and beyond, has resulted in a degree of anxiety about the problematic status of craft in relation to art in general, and specifically in relation to painting. David Hockney's views on craft and skill in relation to art production are almost certainly entwined with his position on 'drawing' and his own decision to spend the first six months of his studentship at the Royal College of Art drawing a skeleton. I may be wrong, but Damien Hirst probably did not enter into any formative art practice of this kind except when he was on the Foundation course in Leeds. Some would argue that Hirst's trajectory as an artist has not suffered as a consequence of this shortcoming, and may well have been enhanced by it. However, the net result is that Hirst sees painting as a marker of the sort of status he now seeks. By his own admission, he would like to achieve something noteworthy in this area and has thrown his hat in the ring by revealing the pictures at White Cube earlier this year. In terms of unpicking the Jonathan Jones

review, it is worth dwelling on the fact that the main thrust of the criticism is directed at the simple fact that Hirst is not equipped to make the sort of paintings he is trying to make. In short, he is not able to articulate pictorial form and space in a way that is persuasive and instead he resorts to 'arrangements' of recognisable artefacts which superficially mimic the surface quality of early Francis Bacon, but which do not work in terms of a figure-ground relationship.

De-skilling is a recurrent theme in the arts and in society at large; the notion that skill is no longer ideological but strategic (Beech 2005) and that the strategic deployment of skill in art requires skills of its own is an interesting thought<sup>7</sup>. The issue with Hirst is that he does not generally rely on displays of skill and yet his recent paintings reveal a desire to paint in what one might say is a fairly straightforward manner and with none of the 'cheap tricks' that Jones refers to. Excessive displays of virtuoso skill can make uncomfortable viewing, unless of course the excessive display is ironic. Gerhard Richter's ironic slickness is certainly knowingly orchestrated and is reminiscent of both the empty ideological rhetoric of soviet realism and the slickness of contemporary advertising. Ideological extremes collide in Richter's work; the banality of Eastern block figuration pitted against the luxuriant excesses of abstract expressionism. Curiously Richter's alleged slickness is not really called into question because of its apparently ironic intent, however, the slickness of Odd Nerdrum by contrast seems to be less acceptable. Why is this? Well perhaps it is because Nerdrum takes himself too seriously and seemingly wants to inhabit something of a literal and metaphorical parallel universe.

Artists' schooled in the Eastern Block, who have subsequently found favour in the west including: Gerhard Richter, Neo Rauch and more recently Adrian Ghenie all have one thing in common, they all had an art education which was firmly rooted in (what many in Western art schools would consider to be) outmoded practices of conventional drawing and painting. It would be wholly wrong to imagine that the adulation heaped on these artists is confirmation of their ability and skill as painters, but there is no doubt that each in their own way have managed to put their formative art education to the service of a contemporary discourse. It is in my view significant that those artists schooled outside of Western Europe and including artists from the far East and in particular South Korea have not been subject to the same anxiety and dilemma faced by artists in the West who have found the issue of skill and competence to be deeply problematic.

### **Practice and theory**

I need to declare at this point that I am not a theorist; I am a practitioner and as such my position on matters of skill and competence is largely experiential and has evolved over many years. I am not making a case for any return to some romantic notion of halcyon days and I am certainly not advocating the taking of a reactionary

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<sup>7</sup> Dave Beech's article in Art Monthly Magazine in 2005 explores the political and cultural legacy of deskilling and makes a persuasive case for the idea that in contemporary art practice, the notion of skill is no longer ideological but strategic.

position in relation to the prevailing discourse of contemporary art. As Kitaj rightly observed in his introduction to the Artist's Eye exhibition 'It is often said that good art derives an important part of its energy from its own time, from its immediate precedents, from having depended substantially on a historical dialectic or imperative of one kind or another'. We are where we are, and there is no point in wishing for some kind of parallel universe. However, my instinct tells me that things have gone horribly wrong and it is my contention that the study of fine art in particular is in a state of crisis. Decades of solitary introspection by generations of art students, who pitted against the challenge of the 'white cube' as the ultimate destination of their output, has in my view all but stifled any chance of a contrary and more meaningful educational experience from taking shape within the visual arts. It is no coincidence that the default position for most fine art students is the white cube of the studio space. It is also not a coincidence that one of the most widely quoted points of reference for the fine art student is 'The Poetics of Space' by Gaston Bachelard. This white washed box is the nest from which the fledgling artist must emerge fully formed in order to succeed in the professional art world. This embryonic white cube space is both a physical and a metaphorical space where the fine art student must nourish and develop their practice and perhaps more importantly, they must be able to defend their position in relation to the discourse of fine art in tutorials, critiques and seminars.

### **A Case Study**

In an interesting case study from Coventry University School of Art & Design, Peter McCarthy and George Sherlock developed an entry level drawing course which aimed at broadening students understanding of observational drawing and equipping weaker students in particular for the difficulties they might encounter when trying to make a coherent two dimensional drawing of a form in space. The approach to drawing was articulated in a lecture given at the Bellas Artes, University of Oporto in Portugal, and subsequently formed the basis of a paper included in The International Journal of Art & Design Education in 2001 (McCarthy and Sherlock 2001)<sup>8</sup>. In essence, the model adopted by McCarthy and Sherlock was predicated on the idea of thinking about drawing in terms of translation rather than imitation and the course was entitled 'Transformational Drawing'. The course was empowering for those taking part and students were encouraged to be imaginative and expressive and to allow for serendipitous occurrences to inform the image whilst at the same time being encouraged to consider the broad masses of the form in question. With the life model as the focus of the exercise, students were encouraged to acknowledge the figure/ground relationship and thus not lapse into a more conventional and hierarchical relationship between the figure and the surrounding space of the room. Students were required to move beyond mere demonstrations of competence and thus gain the confidence to find alternative strategies for drawing the figure and extend their vocabulary of mark-making. The drawing classes included daily

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<sup>8</sup> This paper by McCarthy and Sherlock refers to drawing as being analogous to language and thus vocabulary. The premise of their approach is a rejection of 'being too literal' and allowing for the idea that a 'language' based on translation may come into effect through cycles of activity. Students are introduced to a number of (modernist) strategies for the development of drawing based on observation, which can still result surprising and imaginative results.

critiquing sessions which were fairly combative at times as students were encouraged to defend their approach and also offer critical reflection on their own work and the work of their peers. Having witnessed the results of this approach over a number of years, it was evident that as a working methodology this approach was extremely demanding and required energy and persistence. Ultimately, I think the transformational approach was not only rewarding in preparing students for the development of their own practice in whatever form they saw fit but it also provided a persuasive formative drawing experience which would inform subsequent study. By acknowledging notions of complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty from the outset, the course encouraged dialogue which would permeate practice beyond the life room, rather than providing a hermetically sealed approach to drawing based on academic and largely formulaic principles.

### **Where to next?**

- In conclusion, it is perhaps timely to reflect on some of the current practice in Western art teaching and perhaps glean some ideas from what happens further afield;
- We should attempt to reconcile the tension between the idea of 'uninhibited self expression' in the context of what might be best understood as a 'body of knowledge' which might be learned;
- There should be a place in art education for teaching crafts and skills whilst at the same time acknowledging the need for self expression. This should not however mean that the cognitive is somehow relegated in favour of the retinal. All art of any consequence should be about ideas!

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