

PANELS AND ROUNDTABLES

ARTISTS TEACHING ARTISTS: TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM

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Summary

While there seems to be little space available in conventional education for anything more than a craft approach to digital arts, cyberspace offers an entirely new perspective on the what, why and where of art education.

Art education is in crisis. It is not simply the impact of new technologies on art practice that has put the academy into a spin, but political, economic and commercial priorities have put the very idea of the creative arts at the bottom of the academic agenda. In place of art education we have multimedia training which, even as a crude market strategy, is shortsighted. The multimedia industry is far from stable; the division amongst developers and manufacturers lies not only in software standards, protocols and procedures, but in the very nature of their view of consumer culture which fluctuates between respect and contempt for the mentality of the marketplace. Acquiring highly specialised skills without technological flexibility and creative adaptability is of very limited value in such a volatile climate. An art education for this digital age which is not integrative and holistic is worthless. The aim of higher education must be to enable the individual to acquire values as much as skills, and these cannot be created, tested or absorbed in the short bursts of learning that modular structures demand. The only reliable continuity which is not space dependent is that which cyberspace provides.

However, instead of developmental, open-ended curricula we have a over-determined, complex modularity for which more and more managers are required, thereby limiting the number of artists who can be hired to teach. While computers are now academically ubiquitous, connectivity is universally constrained: the student may get on a computer but she won't necessarily get online. Corporate accountancy with its insistent bottom line has replaced personal accountability with its higher aspirations. Consequently anaesthetics, the dumbing of the culture, has replaced aesthetics, just at the point when our understanding of the complexity of life beneath the surface of things is replacing the old simplistic paradigm of appearance, and as the collaborative construction of emergent systems is replacing the solipsism of personal expression. The reactionary response is a kind of arts-and-crafts revival in the digital domain, accompanied by a weak kind of William Morris 'social concern' and the idealisation of the computer artisan. So much art in this domain is pure craft, no more than nominally interactive, indifferent to the mind or spirit, devoid often of any kind of creative thought at all. It is only when art education is returned to artists, poets, and visionaries, particularly those in dialogue with science and technology, that new generations of students can be expected to be helped. Then, many questions arise: How can the skills and insights of one group of practitioners be shared, questioned or absorbed by another group? Can we talk about learning communities rather than academic classes? Is Web space the only place left to go? Do the new forms of artistic practice and collaborative creativity in cyberspace require new protocols and new crite-

ria? Is education for art in the Net radically discontinuous from past pedagogies? Do existing academic disciplines, departments, faculties and divisions make sense in our world? Finally a choice has to be made between two quite separate and distinct communities: those who wish to dissect, analyse, describe and control what is thought to be the given immutable reality, and those who wish to seed, construct and cultivate new realities. The former will be quite content to continue to inhabit and dominate the old, fixed academic institutions, but the latter demand new forms, new organisms, new hyperstructures of learning.

The answer, it seems to me, lies in trying to develop a planetary discourse using worldwide networks to engender a renaissance of creativity and inquiry. But how far with the amplified intelligence of the Net do universities want to go, or are they capable of going? It is only by building new associative structures in interspace, between the virtual and the real, that we can take on board the questions of collaborative consciousness and artificial life which lie at the root of our cultural concerns as we approach the millennium. I believe it is time to set about constructing, site by site and node by node, a "planetary collegium" - which would engage all our resources of mediated imagination and mind-on-line. But whereas institutional change is usually created top down, and biological change takes place from the bottom up, noetic change is an emergent property of mind, at once cognitive, moral and spiritual, requiring a global determination to realise our extended human potential.

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