Art School and the Old Grey Cardigan Test[1]

Mick Wilson

"The art school has been a subject of fascination for the past decade."[2]

"Living with contradictions is difficult, and, especially for intellectuals and artists employed in academic institutions, the inability to speak honestly and openly about contradictory consciousness can lead to a destructive desire for 'pure' political positions, to militant posturing and internecine battles with one another that ultimately have more to do with individual subjectivities and self-images than with disciplined collective struggle for resources and power."[3]

"The last twenty years have seen enormous shift in the role and potential of educational environments in relation to visual culture. Shifts in the status of art education within the broader pedagogical context have been taking place. [...] This has moved us towards a situation where the artist-teacher is merely one element within a matrix of expectations and institutional aims within established educational models. This perceived shift is, paradoxically demanded by both university art schools – which must create neo-academic justification for all their departments – and by some independent-minded artists who are increasingly unsure that it is relevant to insert themselves as the sole providers of ideas within schools. We therefore face a new set of dilemmas, for the shift is not complete or well planned; it is taking place as I write and we still face many differing art school models."[4]

"To be a teacher is my greatest work of art."[5]

"The market is making inroads on education. The annual student presentations are hunting grounds for gallerists and curators who are tripping over each other in their insatiable craving for talent. The question is whether the transformation from place of freedom to marketplace is good for the quality of the art academy."[6]

"For aspiring and practising designers and artists out there who may feel a little intimidated by your client's or manager's fancy business degrees, take heart. Your art and design background is the future of the new economy [...] It's not hard to see how out-sourcing to India could lead to the next great era in...enterprise [...] Send maintenance to India and, even after costs, 20 per cent of the budget is freed up to come up with the next break-through [...] What comes after services? Creativity."[7]

In recent years there has been a significant growth in national and international debates about the future role and nature of teaching, learning and research in art and design education at third level. From *Manifesta*'s 'Notes for an Artschool'[8] to *Frieze*'s 'Art schools then and now'[9] there is a clear and current topicality to the question of art education even within the mainstream of the international art world. Throughout the 1990s a variety of publications, emanating from the art and design education centres of the UK and the US, already signalled the beginning of a process of re-addressing the 1970s dispensation for art and design education.[10] Throughout the

last decade, European art and design educators have been engaged in a sustained consideration of the relationship between inherited forms of art and design education and the emergent emphases on multiple fronts: harmonisation across Europe; the rapidity of technology change; cultural diversification, social transformation and the question of access; the call for sustainable research cultures; quality metrics and quality assurance measures; various imperatives for civic engagement and economic rationalisation; and the fast displacement of Europe's manufacturing bases and the ambivalent rhetorics of 'creative cities', 'cultural industries' and so on.[11] Concomitant with these shifting patterns of debate there is a widely felt and keenly articulated sense of apprehension about the future of art and design education.

By contrast one is often tempted to see in the actual lived practices and behaviours of many art and design institutions and educators – and I am especially thinking of those in the south of Ireland with which I am most familiar – a pattern of self-regarding conservatism disguised through theatrical self-presentations of radicalism, accompanied by all those well-worn posturing performances of critical attitude (which, of course, spare only the critic). There appears in the conversations and behaviours of educators a distrusting resistance to change processes and accountability measures: processes which inevitably present a threat to the established comfort-zones of art school teachers and which are gingerly and summarily dismissed as "*more* bureaucracy." Indeed, there is a pervasive tendency among art and design educators to refuse to even acknowledge critique (immanent or otherwise), never mind the manifest unwillingness to embark upon the process of self-critique. The unsettling irony here is that art school presents itself as the space within which the practice of auto-critique is to be acquired and realised by student artists or designers as they progress towards professional autonomy.

These are quite strong criticisms of art and design educators, and there is inevitably a certain risk of circularity in as much as I am writing precisely as an art educator: I must surely be a target of my own self-cancelling criticism. More importantly perhaps, this criticism, formulated in this manner may in itself be structured – or may at least be symptomatic – of a conflict process integral to the art and design educational scene, which pits the newly arrived, the (relatively) youthful staff member or indeed the casualised part-timer against the long-tenured bearer of 'tradition'. It would seem that there are within art education institutions established patterns of low-level conflict which fail to pass over into open and critically accountable debate, dialogue or exchange.

On the one-hand I want to say that many of the self-avowed bearers of the art school 'tradition', who so often imagine themselves as the bearers of

a radical potency and critical culture – first proved in something like '1968' or 'the seventies' – seem to have long ago been absorbed into an *old grey cardigan* kind of comfortable though miserable institutionalisation. The painful irony here is that wanting to express this criticism in this combative and somewhat noxious way is already to operate within the theatre of (relatively inconsequential) conflict endemic to art schools and its associated posturing. Even worse, rehearsing matters in this way risks closing down the very discussion one is demanding. This way of presenting affairs risks simple rudeness and succumbs to the rather petty game of hurting colleagues' feelings, especially when all our feelings have been finely tuned and heightened to exquisite sensitivity by the relentless exposure to the day-to-day petty cruelties and one-upmanships of the institutional scene. To say these things may not then really help to move the situation forward, but not to say them seems to preserve the institutions and their protagonists in their frozen and un-interrogated self-regard. The oxygen of some form of public dialogue seems to be demanded but the problem of how to secure this on a productive footing faces a number of challenges.

The first challenge is to move beyond the well worn fault-lines of an us-and-them scenario and try to imagine an educational scene which is not immediately already always polarised between factions; between arrogant *young Turks* and tired *old grey cardigans*; between casualised and tenured employees; between craft and concept; between teachers and technicians; between management and staff; between practitioners and theorists; between elitists and populists; between respective discipline fiefdoms or media cults or departmental territories; and so on. The challenge then is to move our imaginations beyond these polarised tensions and clichés and find a new framework for thinking our potentials and our purposes as art and design educators.

The second challenge is to recognise the common core activity that is the engine of the art school experience and that pervades all the various fiefdoms, institutional territories, and generational dispensations that inhabit the art school world. There is a key mode of engagement for all of us who land there – whether as teachers or students; whether as technicians or administrators – and that common activity, that single point of convergence for all participants in the art school scenario is some form of conversational practice: all day long in art schools people do things and they talk about doing things. Indeed the thing we in art-school-world do most is perhaps simply that: we *talk*. Tutors talk with students; students talk with students; tutors with each other; some people talk in one-to-one situations and some in gatherings; some in tutorials and some in meetings; some in lecture halls and some in libraries; some over coffee and some over pints; some formally

and some informally; some behind closed doors and some behind backs; some in anger and some in enthusiasm. This talking can be both an exhilarating and an exhausting process. It can often be confounding and mind-boggling as when we find ourselves talking about talking and talking on *ad infinitum*. In these endless eddies of conversational exchange our identities, our status, our reputations swim – and sometimes we must fear that they might also drown.

In imagining possible future ways of talking with each other and achieving the oxygen of open public debate, one is asking: Is it possible that we could have new conversations? Have we other things to say to each other? Have we other ways to speak to each other? What is to be the ethos of our speaking with each other? Are we constrained to remember and repeat only so much as we have already said to each other? What kinds of silences might we listen for amid all this talk?

The third challenge to constructing an open-ended assessment and debate in respect of the current state – and future potential – of art and design education is to acknowledge and reflect upon the agency of art and design education and its institutions, which in the context of a relatively underdeveloped market for art and design is especially important. The most dramatic lesson that the recently graduated students of art and design education give us is the (somehow always unexpected) demonstration of their exceptional agency: their amazing ability to get things done, to get things started, to keep things moving. There is some paradox at work in the apparent ability of art education to facilitate the agency of students and at the same time the tendency towards a disavowal by art educators and art schools in respect of

their own powers to make things better, different, and perhaps even more humane within their own immediate world of work.

It is clear that the rampant technocratic reconstruction and rationalisation of education-in-general as training, not for civic participation, but rather for economic production-consumption, threatens to undermine meaningful provision of third level art and design education. It is also clear that, as in the general culture of the university, the failure to provide a critical, dynamic and vital vision for the art school – but rather to appeal instead to the un-interrogated and uncritical valorisation of earlier dispensations – will fail to provide meaningful resistance and opposition to crude econometric policies and restructurings. The art school needs some critical interrogation and some creative vision. It is perhaps alarming that this drive for a creative renewal of vision is apparent in the commercial art press and the notoriously faddish biennale scene but relatively undisclosed within the actual art schools themselves.

Notes

1   This article is based on a position paper circulated in advance of the *Irish Art & Design Research Network's* '2020 Visions: Imagining The Future of Art and Design Education', held at the National College of Art & Design, Dublin, in March 2007.

2   Okwui Enwezor (2006) 'Schools of Thought' in *Frieze*, no. 101 p. 142.

3   George Lipsitz (2000) 'Academic Politics and Social change', in Jodi Dean (ed.) *Cultural Studies / Political Theory,* Cornell University Press, pp. 80-94

4   Liam Gillick (2006) 'Denial & Function: A history of disengagement in relation to teaching', in Abu El Dahab et al. (eds.) *Notes for an Art School*, p. 46.

5   Joseph Beuys in conversation with Willoughby Sharp (1969) *Artforum*, no. 4, p.44.

6   Willen de Rooij and Simon Starling (2006) 'Freespace or Marketplace' in *Metropolis M: Expanding Academy*, No. 4 Aug./Sept. pp. 104-6

7   A blogger's ironic aside cited in Ronald Jones (2006) 'The Art Market' in *Frieze*, no. 101 p. 39.

8   Mai Abu ElDahab, Anton Vidolke and Florian Waldvogel (eds.) (2006) *Notes for an Art School*, Amsterdam: Manifesta.

9   *Frieze*, no. 101, September, 2006.

10 Howard Singerman's (1999) Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University; Paul Hetherington's (1994) *Artist's in the 1990s: Their Education and Values*; and Nicholas de Ville's and Stephen Fosters (1994) *The Artists and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context.*

11 For example, these developments are evidenced in the shifting thematics that structure the biennial conferences of the European League of Institutes of Art. See www.elia.org