Everything is Relevant

Lum, Ken, Scott, Kitty

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Dear Steven

Dear Steven,

I’ve been struggling with the essay for the art education book. I just can’t seem to get a proper handle on what I want to say. Much of this has to do with a kind of doubt that I have about the role of the art school in today’s world. This doubt has surfaced from time to time, but never with such persistence as of late. Two years ago, I resigned from a tenured teaching position at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and this year I decided not to return to teach at Bard College in New York. I still enjoy teaching, but only for defined periods of time and if it allows me immersion in a new place. Writing this letter has been helpful in that it’s forced me to re-evaluate my relationship to both art and pedagogy. Despite my mixed feelings about the nature of many art schools today, I’ve found this exercise extremely useful in reminding me of why the teaching of art continues to be important.

For a number of years, I saw pedagogy as a veritable extension of artistic practice. Teaching offered me more than monetary sustenance. It allowed me to survive without having to worry about living off art sales. I was and continue to be grateful for this, because the business of art has a way of shaping and even defining artistic production in ways that might not be in the best interest of being an artist. Yet it’s important not to take this space afforded by teaching as a space of refuge and retreat from the world. All too often I’ve seen art schools exist as cloistered spaces where art is spoken about in lofty terms without any acknowledgement of how it is manifest in the real world. And this is closely connected to a lack of attention paid to what I’d call the “life knowledges” of students. These knowledges are grounded in the body and often discernible in the movement and conduct of individuals. The operative questions that should be asked are: What does it mean to be in someone else’s place? How is it even possible to express something of the pain and suffering or happiness and joy of someone else?

The answers to these questions go beyond fostering social skills or finding paths of resolution, since such answers would belong more in the domain of social science than in art. The navigation of the social world is a lifelong process, but it’s especially important for artists to explore. There have been several times when I accepted teaching posts outside the frame of social familiarity—in places such as Fort-de-France in Martinique and Hangzhou in China. These experiences provided me with the chance to expand and deepen my understanding of the possibilities of art, particularly as it issues from radically different social contexts from those I’m accustomed to.
In 1995, I taught as a guest professor at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. I was happy to go there because I was deeply unhappy with my situation at the time in Vancouver. Paris gave me a renewed impetus to develop my teaching skills in a different language and setting. The École is housed in a former cloister located in the heart of the city’s chicest arrondissement. Many of the interior walls are designated with heritage status, and the students aren’t allowed to mark them up in any way. I was struck by how the working environment was made too precious for practical use. During my second year at the École, I proposed an exhibition of student works, entirely organized by the students and in cooperation with the students of the École nationale supérieure d’arts Paris–Cergy. The latter is located in the ville nouvelle of Cergy-Pontoise built atop a geological rise at the very end of a Regional Express Network commuter line. A long pedestrian boulevard located at one end of its commercial district symbolically links this distant suburb to the axial meridian line that connects to Paris’s Grande Arche, Arc de Triomphe, and Place de la Concorde. But Cergy-Pontoise is somewhat disconnected from the mythic ideals inherent in its status as a planned township, as it’s now home to a large immigrant community that has turned the utopian architecture of the downtown core into a souq-like environment.

The aim of my proposed student exhibition was to bring together these two somewhat separate worlds. I felt that it was important for both groups of students to be aware of what connected and separated them from one another and to work through these connections and separations collectively. The exhibition took place in a large but empty retail space in the main Cergy-Pontoise shopping concourse. There was a lot of support from the art school in Cergy-Pontoise, and the students there were excited (if not a little surprised) to be working with their Paris counterparts. What unfolded was an incredibly dynamic exchange between the students involved. The Paris students realized that there was much to learn from their counterparts and the Cergy-Pontoise group realized that they were equals, in every way, of their École des Beaux-Arts colleagues. The result was a vibrant exhibition, which was well attended by the citizens of Cergy-Pontoise. It was telling and disappointing that the faculty and administrators from Paris didn’t bother to show up.

An important lesson I learned from the project was that it really doesn’t take all that much to transform student thinking about art and to open up a world of possibilities to them. In this case, all it took was a change in locale and a sustained period of time for students to get to know the new place. A student from Paris told me she would never take
the suburbs for granted again. She then added that she would also never think of Paris in the same way again. I didn’t ask for her to elaborate, but I was pleased by what she said.

In 1997 I spent some time teaching art in Fort-de-France in Martinique. This Caribbean island isn’t far from South America, and yet Martinique television aired only French stations and kiosk stands sold only French publications. The art education of the students at the Institut régional d’art visuel also reflected Martinique’s *outre-mer* status as a department of France. I remember witnessing the incertitude of the students about addressing their lives in their art. They doubted the possibility that their situation could be valid content for their art. They also knew very little about contemporary art outside of France. They were familiar with Andy Warhol, but a discussion of Warhol would inevitably lead to Pierre Restany, Martial Raysse, and the *nouveaux réal-istes*, not to pop art manifestations in the United States, Great Britain, and South America. The collation of the school’s pedagogical program with Paris was reflected in the school’s faculty. Almost all of the instructors were given isolation pay bonuses. And despite the paradise-like setting of Martinique, there was a palpable sense of humiliation on the part of the instructors for having to be there.

My students in Martinique weren’t very familiar with Frantz Fanon and his writing about the psychological effects of colonialism and the internalization of racism. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes: “I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.”¹ I felt that the students of the Institute didn’t question enough the world that produced them. The problem wasn’t that they were complacent, but that they hadn’t been given the tools necessary to critique their own situation. As a result, they were unable to define themselves in relation to historical trauma in the context of the Caribbean. When I asked them where they had travelled to, they responded by saying they hadn’t been anywhere except Guadeloupe, another island department of France to the north of Martinique. When I asked them where they’d like to travel, they responded, “Paris.” Their unanimous response reminded me of a scene from the 1973 movie *Touki Bouki* in which the two protagonists incessantly sing the Josephine Baker song, “Paris, Paris, Paris.” The film presents the dream of going to Paris as a self-searching journey and makes ironic the unfulfilled promises of the postcolonial condition. The students I worked with in Fort-de-France saw the world in similarly bracketed terms. Their school ran counter to my understanding of what
art should do, which is to raise the consciousness of one’s place in the world and produce expressions at the borders of what can and can’t be said in any given social and historical context.

In 2000 I accepted an invitation to teach contemporary Western art at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. The campus was founded in 1928 and modelled after the Bauhaus campus in Dessau, in both physical appearance and pedagogical direction. Many Chinese intellectuals saw the Bauhaus as a possible regenerative model for a China seeking redemption within modernity. In this way, the China Academy of Art exemplified the desire to reconcile a tradition-bound culture with Western modernism. But while I was there, students lived in dorms on campus that seemed bleak in comparison to what we’re used to in the West. The hallways were dark and the rooms cold. The men’s toilet was basically a communal trench in a concrete enclosure. There was only one computer for the entire school, and not a very powerful one at that. It was located in the director’s office and was the only source of Internet access, via telephone dial-up.

While in Hangzhou, I witnessed the selection process for new students. Works consisting solely of calligraphic and ink-brush paintings were put on display in a large room. An elderly man with a long white beard entered the room. An entourage of school officials followed him. I was told that he was akin to a professor emeritus and was highly regarded as a master ink painter. He surveyed the room and then pointed his cane to works by those applicants he deemed of sufficient quality for acceptance into the academy. I found this process curious, based as it was on the reverence of a master, as this figure is a contentious one in Western discourses of contemporary art. I was told that a master becomes one not just because of talent and skill, but because of a lifelong commitment to being an artist.

The curriculum at the China Academy of Art emphasized traditional Chinese categories and standards of art. Students were not permitted to look at Western examples of art during school hours. However, after school hours there were no such restrictions. Students would pin up reproductions of works by artists ranging from Jackson Pollock and David Salle to Anthony Caro and Nam June Paik. I actually held a number of my classes after hours precisely because the environment then was less official and more open. What the students at the academy had learned to do was negotiate the restrictive and contradictory environment of the school. In contrast to the situation I experienced in Martinique, my students in China understood their position as political beings and were learning to imbue their art with a transgressive authority.
In fact, I’ve been increasingly troubled by the attitude that many students have in art schools now. High tuition fees make art school a place of privilege that disfavour those who aren’t as well off and a lot of students come from places of surfeit and privilege. This produces a kind of insularity that distances them from certain kinds of “other” knowledge. They seem more alert to the gamesmanship of art as never before, and they know how to produce works that achieve the appearance of completeness and finish. But something’s missing. They have to be taught to recognize these limitations by questioning the assumptions that they hold.

To me, an art class should hold a dynamic exchange, and that’s most likely to happen when there is a heterogeneous mix of students, a mix that allows the articulation of unexpected and different ways of knowing. In a 1976 lecture at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault spoke about the place of subaltern knowledges in the formation of disciplines. I’ve always found his definition of knowledges meaningful in terms of teaching: “When I say ‘subjugated knowledges’ I mean two things. On the one hand, I am referring to historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systemizations. I am referring to blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship…. When I say ‘subjugated knowledges’ I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.”

Foucault turned to the localized struggles of everyday life in order to challenge the autonomous production of knowledge. His contention was that these localized struggles produce life knowledges, and that these knowledges are very different from institutionally produced and validated knowledges. I think what’s important to grasp here is that life knowledges don’t lend themselves so easily to representation. This idea relates strongly to the practice of art in which the aim is not to transparently represent the real (because this is an impossibility) but rather to reframe the real in ways that ask us to imagine the world otherwise.

As a teacher, I’ve encountered many students who are at an impasse in terms of what to say in their art, even though they’re inundated by contemporary examples of art aimed at providing a blueprint for creative and critical production. Often overlooked are the specific subject positions of the students themselves. These specificities are important, but they’re in danger of being subjugated in favour of a more
homogeneous narrative that complies with the expectations of what contemporary art should look like. What I would argue is that students should be wary of the frictionless alignment of art school pedagogy and capitalist marketing strategies. This makes me think of Thomas Frank’s book, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, wherein he offers an astute reading of how counter-cultures have been co-opted by corporate marketing forces to promote specific products. If you haven’t read it, I think you’d find it revealing because the same phenomenon is definitely present in the contemporary art world, where the production, circulation, and exhibition of art are anchored to corporate bodies and promoted like any other commodity in a capitalist system. This is in spite of the persistent myth that art is somehow separate from the world of commodities, despite art’s obvious commodity status. Students need to be taught to recognize these myths and to find ways to challenge them in their thinking and in the art that they make. We have to help them see the world in terms not solely defined by the art system.

Of course, there are counter-forces in the world that have opened up spaces for creative and critical expression not reliant on this system. Ironically enough, they’re products of the same capitalist model. An example of this is YouTube, which functions as a site where people can be creative without any affiliation to any particular creative discourse such as contemporary art. YouTube’s status as a corporate entity often collides with its functioning as an open repository for unfettered postings by any YouTube user because of potential violations of copyright. We have only to think of the outpouring of videos produced and posted on YouTube in homage to the actor Heath Ledger after his death. These came overwhelmingly not from artists, but from Ledger fans all over the world. Many of the contributions were deeply affecting precisely because they connected directly to the feelings of a community of mourners who knew nothing or had little regard for the rules of artistic discourse or form.

Despite my ambivalence toward the art world, I have to acknowledge that it has given me many experiences that I wouldn’t have had otherwise, growing up as I did in a poor neighbourhood on the East Side of Vancouver. Whenever I teach, I’m always mindful of my roots. I made a sculptural installation out of rental furniture in 1982. The installation was exhibited in my studio. I was taken aback by people’s responses. A lot of people laughed at the perceived tackiness of the furniture. Others thought my aim was to poke fun at bad taste. But this was not the case. I rented the best sofas I could, based on what I thought my mother would have liked. Today I can see how garish the selected furniture must have
I recently recounted this story during a presentation I made at a well-known American art school. A noted art curator was in attendance. At the post-presentation dinner, I noticed the curator looking at me. I turned to him, and he said somewhat tentatively, “I don’t believe you.” “What do you mean?” I replied. He then said, “I don’t believe you when you say that you liked the look of the furniture you selected. It was clearly ugly.” His words shocked me. They were a prescient reminder that little has changed in thirty years. This individual refused to imagine how class inflects what is possible in terms of art production.

When I was six years old, my mother would wake me in the middle of the night. After breakfast we would walk to the edge of Chinatown, where a delivery truck would pick us up. It was filled with elderly Chinese seated on small wooden stools. They were holding onto a thick rope hooked to the wall in lieu of safety belts. My mother and I climbed aboard, and the doors were shut behind us. The interior was completely dark, except for a beam of light that streamed in through a slit at the top of the doors. This was the beginning of what would be an hour-and-a-half journey to the strawberry fields located beyond the Vancouver suburbs. The truck always stopped at the same gas station so that we could get out and stretch our legs. After this brief interlude our journey resumed, and we were eventually dropped off at the edge of the fields, ready to work for the next twelve hours. The sun was always low on the horizon. I accompanied my mother to these fields during the summer months to help support our family. I wasn’t the only child there, but I was the youngest. Perhaps this is why my elderly travelling companions treated me with such affection.

I’m telling you this not to solicit sympathy, but to open up a space to consider what such an experience might have entailed. My concern is with who has the power to articulate their experiences and under what terms those experiences are validated. Gayatri Spivak addresses a similar concern in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Her central point is that the subaltern cannot speak because the channels for being heard are absent. If the subaltern could speak—that is, speak in a way that really mattered to us—then he or she wouldn’t be subaltern. Spivak concludes by stating that the task is not to speak for the subaltern but to open up a space in which the subaltern can be heard. There isn’t a more appropriate place for this to happen than in art school.

I enrolled in my first art class thirty years ago. It comprised approximately fifteen students who were diverse in terms of their backgrounds, ages, and aspirations. Most didn’t know much about art and possessed only a vague notion of the art world. I was a science student who didn’t have any plans to be an artist. Our instructor began the
class by giving us an informal exam to assess our knowledge of art. Slides were projected and we were asked to identify the artist responsible for the work. Several seminal works from the canon of twentieth-century art were shown, and I was unable to identify any of them (including works by Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol). Although the instructor was incredulous at my lack of knowledge, I wasn’t made to feel inferior. After all, my background was in the chemical sciences. However, his incredulity revealed an all-too-common assumption about the accessibility and democracy of art, and it belied the fact that art is an insular enterprise subject to specificities of time and place. If this insularity is removed, then great things can happen for art and the art school environment.

I’d like to conclude this letter by reiterating a point that I made earlier: it really doesn’t take much to make a dynamic art school. The first step is for students to theorize the environment in which their school is situated. This means that students in Kansas City or Mumbai can begin by thinking about their place in Kansas City or Mumbai and the complexities of their subject positions in relation to the rest of the world as they know it. If they’re able to do this, then I think that they’ll be able to define art in ways not necessarily dependent on the authority of the art capitals. This is not to say that students should disregard this authority and pretend that it doesn’t exist. Rather, my point is that students need to challenge dominant ideologies by coming into dialogue with them. This is one of the art school’s primary roles. But such a role can be achieved only if the instructor’s knowledge about the art world is convincing to students. This is one of the reasons why I think that it’s important to teach, even if I continue to have doubts about the art world at large. What students need to be taught is that art is about making everything in the world relevant.

Yours sincerely,

Ken

Jean-François Millet, Des glaneuses dit aussi Les glaneuses, 1857