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Abstract

The artist's studio is one of the more fascinating spaces in contemporary culture, particularly because it operates in a dark cloud of misconceptions, myths, and distortions. It is assumed to be an intensely private place where creativity happens, somehow and in some way, although no one really knows what that means. This potent combination of mystification and ignorance creates problems for studio art education in the academy because the studio space is at the heart of the education of the artist. An important part of my work as an historian of modern art and critic and curator of contemporary art is the study of studio practices. And I am convinced that greater clarity about studio practice will benefit the studio art curriculum. And I am likewise convinced that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning can assist in this necessary project of curricular revision by providing a coherent and consistent pedagogical framework.

Keywords

Scholarship of artistic practice, Teaching and learning

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**Between Teaching and Learning:
Personal Notes on the Scholarship of Artistic Practice**

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Studio Practice. An Introduction

The artist's studio is one of the more fascinating spaces in contemporary culture, particularly because it operates in a dark cloud of misconceptions, myths, and distortions. It is assumed to be an intensely private place where creativity happens, somehow and in some way, although no one really knows what that means. This potent combination of mystification and ignorance creates problems for studio art education in the academy because the studio space is at the heart of the education of the artist. An important part of my work as an historian of modern art and critic and curator of contemporary art is the study of studio practices. And I am convinced that greater clarity about studio practice will benefit the studio art curriculum. And I am likewise convinced that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning can assist in this necessary project of curricular revision by providing a coherent and consistent pedagogical framework.

Art is not only an object, it is a complex set of cultural practices with a history and tradition, into which the artist is initiated, so that her history is understood as part of the larger history of art. Art is thus never a private, individual practice. This notion of the history and tradition of the practice of art also forms her identity as an artist in the world as well as shapes and nourishes her private studio practice. The studio space is the space where decisions are made; and those decisions must be infused with wisdom and discernment, the products of distilled knowledge and understanding about oneself and the medium of one's artistic practice, which has been used by countless artists for centuries. Studio art education must cut through—not add to—the haze that obscures the mechanics of studio practice.

The modern studio space has evolved to become a location where existential questions regarding self-identity and knowledge about the world is developed and maintained through specific aesthetic actions, such as marks on a canvas. These marks are not illustrations of ideas or beliefs already secured or discovered through other means, but are believed to be themselves means of making knowledge. Within this modern paradigm, artistic practice becomes a means to gain understanding about the self and the world, to clarify what it means to be a human person in the world. The belief that this understanding can be achieved in part through artistic practice, through marks on a canvas, is the distinctive contribution of modern art to the history of human aesthetic work. This no doubt has been present in artistic practice in the West well before modernity, but it was implicit or perhaps only of secondary importance. Under the conditions of modernity, however, it becomes preeminent. However, the artist's studio space is not a sacred chapel completely cut off from the outside world. It is porous; it expands or retracts. An enormous part of an artist's education is to discern the shape and contours of her particular studio space and the practices she maintains as the means by which she relates to the world, not just as an artist, but also as a human person.

Studio art education is shaped by this modern notion of the artist's studio while it simultaneously molds the studio according to academic classroom/laboratory/library standards that are legible in academic discourse. This can undermine the very essence and potential of modern studio practice. The end result is that studio art education, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, produces "academic" artists, that is, artists who conceive of their practice as defined by the institutional limits of academia. For studio art education to form artists and not merely academics, it must in some way de-mystify the overblown and clichéd notion of what creativity is and what occurs in the studio space while at the same time resisting the bureaucratic and academic tendency to discipline the life out of this cultural practice. In fact, it is only by demystifying the space that the authentic radicality of studio art practice can emerge. Moreover, I argue that properly understood, studio practice has the potential to serve as a hub around which to inform other cultural practices which are taught and learned in academia.

Perhaps SoTL can be helpful in refocusing attention upon art as a distinctive studio practice by rearranging the relationship between teaching and learning, not merely as a means of developing technical skill or facility with a particular aesthetic medium, but in centering the educational focus on the development of a rich and robust studio practice as the locus within which particular aesthetic decisions must be made and not merely the application of a particular technique to produce a particular image. Critic Donald B. Kuspit once observed that art schools should be in the business not merely to produce a particular kind of artist but a particular kind of self. Being an artist means being a human being in the world in a particular way. Studio practice is the concrete and metaphorical location of the artist as a particular kind of self and so it should be at the heart of a studio art education. But it is not.

Trained as an art historian, I have recently come to academia after over a decade as a curator of modern and contemporary art at a university art museum, which includes considerable experience working with contemporary artists and writing for and speaking about art to diverse public audiences. So, although I had taught a number of undergraduate and graduate courses during my curatorial career, I was never involved in any broad-based curriculum work, even though one of my initiatives while curator was to develop ways that the museum could participate more proactively in the teaching and learning life of academic communities throughout campus.

My primary project as a faculty member is to bring my experience in the contemporary art world, as a curator and critic, to studio art, art education, and art history undergraduate students. My concern is to bring my practices in this art world into the classroom and also to develop ways that I can bring my students into my practices, to show them that artistic practice, including writing about it, is no--indeed, cannot be--limited to the academic classroom. The studio art education might provide the artist with the bones and muscles, but it is the ligaments and tendons of studio practice that bind them together and allow them to work. And I have spent over a decade working with artists as a museum curator and art critic, focusing solely on those ligaments and tendons. It is precisely these ligaments and tendons that are needed to bind studio art education.

What would a curriculum look like if it were so defined by those outside practices, if it included attention to those ligaments and tendons, or, to clear out the fog and haze that surrounds studio practice? Would it look any different? I have begun to reflect on SoTL as a scaffold that can give pedagogical order to my experiences and interests that have been developed outside (although often next to) academia. For my purposes here I am defining SoTL simply as "systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public" (McKinney).

SoTL reflects on the diversity of learning and teaching experiences and their relationship in an effort to probe more deeply in the exploration of how both teaching and learning occur and how both practices can be improved.

Given my experience working with contemporary artists and my familiarity with a wide range of studio practices, I will restrict my reflections in what follow to studio art education. And by studio art I mean the training of art students to practice art, usually through continuing studies in graduate school, with the ultimate goal of working professionally as artists. The training of art historians and art educators falls outside the pale of this short essay. Although, it will be the coherent framework of SoTL that will ultimately enable an art historian to participate in studio art education in a meaningful way.

SoTL exists as a means to rethink the relationship between teaching and learning, most often through reanimating or transcending the limitations of the conventional classroom pedagogical process, most obviously, the assumption that the teacher teaches, dispenses, while the student learns, receives. The question remains, how will SoTL contribute to an educational process, studio art education, in which the core of the curriculum, the studio class, does not appear to conform to such conventional pedagogical situations? Art schools and studio art education in American colleges and universities is a relatively recent phenomenon and as a result, art departments are one of the least assimilated academic disciplines in the university. This is often erroneously believed to be because somehow art is "creative" and thus subjective in ways that other academic disciplines of study are not. But this view, held by art faculty and chemists alike, mystifies artistic practice in unhelpful ways.

First, art is assumed to be the product of a particular visual technique that is, for all intents and purposes, innate. One is "gifted" with artistic talent. A child is not "gifted" at chemistry. The assumption, then, is that the former needs little work to cultivate while the latter needs considerable work. But having "artistic talent," whatever that means, by no means makes one an artist. Second, art faculty and art students alike tend to perpetuate this myth by claiming that they "do art" because they are "visual thinkers," thus implying that they do art because they can't do anything else. This is decidedly not the case for chemistry students, for whom the assumption is that their raw talents (i.e., intelligence) would enable them to contribute to culture and serve society in a myriad of different ways. Third, there is a mystification of "creativity" that assumes that one doesn't necessarily "work" at it. It is somehow and in some way a "grace" and thus can't be taught and can't be disciplined. Add to the assumption that art is entirely subjective and open to every conceivable interpretation, objective evaluation is nearly impossible and there exists no external requirements, and the result is that "art classes" are reduced to "easy grades," relaxation from the rigors of intellectual work in the academy. All of this makes art departments seem like mystical places, barely understood by the mere mortals throughout the academic community. And at the same time, it is also regarded as somehow sub-academic, an intellectual desert or wasteland, an intellectual ghetto, in which students labor in the equivalent of projects, those underfunded facilities where the students make their work.

This is a self-imposed and largely unnecessary exile. Moreover, I believe that this view of art, perpetuated by the art departments themselves, profoundly misunderstands artistic practice. Most faculty respond to the inevitable view that, because art is subjective, creative, and beyond critical judgment, their studio courses are easy, by heaping more work on them, making them produce more and more technical work. But what is needed, perhaps, is not quantity but quality and more conceptual thinking, multi-dimensional

thinking, integrated thinking as a very part of the creative process. SoTL might be helpful to interpret the distinctives of artistic practice in ways that are not only more legible to the academic community, but make better sense of what it is that art faculty and art students actually do. If art is entirely subjective, something anyone can do, and there exist no standard or criterion of value, then why should students pay tuition to study something that merely confirms what we already know and can do. The studio art curriculum is in danger of making itself useless or irrelevant to larger culture. However, with a more robust notion of artistic practice, the study of art might become a more relevant and useful (i.e., challenging and difficult) subject of study in the university. And perhaps, it might even be helpful in reflecting on how teaching and learning themselves can be practiced in the academy.

There are three ways that SoTL might be helpful in studio art education. First, it can give guidance to certain aspects of what occurs and can occur in studio art courses. Second, it can also be helpful in integrating the non-studio art class into the broader curriculum. And third, it can help reconsider how “professional practices” are more fully integrated into the education process.

I. Studio course.

The heart and soul of a studio art education is the studio course, in which students devote three-to five-hour blocks of time working with faculty in particular aesthetic media, from drawing, painting, sculpture to printmaking, ceramics, photography, and video.

Despite its open and seemingly informal dialogical environment, the studio course remains dominated by conventional teaching methods and assumptions, many of which flatly contradict the history of artistic practice itself and the spirit of SoTL. First, despite the fact that it is not a traditional classroom environment, the content of the studio class is often too narrowly defined merely as the application of a particular “technique.” Instructors give students a very specific assignment and students are required to execute it. Therefore, the studio class becomes merely producing an “answer,” the assignment. But the answer isn’t really an answer. That is merely the student’s “take” on the answer. The instructor usually gives the class an assignment that consists merely in the execution of the specifics, as if the finished work is the sum total of those specific instructions, not the production of a strong painting, drawing, photograph, or whatever.

In addition, the conventional sender-receiver/active-passive pedagogical model is further entrenched in studio classes through the fact that the faculty rarely bring their own work in as practitioners, literally or figuratively. It is a practice-based environment for all except the instructor. Unlike theatre or music studio contexts, in which the artist will often perform certain passages so that students can see and experience art in action, art faculty often do not use their own practice as artists as means of instruction; that is, they don’t show, they merely tell. This deprives art students of an important pedagogical resource since the instructor can function less as an objective critic and more as a fellow artist, a mentor—one whom students can emulate—learn and imitate not merely the skills but the behaviors, habits, and all the other disciplines and practices that can be picked up with such observation.

The studio course often has built into it “class critiques,” in which students, through the leadership of the instructor, help students evaluate the work of others. This is a powerful pedagogical experience that can be strengthened by challenging faculty to extend its conventional boundaries, perhaps by bringing in their own work, or inviting other faculty in to offer critiques of not only the students’ work but the instructor’s as well. This practice

can be helpful in breaking down a very sharp barrier that exists between the instructor and the students, which reveals both the faculty and student endeavoring on the same long and winding path of artistic practice.

This is important not only for the students, who are able to observe that the instructor herself, as an artist, is practicing what she preaches, and is also subject to and needs critique and evaluation in her own studio work so that the students can observe how mature artists respond to critique. It is also important for the *instructor's* own growth as an artist, which is their scholarship or research in the academy. The sharp separation among art faculty between their "teaching" and their "studio work," which is a product of conventional academic distinctions, is, I think, surprising to many faculty outside art departments, who believe that the studio environment in the university offers a productive context for faculty to do their own work and perhaps to do it with their students. This is rarely the case and those glorious exceptions merely prove the rule.

Yet there is potential. Those disciplines like printmaking, sculpture, and ceramics, which require large equipment, usually demand that the faculty member share space with her students, which can give the students insight into the instructor's own studio practice, an experience that seems to create a more vibrant, collegial, creative community than the more "solitary" artistic disciplines, like drawing, painting, and photography. (Moreover, advanced architecture courses, often called "vertical studios," in which students work collaboratively or independently for an intense, but abbreviated, time to meet a project deadline, working together and or with a faculty supervisor who often uses those projects in their own professional work, might also be an provocative model.)

Art faculty often remained locked in two hermetically sealed worlds: the world of the "classroom" and the world of their own work as artists, a dichotomy that recapitulates the private/public rift of modernity; a rift given ontological value through the institutionalization of 'research,' 'teaching,' and 'service' as hermetically sealed off "practices." Let me suggest that the art faculty, perhaps with the help of SoTL, should reflect on ways to make these worlds more porous so that both worlds feed on and inform one another. This not only allows the classroom to be nourished by creative practice but also enables the classroom to serve as a catalyst for driving new creative work in the studio and to perhaps rethink the relationships between "research" and "teaching."

The informal studio course context can serve as an opportunity to reflect on how the faculty person, presumably the professional artist, not only "teaches" but also "learns" by incorporating her own studio practices into the studio classroom. Traditional studio training was often led by an artist in his own studio as the students were trained as assistants. And there exists today what could be described as a post-graduate residency program in which artists with their terminal graduate degrees in hand (the M.F.A.) often find work in the studios of professional artists. And it is this experience, not their studio art training as an undergraduate or graduate student, which initiates them most fully into studio practice. It is possible that SoTL might be a helpful tool to consider in what ways this neglected aspect of teaching and learning can be integrated into studio art education, which can capture and enfold those "ligaments" and "tendons" into the muscle and bone of the curriculum, giving the students more strength and flexibility as they develop their artistic practice outside the academy.

II. Curriculum: Art History Courses

The place of the art history course in a studio art curriculum is awkward. The rationale is easy enough to understand. And it is correct: art is a cultural practice; therefore it is also

an historical practice and students who desire to participate in this practice must be initiated into its history and tradition. Yet, too often art students are asked to approach art history like an art history student and not like an artist. And this serves to separate art history from studio practice; art history is merely an “academic” endeavor that, at best, provides names of artists that the student can refer to in conversation with faculty and in their artist statements. For the duration of the course, art students are supposed to act like art historians around art, whatever that means. What it doesn’t mean, supposedly, is to act like artists around the art. Art history puts art in context: biographical, historical, sociological, and political, among many others—it is “scholarly” and “academic,” not “creative.” What often gets short shrift is art’s dynamic aesthetic presence in the present.

It is often a frustrating experience for studio art students to take art history classes because rarely do the instructors have an idea of what those students need from the study of art history and that those needs are different from other students, especially the art history majors. Students and faculty alike recognize this frustration. However, the result is the assumption that art students aren’t “rigorous” or don’t like to “write” or just want “to look at pictures” and faculty end up, if they are sensitive to this frustration, merely catering to and facilitating the marginalization of art students as incapable of serious academic work by assigning “art student friendly” papers.

The issue, which SoTL can be helpful in revealing, is that it is a question of the kind of serious academic work that occurs and how art historians and artists, as participants in different kinds of cultural practices, attend to the history of art. Moreover, the subject matter of SoTL, that is, the relationship of teaching and learning, is powerfully manifest in teaching art history courses to studio art students. Art history courses most often assume that there are artifacts, objects, called “art” that need to be understood in various historical, social, political, and biographical contexts. What this approach does not do sufficient justice to is the reality that art is the product of specific decisions that are made in the artist’s studio. And it is that decision-making with which the art student can most identify.

The studio art student has little in common with Velasquez, Rembrandt, Picasso, and Pollock. Yet the decisions that she faces in her studio are not much different than those faced by each of these artists. SoTL can be helpful in conceptualizing what can be learned from a work of art as a product of decisions that occur in the artist’s studio, decisions that make both the artist in the textbook and the studio art student into “learners,” that is, developing the practices to be sensitive to what the work of art is doing in the process of its making. How does an artist learn in the studio? How does the artist evaluate the decisions that she makes in making a work of art? How are those decisions evaluated as “successful?” This is a radically different way to look at a work of art, which places it not first in the museum or art gallery (or the art history textbook), but in the artist’s studio space.

And let me suggest the unthinkable for an art historian. If studio practice is more than the application of a technique and consists also of initiating the student into the living tradition of modern art, and art history is part of that initiation process, I would urge studio art faculty to teach art history in their studio courses and not merely assume that the art historians “will take care of it.” This will help art history faculty as they teach art students who are familiar with considering art history from an artist’s perspective. The relationship between studio art and art history at the curriculum level must be more porous and less buffered and hermetically sealed than it currently is. It is possible that SoTL can be helpful in developing beneficial relationships that are sufficiently porous while not dissolving art history into merely a service practice for studio art education.

III. Professional Practices

The conventional studio art education will often deal with some of these “ligaments” and “tendons” are sometimes tacked on at the end as a kind of “professional practices” course. This course usually focuses on how the art student gets her work out there in the world, strategies for marketing, applying for grants, how to set up a studio, etc. The guiding assumption is that only after the art students learn the techniques of their artistic medium do the art students think about those non-technical aspects of their artistic practice. This cannot be taught at the end and cannot be reduced to marketing and career strategies. It must be integrated from the very beginning in a textured and expansive notion of the studio space and practice. Painting, for example, is not just an application of a technique or skill. It is a fully integrated and robust way of thinking, of being in the world as a painter. And therefore it is profoundly bound up in theory and conceptualization of the studio space, the development of particular practices, practices which I call disciplines, that form and maintain productive artistic behavior and cultivate meaningful practice and wise decisions, inside and outside the studio.

Conclusion

The artist’s studio space is not a place filled with the inebriating and mysterious fog of “creativity,” in which the work of art just “happens.” It is a space where specific aesthetic decisions are made that might result in a successful work of art. The mechanics of studio practice itself is ironically and surprisingly ignored in studio art education; it is a place where teaching and learning can and should occur in powerful and distinctive ways. Because it offers resources and freedom to re-conceptualize what teaching and learning are and how they interact, SoTL can be a helpful tool in repositioning studio practice at the core of a studio art education.

Moreover, I would also like to suggest that SoTL may benefit from its exposure to the mechanics—the aesthetics and poetics—of studio practice. I have focused in this essay on the limitation of conventional studio art education. But it is appropriate that I mention its chief virtue in the context of the college and university. It is one of the few places where the student is asked to make her work in the studio, her “academic subject,” a formative part of who she is as a human being. The development of her personhood is assumed (correctly I suggest), by her development as an artist. Being an artist in the world is about being a particular kind of human being. Despite all of its shortcomings, studio art education forces students to conceive of their subject not merely as a career path, or a “major,” but as a way of life. This, I believe, should be what all academic study should be about. A chemistry or mathematics student should conceive of his work as forming his identity as a human being not merely as “guild preparation” for a particular career or the acquisition of a skill that can be applied to various career paths. This ultimately touches the more utopian aspirations and potential of SoTL.

Teaching and learning is a cultural practice that must be part of forming and shaping the human being, the teacher and the learner. Despite (or perhaps because of) its marginalized position in the university, studio art education has the potential, with the help of SoTL, of revealing itself to embody the heart and soul of the education process, which is, ultimately, an *aesthetic and artistic process*. Who knew?