

When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond

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It used to be that the teaching of art was academic and proud of it. Rooted in the observation of nature and the imitation of previous art, the long apprenticeship of a would-be painter or sculptor was primarily an acquisition of skills put under specific cultural constraints. Life-drawing and its underlying discourse, anatomy, provided the basic skill ennobled with humanistic knowledge. Never, though, was art equated with skill. What deserved admiration in the accomplished artist was talent, not craftsmanship. Skill could be acquired, talent could not, since talent was thought of as a gift of nature – a gift, however, which could neither develop nor express itself outside the rules, conventions, and codes provided by the tradition. Tradition set the standards against which the production of art students was measured. Academic teaching had great ambitions as regards the maintenance of tradition and the passing on of quality standards; it had little vanity as regards its ability to “turn out” individual artists. All it could hope to do was nurture and discipline its students’ gifts within the limits of nature’s generosity, and to grant even the most ungifted students a technical know-how capable of securing them a recognised, if humble, place in society and a plausible, if modest, source of income. Between the work of the artisan and that of the genius the Academy recognised a leap in quality, but also the cultural continuity of one and the same trade in which everybody held his (or her) rank.

All this was destroyed in less than a century. Reynolds was probably the last great academic pedagogue; a century after him, the Academy had withered into academicism. As industrialisation and the social upheaval, scientific progress and ideological transformations that went with it decomposed the hitherto stable

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social fabric and, on the whole, more or less destroyed all craftsmanship, the examples of the past lost their credibility, in art and elsewhere, and the chain of tradition was eventually broken. To the sensitive artist, academic art and training became just that, academic, and the new art began to look toward the future for its legitimation, with fear and hope alike. The avant-garde was launched. Painting and sculpture, progressively turning away from observation and imitation of outside models, turned inwards and started to observe and imitate their very means of expression. Instead of exerting their talent within relatively fixed conventions, the modernist artists put those conventions themselves to an aesthetic test and, one by one, discarded those by which they no longer felt constrained. Excellence in art came to be measured against the resistance of the medium, with, as yardstick, the honesty with which the artist yields to it. All tradition rejected, painting came to be seen as a sort of essence, present in all painting, past, present or future, as if the medium in its purity could set the rules by itself, command over skill, and provide a vessel for talent. Sculpture, architecture, photography, even cinema became similar essences.

Soon, art schooling was affected by the avant-garde. As the examples and standards of the past could no longer be trusted, as imitation and observation could no longer provide the basics for the apprenticeship of art, the teaching of art had to look elsewhere for roots in both nature and culture. This it achieved in two ways. The figure of Man – the universal measure of all things in nature – was relinquished as outer model for observation, but was recouped as inner subjective principle. Psychology replaced anatomy in its function as foundational discourse for a new artistic humanism. The new doctrine stated that all men are endowed with innate faculties which it is the function of education to allow to grow. Thus, specialisation in the visual arts meant the specific training and growth of the faculties of visual perception and imagination. How to train them became the pedagogical issue. Again, psychology – not the introspective kind but perception psychology, *Gestalt* theory, and so on – provided the idea that the ability to perceive is, by nature, already cultural, that perception is, so to speak, a basic reading skill. It followed from there that imagination was a basic writing skill of sorts. “Creativity” is the name, the modern name, given to the combined innate faculties of perception and imagination. Everybody is endowed with it, and the closer it remains to sheer, blank endowment, the greater is its potential. A child, a primitive, has more creativity than a cultivated adult. The ideal art student, the artist of the future, came to be dreamt of as an infant whose natural ability to read and write the visual world needs only to be properly tutored. The problem became to find the appropriate means. If only the practice of painting and sculpture could be broken into semantic “atoms”, if only some elementary visual alphabet and syntax could be set up, then art – art itself, not merely skill – could be taught and taught without resorting to a now obsolete tradition. Talent, as such, no longer exists. It lies in a raw state in everyone’s creativity, and skill lies, so to speak, ready-made in the properties of the medium: in the linearity of drawing, in the two-dimensionality of the picture plane, in the volumetric properties of sculpture. In

principle, if not in fact, the learning of art became simple: students should learn how to tap their unspoiled creativity, guided by immediate feeling and emotion, and to read their medium, obeying its immanent syntax. As their aesthetic sensibility and artistic literacy progressed, their ability to feel and to read would translate into the ability to express and to articulate. Nurtured perception and imagination would produce artworks of a new kind.

This pedagogical programme proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. All progressive pedagogues of this century, from Froebel to Montessori to Decroly; all school reformers and philosophers of education, from Rudolf Steiner to John Dewey, have based their projects and programmes on creativity, or rather, on the belief in creativity, on the conviction that creativity – not tradition, not rules and conventions – is the best starting point for education. Moreover, all great modern theorists of art, from Herbert Read to E. H. Gombrich to Rudolph Arnheim, have entertained similar convictions and devoted considerable energy to breaking up the “visual language” into its basic components and demonstrating the universality of its perceptive and psychological “laws”. And finally, needless to say, there is not one pioneer of Modernist art, from Malevich to Kandinsky and Klee, or from Itten and Moholy-Nagy to Albers and Hofmann, who has not been actively involved in the creation of art schools and teaching programmes based on the reduction of practice to the fundamental elements of a syntax immanent to the medium. Kandinsky wrote *Von Punkt zur Linie zur Fläche* in 1924, and since then every art school in the world has a 2-D and a 3-D studio to prepare its students for painting and sculpture. If they had been strictly faithful to Kandinsky, if they had also taken their cue from Cubism, they would have a 1-D and a 4-D studio as well.

My point is not just to be ironic, and certainly not to dismiss this philosophy without further trial, but merely to stress that a philosophy it is, a biased one and a dated one. Let’s call it the Bauhaus model. It was never carried out with the radical purity of my description, not even at the Bauhaus itself, which died under the pressure of its own contradictions as much as it did under the hand of the Nazis. But the Bauhaus model, more or less amended, more or less debased, has set a series of assumptions about art teaching upon which dozens of art and architecture schools around the world have been built, and which are, as of today, still underlying, often subliminally, almost unconsciously, most art curriculums, including (if I’m well informed) a great number of foundation courses across the UK. Moreover, it is seemingly the only model that pits itself coherently against the old academic model, such as it also survives, equally amended and often degenerated beyond recognition, not just in the very few *Ecoles de Beaux-Arts* that still defend it (actually, I don’t know of any that still do), but also in the immense majority of art schools and academies around the world that seek to find a compromise between traditionalism and modernism.

I have sketched out an oversimplified picture, a caricature, even, of the postulates underlying the teaching of art up to recent years. But a caricature is all the more truthful in that it is exaggerated, and I will not hesitate in exaggerating it even

more forcibly, in order to make those postulates appear as postulates – that is, as mere postulates. Two models, even though in reality they contaminate each other, divide up the teaching of art conceptually. On the one hand, there is the academic model; on the other, there is the Bauhaus model. The former believes in talent, the latter in creativity. The former classifies the arts according to techniques, what I would call the *métier*; the latter according to the medium. The former fosters imitation; the latter invention. Both models are obsolete. The academic model entered a deep crisis as soon as it began to deserve the derogative label of academicism. Its decadence was accomplished under the pressure of modern art, which is why no return to the past is thinkable lest the blackout is pronounced on all the art and all the artists of modernity. The Bauhaus model also entered an open crisis. That phenomenon is more recent but it isn't new, dating from the Sixties, I would say. It, too, goes hand in hand with the art of its time, and it is contemporaneous with the deep loss of confidence that modernism has undergone since those years. Now, it is dramatic to have to teach according to postulates one doesn't believe in anymore. But in order to change them, one has to see them clearly. Let's review the evidence: do we have to choose between talent and creativity, between *métier* and medium?

Talent vs Creativity

The difference between talent and creativity is that the former is unequally distributed and the latter universally. In the passage from one word to the other, there is of course a complete reversal of ideologies, and it is not difficult to see that, historically, the progress of the ideology of creativity went hand in hand with that of the idea of democracy and of egalitarianism. The use of the word creativity in this elevated sense itself is relatively recent, but its germs were already present in the Romantic notion of the genius. Creativity is grounded in a utopian belief summarised by a slogan that repeats itself with clockwork regularity throughout the history of modernity, from Rimbaud to Beuys: everyone is an artist. Of course, it always meant: everyone is potentially an artist. Talent is also a potential but, on the one hand, it does not depend on some psychology of the faculties, and on the other, it is inseparable from the specific terrain where it is exerted, which in the last resort is always technical. One has talent for music, for carpentry or for cookery, but not talent in general. Creativity, by contrast, is conceived as an absolute and unformalised potential, a supply of energy prior to any division of labour. One has creativity, without qualification: one is creative, period.

Three major consequences derive from this for any art-educational project based on creativity. The first is that nothing should, in principle, restrict access to the study of art. The second is that art itself, and not just the technical means of art, can be taught. And the third is that initiation to art in general should precede every specialisation (that was the role of the *Grundkurs*, or foundation course, at the Bauhaus). The contradiction between these principles is blatant: many art

schools yield to the particularly perverse illusion (which, moreover, frequently backfires) that they produce or fabricate artists, while at the same time considering that their incoming students are artists already, even though only potentially. In fact, all teachers know by experience that talent exists and that creativity is a myth. On this point, the Academy saw things a lot more clearly than modernity. The myth is generous, and this is not a negligible quality when it comes to teaching. And as long as the myth functions, why denounce it? The problem is that it doesn't function any more.

Métier vs Medium

The difference between *métier* and medium is that the former has a historical existence and the latter a transhistorical existence. The Academy classified the fine arts according to the *métier* and everything the notion entails: specialised skills, artisan habits, sleights of hand, rules of composition, canons of beauty, in short, a specific tradition. Modernism classifies the arts according to the medium and everything this notion entails: particular materials, supports, tools, gestures, technical procedures, and conventions of specificity. That an artist practised the *métier* of painter meant that he belonged to the guild of painters and had a place in a given affiliation. His definition of painting would have been, simply: what painters do. That an artist works in the medium of painting means that he questions painting for what it has to say about itself and hasn't said yet. His definition of painting might be: what no painter has done yet. The *métier* gets practised, the medium gets questioned; the *métier* gets transmitted, the medium communicates or gets communicated; the *métier* gets learnt, the medium gets discovered; the *métier* is a tradition, the medium is a language; the *métier* rests on experience, the medium relies on experimentation. From the former to the latter, a reversal occurred in the conception of history. The *métier* is always received from the past; even when regulated by ideals that are supposedly eternal, those ideals are situated upstream in history (like the antique). The medium is received from nowhere; it purports to actualise transcendentals, that is, *a priori* conditions of possibility, which, regulating the work, should lead to the revelation of the medium's essence, paradoxically situated downstream in history. Thus, for the academic model, to teach painting means to transmit its legacy and to allow the apprentice to find a place in a chain of affiliation of which he has a strong awareness and which he will have to pursue. For the Bauhaus model, to teach painting is to open access to a being called painting, supposedly immanent to all paintings from all times, but whose ultimate revelation is yet to come; it is to invite the student to subtract from the medium and thereby to subtract himself from the chain of affiliation.

Three major consequences derive from this. First, teaching the arts according to the medium cultivates distrust of technical skill because mastering the medium gets in the way of questioning the medium; what matters is not technical

apprenticeship but the discovery of those qualities that can be deduced from the medium itself. Second, in cutting off the arts from their specific affiliations and reorganising them according to the specificity of their perceptive properties, this teaching denies itself the possibility of conceiving that there is art in between the mediums. And third, it seeks to teach the future, which is of course impossible. The verdict should be more severe, even, for the myth of the medium than it was for the myth of creativity, with which, moreover, it is contradictory under certain aspects. It has had considerable pedagogical efficiency, but its perverse effects now outrun its benefits.

Imitation vs Invention

The difference between imitation and invention goes without saying. Whereas imitation reproduces, invention produces; whereas imitation generates sameness, invention generates otherness; whereas imitation seeks continuity, invention seeks novelty. The Academy was aware that artists worthy of the name invent. However, even though academic teaching spotted a sign of a student's talent in his capacity to invent, it was not on his capacity to invent that it judged him, nor was it through stimulating invention that it claimed to educate him. Quite the contrary. It was through imposing on him imitation, invention's antithesis: the imitation of nature, of the Ancients, of the master. The Bauhaus model, by contrast, fosters invention, because every progress in its expression indicates a liberation of the student's creativity, an actualisation of his artistic potential. The abandonment of naturalism, the break with the Ancients, the rejection of the master are the predictable results. Now, that a teaching system should systematically encourage the rejection of the master isn't without contradiction. Creativity being the source of invention, the medium its target, the teacher – who is no longer a master – owes his authority to the very constraints of the medium while he invites the student to transgress the medium's limits in order to prove his creativity. He sees it as his task to detect the student's invention and to value it for its own sake, while referring it to the medium and interpreting it within the limits of the medium's specificity.

Again, three major consequences derive from this. First, the kind of teaching that seeks to provoke invention tends to judge its students on a quasi-quantitative basis, on the basis of the frequency of invention as such, of its novelty, of its discontinuous and randomlike character, of its unforeseen freshness: all qualities that are real in an accomplished work of art but quite unsuitable when it comes to recording the students' progress. Second, such teaching systematically encourages the students to experiment with the medium, while containing their experimentation within boundaries that are seen not just as a terrain for apprenticeship, but as the limits of the field of practice itself. Finally, such teaching is loath to discuss the content of the students' work and cultivates formalism. These are the cumulative effects of the generosity of the ideology of creativity and of a conception of

the history of art that banks on the future for its legitimation. The trouble is that the myth of creativity is suspicious, and that the future, from which the Bauhaus model expected its legitimation, belongs to our past.

In view of this cursory analysis, it may seem that I promote some return to the academic model of teaching. Not so, of course. In fact, I don't promote anything, not in this paper, anyway. My only intention is to gain a clearer view of the decline of the Bauhaus model, which is far more important for the proper understanding of the present crisis than the long-accomplished demise of the Academy. It is because the paradigm underlying the Bauhaus model, the creativity-medium-invention paradigm, still operates in most art schools, even in those – especially in those, I should say – that consciously bathe in its critique; it is because its three postulates are either inscribed in the structure of the institution, or linger more or less consciously in the heads of the teachers and of the students, that its perverse effects are so pervasive. Whether creativity exists or whether it is merely a useful illusion is for all practical purposes irrelevant as long as it works. Whether there is such a thing as a “visual language” specific to the medium or whether it is merely a pedagogical strategy is equally irrelevant as long as it works. The question is: does the Bauhaus model still work? Is it still useful?

We, who teach in art schools, all have mitigated answers to this, I'm sure. Who among us hears the word creativity without wearing an ironic smile? Who among us still dreams of a utopian visual language à la Kandinsky, some Esperanto composed of red squares, yellow triangles and blue circles? Who still believes in the purity or the specificity of the medium, in the manner of Greenberg? Who, perhaps with Warhol in mind, or Toroni, or Richter, or Steve Reich, will deny that as much contemporary art of quality has been produced through repetition as through invention? If the Bauhaus model still works, perhaps it is in spite of itself. Many of us have grown to value the perverse effects of a teaching method organised, if only nominally, in terms of the purity of the media and the separateness of the disciplines. Many of us have grown to praise the subversive students who do not behave as if they tapped the unspoiled creativity with which they are supposedly endowed, but who, instead, tap the pop culture with which they come equipped. Those of us who teach the “basic” courses know all too well that they can communicate only rules and conventions, and that significant art is art that overthrows, displaces, abandons or subverts rules and conventions. Who has not dreamt, if only secretly, of having students – the best students – forcing the teacher to give them an A+ because they transgressed the rules of the assignment so intelligently that they displayed a perfect awareness of what art-making is about? Those of us who teach “mixed media”, “intermedia”, “multi-media”, or “experimental media” – whatever the name is of the no man's land that most art schools have ended up institutionalising as if it were a medium of its own – know all too well that if they did not assign subject matter or set technical constraints, formal limits, severe deadlines or whatever rules or conventions, they would not achieve much more than organised escapism. The fruits that the Bauhaus tree yielded and still yields are strange hybrids. We all know

that. We have come to expect it, even foster it. The last art school with a strict Bauhaus ideology (though already considerably amended) was the Black Mountain College, and its best “fruit” was Rauschenberg. Meanwhile, the Bauhaus itself, with all those great artists teaching there, did not produce a single student of a stature equal to that of the masters. Meanwhile, the most “advanced” art schools are those that, consciously entertaining this grim and disillusioned view of the Bauhaus legacy, openly bank on the perversions – they say the subversion – of this modernist model. The artists they produce – for they produce artists indeed – are people whose criterion is the derision of all the notions derived from that of creativity, such as originality and authenticity, without, for all that, necessarily displaying more talent; people who have pushed the rejection of both the *métier* and the medium to the point where their only technique is the appropriation of ready-mades or people who, through simulation, succeed in denying imitation and invention at the same time.

Such is the present situation. A paradigm has imploded, and though it might be that we are in the midst of a “paradigm shift” (if so, it will be for our successors to see it), what I believe is apparently organising the most advanced art schools is in fact the disenchanting, perhaps nihilistic, after-image of the old Bauhaus paradigm. Let me quickly review the evidence in relation to both the postulates of the academic model, talent-*métier*-imitation, and those of the Bauhaus model, creativity-medium-invention. What seems to have taken their place is a new triad of notions: attitude-practice-deconstruction.

Talent and Creativity vs Attitude

In the wake of the student upheaval of the late Sixties no one was ready to admit the inequality of talent, out of fear of seeming irredeemably reactionary. But the May '68 slogan, “all power to the imagination”, didn't last very long, and soon creativity lost its aura, too. Philosophically speaking, the times were very suspicious of anything more or less resembling the old psychology of the faculties, and creativity, which is a neo-Romantic amalgam of the Kantian faculties of sensibility and imagination, became old hat. It had everything against itself: being universal, it could only be “bourgeois”; being transcendental, it could only be “metaphysical”; being natural, it could only be “ideological”. But its greatest sin was that it could not be willed, and the most progressive art and art teaching of the Seventies thought that art had to be willed, whether it aligned itself with some political programme bathed in revolutionary rhetorics, or whether it saw itself as the relentless critique of the dominant ideology. Anyway, it had become hard to suppose that creativity was the potential of mankind in general, and equally hard to hope that it could be instilled through propaganda or education (think of Joseph Beuys, in this context: he certainly represents the last great and tragic hero of the modern myth of creativity, immolating himself on the altar of both pedagogy and “social sculpture”). Thus another concept took the place of creativity, that of “attitude”.

A concept that is a blank, actually: a sort of zero degree of psychology, a neutral point amidst ideological choices, a volition without content.

Of course, in order to be progressive – and how could art of any significance not be progressive? – attitude had to be critical. Lukács, Adorno, Althusser and others were called in to tell would-be artists that neither talent nor creativity were needed to make art but, instead, that “critical attitude” was mandatory. And the fact that not just artists but all “cultural workers” were thought to be in need of a critical attitude of course helped to shape a new, strongly politicised discourse about art and its relation to society, a discourse that, throughout the Seventies and part of the Eighties, became the dominant discourse, not in all art schools, admittedly, but certainly in the most progressive, the most avant-gardistic or – why not say it? – the most fashionable ones. Even if you turn to less politicised aspects of the dominant discourse about art in those years you will see the central position of the notion of attitude confirmed. It is towards the end of the Sixties that the concept of “aesthetic attitude” surfaced in art theory, thanks to Jerome Stolnitz in particular, but also, I should say, thanks to Duchamp’s growing reputation as the first conceptual artist, a combination of influences that greatly helped in pushing aside aesthetics while retaining the notion of attitude. Finally – and this, I believe, clinches it, if only symbolically – it was in 1969 that Harald Szeemann organised the famous exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, at the Kunsthalle in Bern. Both the date and the title coined for this exhibition are symptomatic, for it was then and there that conceptual art was acknowledged for the first time by a major art institution (MoMA was to follow before long with the *Information* show, in 1970), providing a new model for advanced art soon to be emulated and disseminated by most art schools.

Everybody here, I’m sure, is familiar with what happened next. Linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, structuralism and post-structuralism, in short, “theory” (or so-called “French theory”) entered art schools and succeeded in displacing – sometimes replacing – studio practice while renewing the critical vocabulary and intellectual tools with which to approach the making and the appreciating of art. With considerable differences depending on national and local circumstances (the Anglo-Saxon world having the lead), this shift – whose first aspect is the shift from creativity to attitude – occurred in the mid- to late Seventies and was a *fait accompli* by the mid-Eighties. By then, to take just a few prominent examples, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax had its most prolific period behind itself, Cal Arts was launching a generation of successful alumni, and Goldsmiths’ was the place to be. In those days attitude still had to be critical, which basically meant: critical of the social and political status quo. But soon the very success of these art schools began attracting students who went there because of the instant rewards they were seemingly able to promise them. For these students (with or without the conscious or unconscious complicity of their teachers, I can’t tell), what had started as an ideological alternative to both talent and creativity, called “critical attitude”, became just that, an attitude, a stance, a pose, a contrivance. This phenomenon, of course, widely

exceeds the few art schools I just named; it even exceeds art schools in general, for it is rampant throughout the whole academic world, especially in the humanities. It can be summarised by saying that political commitment sank into political correctness. Meanwhile, what remains of the old postulates – the academic postulate called talent and the modernist postulate called creativity – on which to ground a plausible art curriculum is the poorest, the most tautological notion of all: that of an artist's attitude.

***Métier* and Medium vs Practice**

Dividing the arts according to the medium rather than to the *métier*; reading art history in terms of “a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium” (Clement Greenberg); fostering the purity of the medium as a value in itself are the three strong points of formalist criticism and modernist doctrine in art. As is well known, formalism and modernism have been under heavy fire since the mid-Sixties, first in America, soon after in England, and then in the rest of the Western world. Just as with Harald Szeemann's show, *When Attitudes Become Form*, let me choose a symbolic event to pinpoint this, an event all the more symbolic in that it happened in 1966 at an art school. John Latham was a part-time instructor at St Martin's, in London, when he borrowed Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* from the school's library and, with the complicity of Barry Flanagan, then a student at St Martin's, organised an event entitled *Still & Chew*, when a number of pages of the book were chewed by the participants and spat into a jar, then submitted to a complex chemical treatment. You know the aftermath of this performance (or was it a happening?): a year or so later, when asked to return the book to the library, John Latham returned it indeed, but in the shape of a jar containing the unspeakable, let alone unreadable, mixture. He was fired the next day.

Today, needless to say, he could do the same performance with the principal's blessing, and the librarian wouldn't even bother to reorder *Art and Culture*. Events, happenings, and performances have long been absorbed into art schools, and even though most schools keep a painting studio, a sculpture studio, a printmaking studio, and so on, they have added to the list a “mixed media”, an “interdisciplinary”, or a “free-for-all” studio – whatever the name – which definitely indicates that the teaching of art no longer rests on an aesthetic commitment to the specificity or the purity of the medium. By 1970 Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried were already the last art critics to uphold the idea that no art of significance could be done that sits in between media, and that if something is neither painting nor sculpture, then it is not art. Against them, a whole generation of conceptual artists were relying on Duchamp in order to maintain that the art was in the concept, that it was dematerialised, that it did not cling to any medium, above all not to painting. They fought against the medium but, of course, didn't rehabilitate the *métier* for all that. Just as with the word “attitude”, what was soon to replace both the *métier* and the medium was another magical word, “practice”.

By 1975, the word “practice” was widely in use among all the people who had been in touch with “French theory”, and since “French theory”, after all, originated in France, it is there, in the writings of the Tel Quel people, in particular, that it acquired a cluster of interesting meanings in the context of literature and art. One of its benefits was that it was charged with prestigious political connotations, Marxist, of course, and Althusserian. More important is that it is a general word not a specific one, or, to say this differently, that it puts the emphasis on the social, not on the technical, division of labour. Applied to painting, for example, it allowed us to conceive of painting not in terms of a specific skill (such as entailed by the notion of *métier*), nor in terms of a specific medium (such as the Greenbergian flatness), but in terms of a specific historical institution called “pictorial practice”. This is the way both the painters belonging to the Support-Surface group, and their arch-enemy, Daniel Buren, used the word in defence of painting. Other artists, who were defending interdisciplinarity against specificity, began speaking of “artistic practice” or “practices”, depending on whether the generic was thought of as being one or plural. But the most interesting – i.e. symptomatic – phenomenon is that the word art itself (simply, art) became taboo. It was guilty of conveying some faith in the “essence” of art, I mean, in the existence of some transhistorical and transcultural common denominator among all artistic practices. Our epoch being radically relativistic, it wouldn’t allow such unorthodox belief. The orthodoxy of the times prescribed – and still prescribe – conceiving of art as being just one “signifying practice” (that expression was coined by Julia Kristeva) among others.

I have just said: “prescribed – and still prescribe”. In fact, I’m not so sure. One of the things I expect from this conference is that it may help me understand to what extent the orthodoxy of discourse (what I nastily referred to as political correctness) fails to hide the reality of anxieties, disappointments, shattered beliefs, which, I suspect, have a hard time expressing themselves without giving the impression (as I most probably do) of wanting to go backwards and resorting to nostalgia. I hope that the discussion will bring these difficulties into the open, but meanwhile I would like to stress that what was in the Seventies an avant-gardistic discourse has, by now, been largely institutionalised. I know of at least one art school where the students have the choice of enrolling either in “Communication” or in “Artistic Practice”. As always, the magic of changing names is a symptom: the expression “artistic practice” has become a ritual formula, conveying the vague suspicion that has come to surround the word art, while failing to designate referents in the world (that is, actual works) of which one could be sure that the word art has ceased to apply to them significantly.

Imitation and Invention vs Deconstruction

When the culture that fosters invention starts to doubt, it ceases to oppose itself to the culture fostering imitation that it claimed to supplant. Conversely, when the absence of models to be imitated begins to be felt as a loss and no longer as a liberation, this can only mean that this culture’s capacity to invent without looking

back has dried up. Once this point is reached (and God knows it has been reached: look at all the neo- and all the post-movements; look at the endemic practices of quotation, second- or third-degree self-referentiality, replicas, and the like), then it is no longer enough to say that imitation repeats and that invention makes the difference. The very concepts of repetition and difference ought to be thought anew, transversally, so to speak. Towards the end of the Sixties, again, and sitting on the uneasy boundary between literature and philosophy, Jacques Derrida, but also Gilles Deleuze and others, began thinking about difference and repetition together. Between the live voice creating newness and the trace that supplants and supplements the missing origin, they showed the link dismantling their expected opposition. Derrida sought *écriture* in creation and *différance* in reproduction, while Deleuze showed that the eternal return of sameness inhabited the production of difference. Traditional concepts such as presence versus absence, immediacy versus mediation, originality versus secondarity, were no longer secure oppositions, and had to be deconstructed.

The success of deconstruction is not simply explained – let alone explained away – by the quality of the philosophical work done under its name, and even less so by the mere influence of Derrida – and of Paul de Man on the other side of the Atlantic – on literary criticism. If it had not resonated at a very precise stage in the crisis of modernity, it would not have achieved success at all. But, as we all know, it has, to the point where deconstructionism – and that’s the last straw, really – became the banner under which an architecture movement developed, after having invaded art criticism and, more recently, the teaching of art itself. Rather misunderstood and badly assimilated, deconstruction has apparently become, in the Eighties, a method by which to produce art and to teach it. As such, however, rather misunderstood and badly assimilated, deconstruction is merely the symptom of the disarray of a generation of art teachers who have lived through the crisis of invention and have never themselves been submitted to the discipline of imitation. The result is that students who haven’t had the time to construct an artistic culture of any kind are being tutored in the deconstructive suspicion proper to our time. I have seen one art school (not that long ago) where the first year course (what used to be the foundation course) had been transformed into a seminar in which the point was to “deconstruct” anything entering the classroom. One week it was an advertisement, another week it was the policy of this or that public art institution, and yet another week it was a student’s work – a work done at home, that is, as if no assignment had been given to her beside the unspoken injunction to produce material to be deconstructed in the classroom. The ensuing paralysis was not just sad, it was revolting.

Of course, as I warned you at the beginning of my talk, I have simplified matters, and I have turned the world of present-day art schools into a caricature, just as I did with the old Academy and with the somewhat younger Bauhaus model. In the everyday reality of art schools things are a lot more complex, more subtle, more ambiguous. But since all of us, here, are gathered around the problematic and general issues of “perspectives in fine art education”, I hope you understand that

it is not on the level of our everyday endeavours that I have situated my remarks but on that of the historical ideological paradigms that we inherit from our institutions or with which, willy-nilly, we have to work. It is thus my contention, which I really want to offer as an open basis for discussion, that the triad of notions, “attitude-practice-deconstruction”, is not the post-modern paradigm that supposedly substituted for the modern paradigm, “creativity-medium-invention”. It is the same one, minus faith, plus suspicion. I tend to see it as a mere after-image, as the negative symptom of a historical transition whose positivity is not clear yet. As such it is quite interesting, and it can yield strong works of art. But for the teaching of art it is sterile. Once it is possible to put it down on paper, as I have just done, this means that its potential for negation has already become conventional (deconstruction is today’s good taste), that its anguish is no longer of the kind that nourishes true artists (it is fake, because it is reconciled with the present); and that its suspicion is, unlike Descartes’s doubt, not fruitful (it is aimed at the other and not at oneself).

I shall stop here, rather abruptly, on purpose. Having offered a diagnosis, I refuse to suggest a cure – which is not to say that the cure interests me less than the diagnosis. Quite the contrary. As some of you might know, I spent the past three years conceiving the project of a new art school on behalf of the City of Paris, until it was abandoned by the very same City of Paris for financial reasons. In the process I had dozens of meetings with artists, teachers, critics, intellectuals, technicians; I wrote a book on the issue of art schools, of which you have just heard the first fifteen pages; and I was lucky enough to be able to organise a one-month summer school for thirty-two students, as a sort of “dry-run” test of the future school, just before the project went down the drain. In the process I also learnt that there is no ready-made solution to the crisis in art schools; that the first thing to do was patiently to reconstitute a community of good artists who love art, who respect each other and their students, and who take their task as transmitters seriously; and that the last thing to do was to want to unite them around a banner, a programme or an ideology. I hope you will pardon me for refusing even to suggest that I might hold such a banner.