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Book Reviews
Comptes-rendus de livres

Brad Buckley and John Conomos, eds., *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artist, the PhD, and the Academy,* The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2009, 234 pp., paper $25, ISBN 978-0-919616-49-3.

Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artist, the PhD and the Academy, edited by Brad Buckley and John Conomos, provides a broad overview of the questions surrounding the evolution of the contemporary art school within the university setting. The subtitle is somewhat misleading as, rather than focus exclusively on the question of the PhD as the newly emerging terminal degree in the visual arts, the essays in this publication encompass broader questions centered on the role of the visual arts within the university, investigating concerns that are relevant to both undergraduate and post-graduate education. The collection provides a timely and provocative series of snapshots of art education from the viewpoints of Australian, Canadian, American, Danish, and Norwegian academics teaching in a wide range of disciplines that fall under the rubric of the visual arts. In our globalized world, the role of the artist is shifting toward a new model of collaborative inquiry, interdisciplinarity, and technological exploration. Simultaneously, the role of the humanities is being scrutinized within the corporatized university system, and the PhD has begun to emerge as a potential new terminal degree for university-level teaching in the visual arts. These concurrent events have unsettled the status quo of undergraduate and postgraduate art programs, and raised the question of how to best prepare a new generation of artists to practise in the twenty-first century.

While some of the issues discussed in the essays are regionally specific—for example, the discussion of the effects of the forced amalgamation of art schools with universities in Australia in 1990, and the analysis of the effect of the 1999 Bologna Declaration on European institutions—these discussions remain informative as comparisons to the Canadian system. Buckley and Conomos, the Australian editors, reflect positively on the decision of Canada's stand-alone art and design colleges, including Emily Carr University of Art + Design and Ontario College of Art and Design, to transition to university status while maintaining their independence. They note that this conversion allowed independent Canadian art and design schools to avoid the profound damage suffered by Australian art and design schools when they were forced into "arranged marriages" with universities. However, while independent institutions such as NSCAD, OCAD, ACAD, and Emily Carr University may have avoided the pitfalls of the arranged marriage, the reality is that these institutions are exceptions to the rule of the art department housed within the university, which remains the norm in schools across Canada. Thus, the conditions that Buckley and Conomos diagnose in the Australian system are likewise present in Canadian art departments to varying degrees.

In two separate essays, Buckley and Conomos cite the example of Rhode Island School of Design's early twentieth-century situation of the education of artists in "institutions with a strong vocational mission": the principles of art applied to the "requirements of trade and manufacturing" (81, 88). They suggest that this history, which privileges hand skills and utilitarian pursuits over academic challenge and debate, continues to cast a prejudicial shadow over the inclusion of the arts within universities. With the decline of modernism, and its mythic construction of the artist as an isolated, individualist genius, new models for art education have emerged that stress interactivity, inter- and transdisciplinarity, and collaborative approaches. The crux of the problem the editors describe is the incongruity of situating art education in the top-down, market-driven world of the twenty-first-century university, where creative engagement and critical thinking often take a back seat to professional training and quantifiable success—a "dumbing down" of the institution. In this environment, there is an extreme disjuncture between what non-artist academics define as research (work that is measurable, factual, and results-based), and the creative work that artist academics and their students undertake (work which is experiential, intuitive, and open-ended). In the worst case scenario, this dichotomy leads art departments inside universities to be marginalized and alienated within the increasingly corporatized culture of the institutions that house them. The problem is intensified when non-artists, who lack knowledge of contemporary art pedagogy—or worse, who are "contemporary artphobes"—make up the senior management of the institution. Buckley and Conomos ask whether art and design schools would fare better as stand-alone institutions; within ideal, hermetic institutions, different perimeters for research would be established, and different criteria for success would be prioritized. However, they also raise the possibility that the art school inside the university harbours the potential to be a model of the university at its best. Art academics and art students potentially can play valuable roles in the institution when they raise oppositional questions, provoke debate, and challenge the status quo. The artist who is an experimenter and an innovator is uniquely positioned to function as an interdisciplinary practitioner, connecting disparate fields, and forming coherent visions and understandings of complex systems of knowledge.

Other authors in the collection concur with the editors' analyses of the changing role artists in society, and analyze both the pitfalls and the potentials inherent in this rapidly shifting landscape. For example, in his essay, "Art, Design, and Beyond," Luc Corchesne of the School of Industrial Design at the Université de Montréal addresses the challenge of integrating theory

and practice in the context of the studio and in collaborative enterprises outside the university. He succinctly identifies the need for the artist to become a "T-shaped professional" (139). This term provides a vivid visual representation of the paradox of the contemporary arts education that many of the authors touch on. To understand the conundrum, imagine the vertical bar of the T representing the disciplinary proficiency that must be grasped by the student, and the horizontal bar representing the student's general knowledge and interdisciplinary flexibility. To achieve success the student must—at some stage—master both axes, and combine them effectively. Corchesnes's timely question is: Should an art and/or design education first provide skills and know-how that can be quickly applied, and then let questioning arise from experience as the real world challenges certainties and imposes a broadening of perspective and horizon? Or should education first provide a wide open, real-world opportunity in which the need to get very good at something proves essential at some point in the process? (139)

The practical nature of this query shapes a school's approach to undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate education. Corchesne notes that interdisciplinary workshops at the undergraduate level are rare, and that undergraduate programs still tend to adhere to stricter disciplinary categories than graduate and post-graduate programs do. Students in these advanced programs must, by necessity, become familiar with the research methodologies from both the arts and sciences. This breadth of research capabilities has become increasingly important, as the artist academic seeks funding from university funding bodies. Corchesne provides the reader with an inspiring vision of the artist/designer as a polymath who fluidly adapts to changing circumstances and unpredictable demands, and is a valuable citizen both within the university and outside its walls.

One of the most enjoyable and rewarding pieces in the collection is Edward Colless's poetic essay, "Unnameable," which muses on the philosophical riddle of how to teach "a non-subject, a subject that is and is not teachable" (103). Touching on stories of Iago, Hamlet, God, Moses, Socrates, Popeye, Tisias and his Sophist teacher Korax as metaphorical devices, Colless analyzes why the art school may never comfortably fit within the confines of the university. The analogy Colless settles on to illustrate the dilemma of the art professor is Denis Diderot's "paradox of the actor." The actor deceives by doing and not doing something at the same time. Fictional characters played by actors enact a kiss, but—because they playing parts—it is not a real kiss, but the depiction of a kiss. However, to portray this kiss, the actors must actually kiss one another—there is not one kiss, but two. Despite our ability to teach students the rudiments of design, colour theory, the mechanics of drawing the nude, and to explicate art theory, we cannot teach a student how to be an artist because each of our journeys as a creator is, at some level, a wordless, indescribable process. However, it is only through the enactment of the classroom rituals of making, looking, and critiquing that the student who chooses this path can experience their own frisson of self-identity.

Sara Diamond's essay, "Moving out of Bounds: Expanding the Field of Art Education," describes how the increasing engagement between the arts and sciences shapes the mission of the twenty-first-century art school. She outlines a number of different relationships that can evolve between artists and scientists, from participatory team approaches and open-ended collaborations to individual artists' appropriations, repositionings, and critiques of science. Although artists are sometimes imagined to take more from their collaborations with the sciences than they contribute to them, Diamond notes that the sciences turn to the arts as a means of understanding what is difficult to articulate, to represent invisible concepts, to understand perception, and to gain greater insights into the physiological processes connected to creativity. Diamond identifies the potential for artists and scientists to find common ground as they engage in practices that are mutually challenging and beneficial. Diamond outlines the Ontario College of Art and Design's strategic plan for 2006–12, which builds on the institution's history of interdisciplinary research and pedagogy across artistic and scientific disciplines. Her description of the development of the strategic plan makes interesting reading, as it envisions societal scenarios that could potentially shape the future of art and design, as well as the future of education. These scenarios include a utopian scenario of a "Global Lab" that will harnesses art and design to provide imagination and leadership to solve global problems; an "Island Living" model, where globalization is rejected and artists become the voices that are valued for their ability to reshape society's view of itself; a dystopian "Legacy Inc." society, where terrorism, economic upheaval, and pandemics lead to a conservative era of fear, in which art and design are used in the services of culture to preserve and secure the past; and finally, the model of the "Commercial World," where commercialization drives art and design as well as education in an era of increased globalization, technology, and universal aesthetics. In each of these scenarios, OCAD contributors to the plan saw the centrality of the themes of technology and science. In response, they asked what this would mean to pedagogy, and identified five themes that would build on cross-disciplinary curriculum and research interests that already existed in the institution. The themes of sustainability, diversity, wellness, technological innovation, and contemporary ethics were identified as new directions that would be emphasized during the five year strategic plan. Like Corchesne, Diamond sees an increasingly important role for the artist as an experimenter and innovator who has the potential to influence and shape the future.

While most of the authors represented in the anthology share the opinion that the integration of visual arts programs into universities has the potential to generate beneficial impacts for both the institution and the art school, including breaking down disciplinary silos, providing forums for debate, and modelling the shift away from hierarchical learning toward contextual and comprehensive learning, several authors highlight current and potential problems of the art school in a university setting. The issue of how to assess artistic investigations in accordance with university research standards appears in several essays, raising the question of whether art education does have different paradigms than other subjects. A number of authors express anxiety about a potential lack of autonomy and minimal funding for art departments within the corporate university structure that rewards quantifiable results. NASCAD professor Bruce Barber's essay, "The Question (of Failure) in Art Research," examines the requirements of "blended" art PhD programs in comparison to PhDs in other fields, and makes an in-depth comparison of programs of The University of Western Ontario, York University, and the European Graduate School. Citing Marcel Duchamp's broken *Large Glass* and "dust breeding," he reminds the reader that a work of art need not succeed in a traditional academic sense, and that the implicit failure of the work can, strangely, be integral to its meaning. Likewise, using the example of Warhol, Barber notes that the artist need not progress through the academy to become a seminal figure in the art world. He cautions that the line between artistic success and failure is a fine line, akin to the one between madness and genius In a success-driven institution, is the artist at liberty to take the same risks that she would in the studio? In Barber's words, "It is wise to reflect on the status of failure in the fomenting of progressive critical art practice" (54).

The editors organized the essays in "Rethinking the Contemporary Art School" alphabetically, rather than thematically. While this structure was intended to facilitate "intertextual," "cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural readings" (3), it is somewhat disorienting, particularly as the authors are not identified with their institutions at the beginning of their essays. This forces the reader to frequently flip to the back of the book to check the notes on contributors to contextualize their viewpoints. The editors refrained from constructing a theory of how art education is evolving globally, or how it might be improved. Rather, they provide a platform for the authors to share their experiences, observations, and opinions, shaped by their particular perspectives in North America and Europe. The viewpoints of American, Canadian, and Australian academics are equally represented, each country contributing four or five essays to the collection. Unfortunately, only two authors represent European viewpoints: Mikkel Bogh (The Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of the Fine Arts) and Jeremy Welsh (The Bergen National Academy, Norway). Bogh's and Welsh's essays suggest that the issues and tensions in European art education are similar to those in North America, but the absence of offerings from Germany, France, Italy, and other countries prominent in global artistic culture leaves a noticeable gap in the text.

Reading the book feels somewhat like attending a conference, where the panelists put their ideas on the table and the audience poses the questions that reveal the links and contrasts in the speakers' theories. There is no afterword to neatly tie up the information, or to make recommendations—but this seems appropriate, given the unsettled flux of post-secondary art education. The primary value of the book is that it lays out problematic issues as they appear from a wide range of perspectives. Like a good conference, the value of this book will be the debates that take place in the bar afterwards. The reader is left with the message that art education has arrived at a critical juncture, and is poised to move forward into territory that is unknown, but full of potential.

Catherine Heard
Artist, Independent Scholar

Michelangelo Sabatino, foreword by Kurt W. Forster, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010, 341 pp., $70, ISBN 978-0-802097-05-7.

Michelangelo Sabatino's *Pride in Modesty* is a detailed and evocative account of the emergence and appropriation of the vernacular tradition in Italian architectural culture from the early 1900s to the 1970s. Sabatino argues that the vernacular, in all of its rich variety and complexity, served as a critical point of reference for modernist architects as they struggled to engage with the rapid social, political, and economic changes that transformed Italy in the twentieth century. The book brings a valuable new perspective to the scholarship on Italian modernism, much of which has focused on the Italian example in relationship to international avant-garde trends and on the fascist regime's engagement with propagandistic cultural production. Although both of these themes are addressed, by shifting the reader's attention to the study, reception, and influence of vernacular traditions, Sabatino constructs an alternative narrative that serves as a basis for evaluating the continuities within Italian architectural culture in the twentieth century.

Sabatino begins his chronological account by probing the efforts made by ethnographers, preservationists, and de-