Teaching Art History through archaeologies of the contemporary

Leoni Schmidt
Dunedin School of Art @ Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand
E-mail: leoni@tekotago.ac.nz

This article argues that Art History as a discipline has been critiqued on a number of levels in recent decades. However, the knowledge which the discipline can provide for students in tertiary art schools remains invaluable. Therefore, it is important for the discipline to continue to be taught. This involves connections between the contemporary and historical works as archaeologies of the contemporary. Current visual arts practices can find their own distinct genealogies through such connections. The article presents examples from three recent international exhibitions and also from recent studio practice in New Zealand and South Africa.
Keywords: contemporary practices, historical references, visual arts genealogies, archaeologies of the contemporary, recent exhibitions and case studies

Eietydse argelogieë vir the onderrig van Kunsgeskiedenis
Hierdie artikel argumenteer dat Kunsgeskiedenis as 'n vakgebied sterk kritiek ontlok het op verskillende vlakke in die afgelope decades. Nietemin bly die kennis wat deur hierdie vakgebied aan studente in tersiêre kunsskole oorgedra kan word van onskatbare waarde. Daarom is die volgehoue aanbieding van Kunsgeskiedenis van groot belang. Volgehoue aanbieding betrek egter nodige verbande tussen historiese werke as synde argeologieë van die kontemporêre. Huidige visuele kunste praktyke kan hul eie spesifieke genealogieë ontdek deur sulke verbande. Die artikel bied voorbeelde uit drie onlangse internasionale uitstallings asook enkeles afkomstig uit onlangse ateljeewerk in Nieu-Zeeland en Suid-Afrika.
Sleutelwoorde: eietydse kunspraktyke, historiese verwysings, visuele genealogieë, onlangse uitstallings en gevallestudies

This article is written from the point of view of a trained art historian who currently works in a tertiary art school in the South Island of New Zealand where all students attend lectures and tutorials in Art History and Theory, courses which are possibly more aptly grouped under the heading of Critical Studies. We focus on the critical analysis of contemporary art works and in doing so we contextualise such works in terms of their current socio-political environments and in terms of the historical traditions they align with or question. The fact that we called this discipline in our school 'Art History & Theory', then 'Art Theory & History', then 'Critical Studies' and now again 'Art History & Theory' will provide readers with a glimpse of the ambivalence we ourselves experience with regard to the discipline of Art History. We are also aware that many others have asked questions as to what has led to the demise of Art History in New Zealand and elsewhere and about whether there actually is such a demise?

There are many texts which have explored the reasons for ambivalence and tension around the discipline of Art History. One such is Arthur C. Danto's, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (1998). He contends that the very concept of 'history' has vanished from the art world; that we live in post-historical times; that art, construed historically, had already reached the end of the line in the 1960s; that now, there are countless directions art can take and none are privileged as *the* historical trajectory; that a developmental history became no longer "interestingly thinkable"(136); and that Art History as a discipline became suspect and faced challenges, especially via French post-structuralist philosophy which critiqued its 'grand narrative' and its exclusions.

Reading a text such as Keith Moxey's "The History of Art after the Death of the 'Death of the Subject'" (1998), it seems that Art History as a discipline has been critiqued on the basis of its exclusion of women artists over the centuries; its inattention to the work of marginalised groups such as children, the aged, the other-abled; for its inattention to work in which marginalised sexual preferences are made manifest; for its exclusion of certain types of art-making based on a hierarchy of materialities; for the exclusion or appropriation of other cultures inherent in a

Eurocentric vision of the world; and for its inability to develop ways of thinking commensurate with contemporary studio practices.

The critique of Art History poses various problems and challenges for tertiary art schools and these can be summarised as follows: Despite the discreditation of Art History as a discipline, contemporary practices continue to engage with the history of art, with art of the past. Art works from the past bring connotations and associations with them into the contemporary arena. Students' work reference these connotations and associations but they are often unaware of the implications of reference material within their own work. Students often use material without understanding how it brings layers of meaning to their own work and they often do not understand what kinds of meaning are brought into their own work through referencing of art of the past. Furthermore, students' criticality in terms of their own and other contemporary work is often hampered by their misunderstanding or non-understanding of historical practices.

In the light of the above, it seems necessary to continue the teaching of the history of art in contemporary art schools. The question arises: *how* can it still be taught in art schools today? I strongly propose that Art History does continue to be taught in art schools but that it becomes reframed through four major strategies: 1) Teaching art histories in the *plural* through archaeologies of the contemporary can 2) support students in finding *genealogies* relevant to their own work. 3) Using studio methodologies in teaching sessions – for example through analysing methods and materialities of making as they happen *in situ* – is possible in an art school where staff and students are continuously engaged with the physicalities of making 'on the spot' as it were. 4) Lastly, creating triadic relationships with students between their own work and art's histories-practices-theories can *embed* their own work within fields of signification, within the discourses with which their work engages.

Three exhibitions

Three recent exhibitions highlighted relationships across time in the history of art. One of these exhibitions was entitled "Cézanne and Beyond" at the Philadelphia Museum in 2009 which showed works by Cézanne and eighteen other artists whose practices owe much to his. In reviewing this exhibition and referring to Ferdinand Léger, Richard Lacayo wrote in an article: "Cézanne *zut*? Finished? Gone? Not a chance!" (2009: 27) Three sets of images make the connections across historical timeframes clear.

Cézanne's *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* (1877) famously positioned the model against a backdrop created by the unmodelled treatment of the chair, thereby flattening the space and resulting in a tension between a three-dimensional representational space in which the body is placed and the two-dimensionality of the painted surface as a formal element. The dialogue between representational space and formal elements entered into by Cézanne was extended by Picasso when he painted his *The Dream (Marie Therese)* in 1932. The red chair is now completely flat and the modeling of the body is wholly absent, with only minimal foreshortening of the body still retaining representational space within the dialogue.

Georges Braque picks up on another signature Cézannesque dialogue in his *Studio with Skull* (1938). When comparing this painting with Cézanne's *Still-life with a Dessert* (1877 or 1879) on the Philadelphia exhibition, one sees how both deploy a tension between representational motifs and the rhythm created by the formal relationships between the motifs. The artists are engaged in the same discourse, a discourse centering around representation and formal concerns. Like Picasso, Braque goes further than Cézanne, so far in fact that the tension almost dissipates in favour of formal concerns.

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Cézanne had the ability to engage the viewer simultaneously on two equally balanced levels. In his *The Bay of Marseille seen from L' Estaque* (1885), one is aware of the expanse of water as a representation of the sea but also of this blue stretch of canvas as blue paint on a surface. One experiences the painting as both representation *and* as materiality. With *Lake 2* (2002), Ellsworth Kelly pays homage to the latter when he presents us with a shaped canvas in the same form as Cézanne's bay, a shaped canvas painted in Klein Blue, thereby also paying homage to the modernist tradition which includes the work of Yves Klein. Again, it is impossible to read the painting without its historical references as these are part and parcel of the work's field of signification.

A second exhibition which foregrounded contemporary engagements with the past was the Fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial held in Brisbane, Australia, in 2006-07. Many works were exhibited in ways which allowed glimpses of historical material referenced. Some artists had been 'playing' with art historical objects and 're-making' them to suggest new meanings and functions for them in a contemporary context. One became aware of critiques of contemporary society through the insertion of the historical into the contemporary and a re-thinking of the hierarchy of materialities for the sake of social critique was evident. Artists were using historical tropes such as the vanitas to comment on contemporary life. Many artists were adapting the historical to speak of the present or to critique or commemorate the past through the present.

There were many examples of these different strategies on the exhibition. Only a few can be mentioned here. Ai Waiwei showed a strip of vases painted smoothly with contemporary house paint. These vases could be seen across a space also containing a glass case exhibiting ancient Chinese vases. The artist's comment on the homogenising effects of industrial modernisation was strengthened by the fact that the viewer could see the ancient versions in the same space, complete with their handcrafted and individualised forms, surfaces and glazed decorations. Looking into Waiwei's painted vases, the viewer was shocked to see that he had actually painted over a number of such 'originals'. His *Table with Two Legs* contorts the piece of furniture into a non-functional caricature of itself and speaks of the trade in knock-off replicas of antique European furniture in contemporary China. Ai Waiwei's *Boomerang* – aptly named for a work exhibited in Australia – is made of millions of glass beads hanging like a chandelier in the central space of the Queensland Art Gallery as witness to the rampant consumerism through which contemporary Chinese reference European traditions of splendour for the sake of social status.

Artist Ex De Medici (a pseudonym) uses the trope of the vanitas to comment on a contemporary Western society rampant with consumerism and littered with throw-away piles of redundant technologies in a work entitled *Live the (Big Black) Dream* (2006) in which skulls amidst tires and broken computer parts remind one of the long history of the still-life as a comment on the transience of the material world. Masami Teraoka connects the terror of Aids in our time to old mythologies in a print media series in which monsters represent the nightmares and fears currently associated with this disease.

Jitish Kallat warps the 1947 words of Jawaharlal Nehru when he spoke in English on the occasion of India's Independence from the British Raj. Jubilee Rajiah writes about the complex historical connections between this work and India as its context: "*Public Notice…*is an apt symbolic depiction of India as it is today, more than fifty years after Independence. It is a work that is poignant and disturbing; distorted, mangled and warped, and yet large and imposing and gripping. The lofty ideals and inspirational themes burnt and inscribed on it were first proclaimed during the auspicious and momentous event of declaration of Independent India. Nehru's famous speech was delivered at midnight on the 14th of August 1947 when India gained independence after two centuries of British rule. India held its breath and throughout the

land people waited with expectant anticipation for their beloved leader to deliver his speech. 'And, at the stroke of the midnight hour, Nehru spoke. In English', Pavan K. Varma points this out in his book *The Great Indian Middle Class*." (2008: 47)

Many contemporary Chinese artists exhibiting at the Asia-Pacific Triennial commemorated or critiqued the historical Long March of the Red Army through China, examples being Hon Hao's archive of image and text through a relief of letters, postcards and other memorabilia in *Long March to Panjiavuan* (2004); Mu Chen and Shao Ynong's large photograph entitled *Gutian*, redolent of the past when classrooms were used for the re-education of people during the Cultural Revolution; Lui Jieqiong's *Story of the Red Army* using the traditional Chinese paper cut-out on a large scale for narrative purposes; and Qin Ga's tattoo on the back of a person, showing the old map with routes followed during the Long March.

A third exhibition which recently highlighted genealogies of the contemporary amidst the historical was called *In-Finitum* and was held in Venice at the Palazzo Fortuny in 2009. This exhibition did not only highlight genealogies but was strongly predicated upon these. Viewers found themselves immersed in spaces wherein art works from different eras and locations were 'speaking' to one another around a complex thematic. In "About In-Finitum" a conversation is recorded between Tatsuro Miki and Axel Vervoordt. They discuss the rationale for the exhibition and in this process they consider "…ancient and contemporary works of art…the perpetual genesis…everything moves…" and they quote the Buddhist monk Gensou: "Everything is free of an eternal existence. All phenomena are created through conditions, are interdependent and interrelated with other phenomena. Since the conditions change continuously, all phenomena are only temporary manifestations. In other words, nothing remains equal. Everything is free of an independent substance. Everything is energy in continuous transformation. Therefore all forms can be nothing other than a fragment of a moment in an endless process". (2009: 75)

Being one of the viewers at *In-Finitum*, I tried to understand the thematic through making a list of words which seemed to conceptually underpin the curation of the show. My list included: *infinity, space, apocalypse, eminent disaster, funereal, darkness, black, mystical, incomplete, ethereal, otherworldly* and so forth, words aptly encapsulated by the title of the exhibition. The 'conversations' between the works on show included four trajectories across space and time which could be discussed under the rubrics of 'black', 'colour', 'space' and 'body', rubrics within which each individual work of art contributed its own particularity to an ensemble of works.

In-Finitum included a totally black room in which two black Ad Reinhardt paintings hung on opposite walls with a black Lucio Fontana perforated canvas on an adjacent wall. After being immersed in blackness the viewer could not ignore the prevalence of black works positioned against the ornamental silk wall coverings of the 16th Century palazzo. Otto Piene's *Black Sun* (1962-63) hung over a 16th-Century chest across from a projection of Bill Viola's ominous dark *Bodies of Light* (2006) and Arnold Böcklin's funereal *The Island of the Dead* (1880) in which sooty black supports the theme. Elsewhere in the palazzo, a black sculpture called *Spatial Concept – Nature* (1959-60) by Fontana shared a black space with Kazuo Shiraga's painting *Enmaten* (1983) in which black impasto emphasises the very materiality of blackness. Nearby, Jason Martin's black *Primavera* (2007) hung over a dark doorway into blackness and was flanked by two black granite Egyptian Sekhmet *torsi* from the reign of Amenhotep 111 (c. 1388-1351 BC).

The viewer at *In-Finitum* also became aware of how *avant-garde* modernists famous for their focus on colour as a primary vehicle for eliciting affect – an amalgam of physical sensation and emotional response – have by now themselves become 'historical' ancestors of current

colour explorations. Yves Klein's *Monochrome* blue painting (1956) contrasted with the peeled surface of an ancient wall in the palazzo and related to Alfred Hofkunst's *Blue Sky* (1975) and Donald Judd's *Untitled* (1988), both also being explorations of blueness. Nearby, Mark Rothko's *Untitled (Gray, Gray on Red)* from 1968 made it clear that the viewer was dealing with a discourse in painting, a discourse around colour as an autonomous formal element through which affect can be made manifest, materialised. 'Discourse' in this context denotes a Foucauldian framework within which making occurs according to certain parameters and histories. He wrote: "…truth…was displaced towards the utterance itself, its meaning, its form, its object, its relation to its [system of] reference." (1976: 212)

It is important for a student whose work enters a particular discourse in the visual arts to understand its parameters and its histories in order to avoid what Milan Kundera describes as being at best "…applauded as a virtuoso of pastiche". (2007: 4) He continues: "No way around it: historical consciousness is so thoroughly inherent in our perception of art that [any] anachronism (a Beethoven piece written today) would be spontaneously (that is without the least hypocrisy) felt to be ridiculous, false, incongruous, even monstrous. Our feeling of continuity is so strong that it enters into the perception of any work of art…[Art] is there to create its own history." (2007: 4-5 & 27)

Colour fields suggest space and this is true of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1809) in which a diminutive vertical figure is silhouetted against three horizontal surfaces of colour inside the frame of the scene. Below is the earth indicated with a narrow light brown strip, on top of that is the sea as a thin dark indigo surface, and on top of that is an endless sky which fills most of the canvas in light grey-blue tones. Infinity and man's small insignificance in the large universe speak from the simple composition and spatial use of colour in this work.

Across the room, Jeff Verheyen's *Urbino – Ideal Space* (1978) omitted any reference to the human figure in a composition of colour – brown and grey-blue tones – without horizon line. Hiro Shi Sugimoto's *North Pacific Ocean – Okhurosaki* (2002) reinstates the horizon line, thereby suggesting a viewer outside the frame of the painting. All three works – speaking to one another across time and location – pulled their audience into an infinity of space created through colour, a somber infinity of muted tones and unreachable destinies.

As a counterpoint, Grazia Toderi's *Orbito Rosso* (2007, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TQ9RFx8crk for the moving image), depends as much on colour in creating an expanse of space, but her colour field moving image projection is interrupted by intermittent light signals across an ambiguous cityscape suggested by shadow play superimposed on the red field. After 9/11 one cannot read this work without foreboding and a sense of eminent disaster. Exactly because one can view this work against the backdrop of a history of colour field painting with its attributes of infinite space supporting spirituality and serenity, a disruption is experienced which echoes the disruption caused by aerial violence on 9/11.

The human body also played a large role at *In-Finitum*. Solemn marble figures turn away from us as they walk into a mausoleum in Antonio Canova's *Model for the Monument for Titian* (c.1791). Francesco Hayez's *Penitent Magdalen* (1833) positions a nude female figure in the centre of the canvas amidst skulls – somber vanitas once more. What is remarkable about this painting is the way in which the face has been partially erased, obscured and reconstituted a century before collage and more than a century before postmodernist pastiches of the portrait. Nearer to our time, Michael Borremans turns his model completely away from us, thereby aligning his *Ghost 11* (2008) with a tradition of sombre figures, in his case presented as exquisite light and colour moving into blackness. One cannot help but think of Dylan Thomas's line "rage, rage against the dying of the light" from his radio play *Under Milkwood* (1964). Of

course, genealogies between historical works and the contemporary form along the trajectories of viewers' own memories and experiences. Histories or the archaeologies of the contemporary after the death of the death of the subject remain subjective constructs.

Case studies

Far away from Thomas's Wales and *In-Finitum*'s Venice and closer to home in New Zealand – my country of earthquakes, geological instability, surrounded by water at every turn – a case study foregrounding connections between the contemporary and the historical resides in the work of young artist Kurt Adams. His *Grayscale Drawing* project (2005) creates these connections through links with the working methods of two earlier artists and with the ideas of three theorists, one of whom published early in the twentieth century.

Adams first created a garden à la Claude Monet through making a field of digital components to use in the work. He quotes from Roger Shattuck writing about Monet's work: "…'painting within painting…The scenes he [Monet] observed around the lily pond and along the flower beds were already painted – that is, created by his landscape gardening'" (1982:28) and reminds us in his own writing that Monet used the term *Je pioche* (hacking away or hoeing a row) for both his gardening and his painting practice. (2005: 6) Secondly, Adams played with graphology à la Cy Twombly working around the middle of the twentieth century. This involves the personal 'handwriting' of the artist in making marks on a surface.

Thirdly, Adams researched processes of 'enfolding' with Gilles Deleuze via Heinrich Wölfflin. Deleuze based his ideas about the Baroque and 'enfolding' on the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin's notion of "a-tectonic form", discussed in *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, (1929, English translation in 1932): "Thus a continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surrounding. A fold is always folded within a fold…" (1993: 18).

Adams furthermore used a system to create a system à la Brian Massumi and he writes and quotes from *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, (2002: 134 &137) as follows: "…my work [investigates] the appearance of the 'hand made' through digital media, inviting the computer codes and algorithms to disagree with my drawing, 'automatically producing unforeseen results using feedback mechanisms to create resonance and interference between routines. The digital processing become self-modulating; the running of the code induces qualitative transformation in its loopy operation'." ("Grayscale Drawing", 2005: 7).

Another artist who finds a genealogy in visual arts practices of the past is Jo Ogier, who travelled to the Subantarctic Islands of New Zealand to research the fauna and flora on those 'floating museums' where people are seldom allowed these days. Her travels resulted in the gathering of specimens and field drawings translated into etchings exhibited in traditional formats with full information. The work refers to traditions of bio-documentation as found in historical examples by Walter Fitch, Maria-Sybilla Merian and Charles Alexandre Le Sueur. In Ogier's parallel installation practice, sculptural boat forms support silk lengths on which images are drawn, printed and painted. A cold temperature, longitudinal orientations and subtle sound waves from the Subantarctic region contribute to an immersive environment for participants: an example of how traditional practices can be transformed into the contemporary.

Rachael Rakena is an artist identifying as Kai Tahu Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work entitled *Mihi Aroha* (2002) uses digital text running down like water off the diagonal walls

of a Māori *marae* or meeting house. The work was made in commemoration of her mother's life after death, a movement akin to slipping under water in Kai Tahu mythology. This electronic art work draws consciously on the traditional, historical patterns and placement of flax patterns on the diagonal ribs of the *marae*, of which many magnificent examples can be seen in New Zealand.

Kai Tahu Māori artist Peter Murphy also focuses on water and plays with connections between famous European paintings like Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* and new media through a project which highlights the colonisation of the Antipodes through travel by sea. His work entitled *Raft of the Everyday* mesmerises the viewer and uses this affect to lure one into a sense of travelling movement offset by the stability of the frame and its relatively smale scale of about 100 x 150cm.

A final example with respect to the connections between the contemporary and the historical, the 'archaeology of the contemporary' is South African William Kentridge's *Magic Flute*. Again, the artist references art historical strategies and studio methodologies in his contemporary work. Kentridge uses a simple technology popular in Victorian England, namely shadow play – borrowed from ancient Egypt – wherein shadows cast by hand were projected onto a lit surface to augment the activities on a stage. Also in the 19th century, the panorama as a mechanically moving image augmented the written knowledge people had of places and tourist destinations in an age of increasing travel. Kentridge deploys these old technologies and the stage décor of the early 19th century in his work and has called some of his drawing a "chorus" (2000: s.p.) which augments or comments on what is going on alongside or on a stage, just as the chorus in Classical Greek theatre fulfilled the same functions.

Kentridge uses the shadow-light combination in conjunction with the format of the pentimento where the drawer shows his own corrections and changes as is the case in many historical examples, such as in the work of Rubens. Jill Bennett points out that the word 'pentimento' is related to the word 'pentirsi', to repent or question or change one's mind or opinion. She tells how art "historians and conservators now delight in [what] pentimenti x-rays and infrared photographs reveal as [historical] ghostings [of process] underneath the surface of a painting, reading [the drawings there] as evidence of a painter's thought processes or changes of mind". (2001:44)

The *Magic Flute* has been performed as a full opera by local collaborators with the artist in Belgium, Israel, Italy and in South Africa. Kentridge was commissioned by the Theatre Royal La Monnaie in Brussels to direct the opera. He also, however, created the 'décor' for the work. Images on blackboard show the early sketches of studio research for the later project called "Learning the Flute". A scale model was called "Preparing the Flute". Images in the documentation of the project entitled *William Kentridge: Flute* (2005) provide a glimpse of the performed opera in which historical references are maintained through shadow-light, the inclusion of the blackboard as anticipatory device and projections of pentimenti where corrections are shown in charcoal and chalk.

The opera includes the character of Papageno, the birdcatcher, who slyly imitates birds in order to lure them to the catch. Kentridge includes this character which is now part of the history of the opera's performances and other visualisations. But, he also includes his own body in a digital projection of drawings which emulate the historical format of the panorama. Kentridge uses the opportunity to visualise a becoming: Papageno in the form of the artist's body becomes his dove in an orb-like insertion into the décor of the opera, a chorus-like aesthetic move which transforms the 18th-century stability of the *Magic Flute* characters into a fluid metamorphic identification between the contemporary subject and object.

Teaching Art History through archaeologies of the contemporary can focus on how new art works with which students are involved at a particular moment achieve transformations of the historical. However, without understandings of the historical antecedents it is impossible to analyse such transformations. This article argues for the continuation of Art History teaching in tertiary art schools, but with a difference: acknowledging the reasons for critiques of the discipline and connecting the present with the past in order for students to remain interested in the archaeologies and genealogies of their own and related visual arts practices.

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Leoni Schmidt is currently Research Professor and Head of the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand. She is particularly interested in the pedagogical possibilities of the visual arts, specifically in how Art History can function as a discipline within contemporary tertiary art schools and in how contemporary drawing and its theoretical and historical underpinnings can facilitate education in a studio and study integration. Leoni has been responsible for the establishment of the Master of Fine Arts Programme at her current institution, a programme which has earned praise from candidates, supervisors, and international monitors and external examiners for its academic rigour and integration of studio practice and theory. She holds a doctorate from the University of Johannesburg, an MA (Fine Arts) from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and a BA (Fine Arts) from the University of South Africa. Her research focuses on contemporary drawing and art history & theory and their relationships with education in the visual arts, design and architecture; their intersections with other visual arts disciplines; and their functions in particular socio-political contexts and case studies.