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'My Position in the Design World: Locating Subjectivity in the Design Curriculum'

Annebella Pollen

Introduction

Where is subjectivity located in the design curriculum? As a result of historical regulation of the place of practice and theory in British higher education, design students are routinely expected to utilize a range of different skills in the different aspects of their studies. Critics of what is sometimes described as the 'academic element' of studio-based teaching and learning have complained that while art and design students are required to place themselves at the center of the creative process of making, they are denied this position in the historical and theoretical elements of their courses. As Maziar Raein puts it, for example, "The academic tradition views the presence of third person in a narrative as essential; this convention indicates an objective view of the material and the commentaries upon it. Conversely the presence of the 'I' is essential in the work of art or design." (2003: 2)

In these kinds of characterizations, as a result of a perceived binary split between subjective and objective modes of apprehension and communication, the critical, cultural and historical aspects of art and design education have been positioned as dry and distant,

lacking in empathy and personal engagement. In this “discourse of oppositions” (Tynan and New, 2009: 296), long entrenched in art and design education, historical and theoretical elements are positioned as enemies of creative practice, as science versus art, as rigor versus emotion. Yet despite these divisions and accusations, in practice - as this article will demonstrate - design students can experience historical and cultural studies as a fertile space for establishing their own subject positions as producers, consumers and interpreters of designed objects in a material world.

Theory and Practice Positions in Art and Design Education: A Historical Snapshot

The organization of British art and design studies in higher education has been subject to a range of governmental restructuring initiatives since the Second World War that have proved instrumental in shaping the experience and perception of the subject in its present formulation. A number of useful histories have provided detailed accounts of the institutionally and pedagogically-informed changes that have shaped art and design in British higher education (Ashwin, 1975; Hickman, 2008; Huppatz and Lees-Maffei, 2013). As such, this history will only be briefly outlined here, highlighting core historical reference points for debates about subjectivity and objectivity in the curriculum.

Broadly speaking, after its early background rooted in apprenticeship and technical training schools, the development of new degree-equivalent diploma qualifications for design courses in UK polytechnics in the post-war period led to the addition of new areas of study to the curriculum. These included a statutory proportion of around 15% art history and contextual studies in content and assessment (Ministry of Education, 1960; Department of Education and Science, 1970). The development of these and other new systems for

qualification and assessment was devised through a series of government committees, recommendations and reports that investigated ways of developing art and design in higher education during the post-war period, including the National Advisory Council on Art Education, whose outputs are sometimes referred to by the surnames of the committees' chairs, Sir William Coldstream and Sir John Summerson, respectively (Ashwin, 1975). The purpose of these councils and committees was to develop a system of content and assessment that would increase the intellectual substance of art practice and raise the academic profile of arts.

The discussions that led to fundamental transformations in the development of degree level qualifications in polytechnics and later universities, and the way in which the changes were received, reveal the ways in which different aspects of the study of art and design have been characterized. The expansion of theoretical and critical studies has been appraised by some as "extraneous" to the discipline, and its introduction has been described as "neither inevitable nor 'natural' " (Borg 2007: 85). The contested character of the theoretical elements is perhaps best seen in the context of the well-known student uprisings in higher education in the late 1960s, which temporarily closed down several British art establishments and made many others into sites of protest. In several cases, disgruntled students made explicit reference to the shortcomings of the generic art history provision among their list of complaints and demands, leading to the development of more discipline-specific cultural and complementary studies pathways (Lyon and Woodham, 2009). Twentieth century concerns about the balance of theory to practice, of academic versus creative content, continue in the twenty-first where national quality assurance surveys confirm the legacy of these decisions. As the 2002 Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Subject

Benchmark Statements in Art and Design outlined, “most courses commonly display many of the characteristics of learning and teaching that date back to Coldstream” (in Raein 2004: 4).

The oppositional difference perceived to be at the heart of the “forced marriage” (Hughes 2008: 36) between practical and theoretical elements of study is not merely related to content and outcomes; for many the issue is methodological, where the differing approaches to the subject of study appear to be split along subjective and objective lines. Subjective knowledge indicates an understanding that develops from the personal experience and emotions of the perceiver, rather than external criteria. Its inverse, objectivity, is defined as knowledge that relates to external phenomena, independent of an individual’s emotions and experience (Collins English Dictionary, 2006). While these distinctions are not explicitly named as structuring systems in conceptualisations of disciplinary differences, it is notable that the most recent QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, for example, utilize quite different language to describe the subject matter, epistemological priorities and assessments in the study of art and design and the history of art, architecture and design, respectively. Terms such as personal development, self-fulfillment, self-expression and self-reflection are repeatedly emphasized in the benchmarks for the study of art and design but are entirely absent from their historical and theoretical counterpart. The sole concession can be found in the list of subject-specific skills in the history of art, architecture and design, where it is indicated that students should be able to “draw upon personal responses to artefacts”; even this is tempered, however, by the proviso “while recognizing how these should be distinguished from other relevant meanings.” (2008: 6) In a pedagogic context, then, attributes and skills related to

subjectivity are positioned as central to the art and design curriculum and to learning methodologies, while the acquisition and deployment of more objective forms of knowledge, along with associated critical and analytical skills, appears more highly valued in history and theory. This article examines the ways that these disciplinary differences have been discussed and applied, while challenging some of their precepts.

Theory and Practice Positions in Art and Design Education: Some Myths and Critique

In order to demonstrate how these areas have been examined in pedagogical debate, this article draws on selected material from the Writing PAD (Writing Purposefully in Art and Design) network. Established in 2002, and originally made up of representatives from 40 British higher education art and design institutions, and now extended to more than 100 institutions over 5 continents, Writing PAD was founded in response to concerns about the role of the humanities element of the arts curriculum in degree level education. Originally financed for four years by the Higher Education Funding Council (and continuing since 2006 in a self-funded capacity), Writing PAD's founding aim was to bring together studio, theory and learning support staff to explore the role of writing in art and design. The network's early statements of intent outlined the principal issues and areas for concern. Arguing that the theoretical elements of academic art and design education (variously organized in universities under titles such as historical, critical, contextual and/or cultural studies) were unsuited to some art and design students' needs, they sought in particular new approaches to assessment. As Julia Lockheart, put it: "it has long been felt that the government-driven change from 'art college' to 'university' brought with it the imposition of the Humanities writing component [...] unsuitable for the variety of purposes and possibilities for writing within art and design." (2007: 1)

While the purpose of the network, as indicated by its name, was to improve the functionality of writing in art and design, as a means to this end, the separation between disciplinary areas was repeatedly reiterated. As part of this, the subject matter and method of delivery of art and design history and theory were also criticized. For example, in a journal article that developed out of one of broader range of nine short, polemic pieces that launched the network, Maziar Raein argued that “many art and design students feel alienated by the methods employed in the primarily classroom-based teaching of theory” (2004: 163), which he saw as a kind of military training, with students seated in rows on the receiving end of a one-way stream of information, provided through dismemberment of the object of study, followed by rigorous testing.

Such conceptualisations position practice and theory as opposites, with theoretical study as linear and arts practice as non-linear, as competing right and left-brain modes. John Wood, for example, in a widely-cited essay published outside of the Writing PAD network, but which acted as a philosophical underpinning to some of the discussions and was included among in its opening texts, set up a table that pitted “methodologies of rigour” against “methodologies of empathy”, where theoretical approaches to design were positioned in the former and design practice in the latter. He named narrowness of focus, the value of “quantified measurement” and an emphasis on decontextualized “facts” as qualities of rigor, separate from the altogether more appealing holistic, human and shared empathetic approaches (1999:12). Wendy Mayfield, in another graphic visualization for Writing PAD, created a pair of non-overlapping circles in which opposing characteristics of art and design academic studies and studio practice / process, as characterized by students, were

clustered. In this ordering, the academic inhabits an inferior set of values. Scholarly elements of art and design studies were classified as being bound by “rules” and were described in adjectives such as “indirect”, “exclusive”, “prescriptive” and “isolated”. These qualities were opposed to studio practice, which was warmly and emotively described as “direct”, “inclusive”, “exploratory” and “shared” (2005: 7).

While these black-and-white divisions have been challenged by subsequent empirical studies of students’ experiences of art and design education (Pritchard, Heatly, Trigwell 2005; Ryan 2009; Tynan and New 2009), the implication of such binary thinking is that theoretical studies are antithetical to artistic practice. Many of the case studies examined by Writing PAD in its first phase (and, indeed, since, in the six volumes of the network’s *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, established 2007), ultimately aim to spotlight disciplinary differences in order to improve integration between modes of study, yet the distinctions and problem-based models on which the network was initially based - judging by some of its polemical, provocative discussion pieces and its “Primer Report” (Writing PAD, 2003) - arguably served to reproduce and perpetuate sometimes ill-founded binary divisions.

Searching for Subjectivity’s Place in the Design Curriculum

These debates are relevant to the core issue of the location of subjectivity and objectivity in the history of art and design curriculum, because art and design practice and art and design history, respectively, are commonly understood to inhabit separate subjective and objective pedagogic territories. Mayfield, for example, notes that studio research may be understood by students as “internal” and written research is “external” (2005: 7). Raein shows how little subjective evaluation seems to be required in art and design history when he summarizes

the role of the scholarly researcher as “a detached, divorced and abstracted examiner” (2004: 169). Wood’s classification of the characteristics of rigor - that he understands as fundamental to Western systems of scholarly knowledge and “a cardinal metaphor of education” - include perfection, consistency, comprehensiveness, linearity, explicitness and philosophical skepticism. Of particular relevance here are the areas he includes under the headings of “objectivity” and “unsituatedness”, also described as “authorial remoteness”. Whereas design practice is seen as being flexible, situated and opportunistic, Wood argues:

Since the Enlightenment, the vain belief in a possible ‘objectivity’ has encouraged authors to create a sense of detachment from what they write about. This conceit discourages use of the first person singular and the use of active verbs. It has therefore left us with a dangerous legacy of denial about the ownership of, and therefore a responsibility for, knowledge. (Wood, 1999: 6)

Raein’s explorations of exactly this debate, following Wood, focus on his question, “Where is the ‘I’?” He reiterates that the academic training that the students are given is based on cultivating “objective and detached points of view”. He describes this kind of activity as “intellectual and cerebral” and, again, contrasts this unfavorably with studio practice, which he describes as knowledge acquisition through “doing”. Studio practice is characterized as “active”, “multi-sensory”, “generative”, as well as experiential, experimental and processual (2003: 1). Raein seems to characterize art and design history as art and design’s shadow side, as a kind of science disguised as art. He does not, for example, credit historical and critical studies research, by inference, with imagination, creativity or personality. He and Wood leave scant room for academic studies to be active, multi-sensory, experimental,

experiential and processual, or to function as situated and contextualized knowledge, all of which, as a writer, academic and art and design historian, I would claim them as equally capable of being.

The premise of the Writing PAD network was (and continues to be) valid and laudable – that the role of writing in the art and design curriculum is worthy of scrutiny, and that its role could be enhanced and developed to create new forms of engagement for the benefit of students. The works cited appear among a broader range of concerns, discussions and models of good practice, and are used here as examples of recent disciplinary conceptualisations of difference. Nonetheless, some of Writing PAD's statements of intent falsely characterize history and theory approaches as discouraging of subjective modes of teaching and learning in academic analysis. Indeed, later research, in the network's *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, has questioned the utility of such rigid distinctions. For example, reflecting on Wood and Raein's claims, Mary O'Neill argues for a conception of fluidity rather than opposition:

in reality, the division between objective detached theory and the subjective positioned practice was never as clear cut as the Cartesian concept of mind assumed. This view can lead to a romanticization of art production as something magical which the artist does without thought and reflection – a purely subjective act. However many artists deploy cognitive intelligence, rational thought and rigorous aesthetic judgment in working with their feelings and inspired leaps of imagination. [...] Equally it has become increasingly the case that theorists no longer

assume the position of objective observer but position themselves within a debate and openly acknowledge their presence within the text (2008: 298).

Certainly the notion that, in order to be rigorous, academic study must forfeit the personal is one that does not stand up to close scrutiny. Helen Sword, in her recent research into subjectivity in academic writing, for example, has found that first person pronouns are commonly found across all subject domains. In her cross-disciplinary study of 66 peer-reviewed journals, she found only one that appeared to forbid their usage. She concedes that the requirement to maintain a so-called “objective authorial stance” may have been formerly promoted and subsequently internalized by scholars, but her 2012 research positions this firmly in the distant past:

Once upon a time, PhD students across the disciplines were taught that personality should never intrude upon scholarly writing. Apprentice scientists, social scientists, and even humanities scholars were warned that their research would not be taken seriously unless they reported on their work in a sort of human-free zone where *I* and *we* dared not speak their names (Sword, 2012: 36).

Sword recommends that those who wish to assume a scientific tone of objectivity should also note that “most scientists have long since abandoned the impersonal passive mode” (2012: 39). Her research into a sample of 500 cross-disciplinary academic articles and 100 advanced academic writing guides reveals that articles that contain personal pronouns almost exactly match the percentage of guides that recommend their use, that is, 78% and 79% respectively (2012: 43). The overwhelming evidence is that the personal is welcome in

academic study across the disciplines, suggesting that the so-called detached model, outlined above, is outdated. Indeed, it may have always been something of a straw man in relation to the study of history. More than fifty years ago, E. H. Carr noted that the subject was formed in the interrelationship between a historian and his facts (1961: 30). Design historian Judy Attfield, in a founding text of the discipline, also advised explicitly, "in studying and writing the history of design it is necessary to make conscious the subjectivity of the historian" (Attfield, 1989: 211).

From Problems to Appreciation: Historical and Critical Studies in Students' Own Words

Working outwards from "current inefficiencies", the Writing PAD network began by asking founding and partner institutions to identify "common problems that many A&D students encounter" with academic modes of study and assessment (Writing PAD, 2003: 19; 3). In order to access a different perspective on design students' experiences of their historical and critical studies modules, the small-scale action research study outlined below utilized a different methodological mode. Drawing on the work of Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, who assert that "action research maintains a problem-oriented view of the world" (2000: 189), this study applies the approach of Appreciative Inquiry. As the authors put it, "Appreciative inquiry is premised on the belief that it is much faster and more straightforward to go through the front door of enthusiasm. Going through the back door to study low morale on the way to a future of enthusiasm is an unnecessary detour that simply makes no sense." (2000: 191) Founded on "the power of the positive question" in order to discover "the best of what is" (2000: 192), appreciative pedagogy, in Yballe and O'Connor's conceptualization, "trusts in, celebrates, and deliberately seeks out students' experiences of success and moments of high energy and great pride" (2004: 180).

At the University of Brighton, in the south east of England, each of the 900 students per year in the Faculty of Arts is required to undertake some form of historical, critical, cultural and/or contextual studies as part of their art and design education. Brighton has more than 150 years of history in arts education and a recent publication celebrating the anniversary of the institution provides a useful account of the varying trajectories of the delivery of art history and complementary studies since the 1950s in particular (Lyon and Woodham, 2009). Brighton has also played a distinctive role in the development of the teaching of design history as a stand-alone discipline. Hosting the 1977 conference from which the Design History Society was born, it was one of the first institutions to offer a single honors undergraduate qualification in the History of Design. It continues to lead the field by being one of the very few institutions to offer specialist BA and MA design history pathways, by hosting an active Design History and Material Culture research cluster and longstanding Postgraduate Design History Society, and boasting a significant number of senior research staff in the area. The teaching of design history to design students takes place within this context; other theoretical teaching for other courses in the faculty (as indeed nationally) vary in their content, delivery and assessment, not least in the provision of history.

This study focuses in particular on the experiences of students studying on the following three undergraduate courses: BA (Hons) Fashion with Business Studies, BA (Hons) Textiles with Business Studies and BA (Hons) Design and Craft. Each of these students undertakes a mandatory historical and critical studies module. Delivery in the first year is comprised of weekly team-taught lectures by specialist design history staff plus student-led seminars on a range of themes that cut across degree topics and historical and contemporary periods;

assessment is by written essay. Subsequent years of study offer further historical and critical studies specialization, divided by subject pathway, and all routes culminate in a major written research project or dissertation. First year students on these degree programs are required to complete evaluation forms at the end of each term, where they are customarily asked to rate and comment on aspects of their provision, such as lectures, seminars and module organization. Feelings about academic writing are not sought explicitly but are understood to form a part of the overall teaching and learning experience that is being appraised. In order to capture student appreciation as a tool for development, and in order to research students' feelings and ideas about the overarching value of historical and critical studies, two additional questions were added to evaluation forms. These were explicitly positively phrased, asking: "What do you like best about Historical and Critical Studies?" and, provocatively, "How do you think Historical and Critical Studies benefits your studio work?"

Questionnaire modes of evaluation, especially when anonymous, are known to promote axe-grinding responses, and as other pedagogic research projects have demonstrated, students taking part in research groups generally "are quicker to identify negatives rather than positives" (Mayfield, 2005: 1). Questionnaires have also been subject to some critique as a pedagogic research tool. As a much larger example, the UK-wide National Student Survey - which asks all final year students to evaluate a wide range of aspects of their student experience - has proved contentious as a method for measuring university performance and satisfaction. A recent critical article on the topic summarizes academics' complaints about the research's shortcomings and describes the results as merely offering "a hotchpotch of subjectivity" (Swain, 2009). The challenges of qualitative research methods

more broadly can include the difficulty of quantifying interpretive answers; responses to open-ended enquiries may be impressionistic and fail to provide the precise information required. These challenges, however, can be redrawn as opportunities if interpretation, impression and subjectivity are actively encouraged. The design of open-ended questions is more likely to produce free-form answers than tick-box methods (and indeed the written questionnaires in this study also included some stylistic flourishes from flamboyant handwriting to kisses). This freedom allowed for an expansive range of non-prescribed responses. Students were free to interpret the question in any way they liked and many took the opportunity to personalize the enquiry in responses that allowed for the capture not only of data and facts but also experience, perceptions and feelings.

Out of a cohort of approximately 120 students, with 90 in attendance on the day, 77 replies were received. In overview, just two respondents stated clearly that they did not perceive any direct benefit from historical and critical studies to their studio work. A further five began with a similar denial before providing some concession (for example, stating that its value was still latent or that they found the area of study to be informative despite it having little direct impact). While the opinions of the students who did not participate cannot be taken into account, it is notable that the vast majority responded positively, interpreted the questions thoughtfully and provided evaluations in a strikingly personal way, responding not just to a general appraisal of historical and critical studies but, crucially in the context of debates about subjectivity, what it does for them. The questions were addressed in the first person and they were answered in kind.

The following discussion draws out a number of themes emerging from the responses, and reflects in particular on the students' subjective evaluations of their academic studies in terms of their personal and professional self-development, whereby historical and critical studies is positioned as contributing to who they are, how they think and how they design. In an echo of the separation of studio and theory, discussed above, it was notable that several students perceived historical and critical studies as a parallel to their studio work. Examples of this kind of response include: "A nice accompaniment to design work so our course is more varied. Nice to have a more academic element" and "I find it quite useful to have academic work alongside my creative work, it breaks it up a bit and gives me something else to focus on". Studio work is here tellingly described as 'creative', positioning academic work, therefore, as non-creative, reflecting the split understanding of the subject; nevertheless, the opposition is perceived as a positive difference. One student asserted, for example: "An insight into different subject areas always benefits your outlook", and another stated that historical and critical studies offered "Time to stand back from making and reflect".

Given the opportunity to reflect on the benefits to their studio work, students necessarily describe their theoretical studies in instrumental terms. In this sense, there is a distinctive difference between teaching student design historians in a school of humanities and teaching student design practitioners in a school of art; as Kjetil Fallan (2013) has noted, it is important to acknowledge that design history has a life beyond the needs of design students. Whereas student design historians may appreciate the coverage of a range of forms, media and practices as relevant to the cultural and social understanding of the material world, and relish the intellectual challenge of thinking of design history in its most

intellectually and interdisciplinary expansive sense, student design practitioners may not cherish the study of design history, historiography and theory for its own sake. The concept of 'service' teaching, frequently used to describe the role of humanities staff to the studio, is not an especially pleasant descriptor; it evokes a metaphor of enforced insemination, and it can imply inferiority and even subservience. Additionally, the popularity of the term 'context' to describe this element of study is little better. This implies that the teaching of the social, historical and cultural aspects of design are mere backdrop to the main event, rather than key considerations of what design is, what it should do and what it could be. Nevertheless, studio practitioners necessarily, and fittingly, often look to historical studies for what might best be described as "a usable past" (Van Wyck Brooks, 1918); one that can inform contemporary critical thinking and inspire and even shape contemporary practice. As such, in reflection of the question, students necessarily personalized their appreciation of historical and critical studies in terms of its utility. These benefits may include novelty: "Gives me a new perspective on the work I produce" and "Gives me new ideas for inspiration, especially the past", or provocation, where responses include: "This spurs on my studio work" and "Provokes / triggers thought and ideas".

The way that historical and critical studies can act as a source of inspiration and influence was dominant among responses, whether in terms of ideas, attitudes or practice. Students stated, for example: "The history/knowledge and concepts influence my ideas"; "Some topics, such as taste, have been particularly interesting and have affected my attitudes to design" and "Topics affect how I design". This particularly seemed to be the case with the more unexpected elements of the course content. This is interesting as empirical experience shows that sometimes student designers can be surprised by historical and critical studies'

content, and a minority may even, initially, experience something like culture shock in their first year. This is because they may have thought that they were coming to study, exclusively, the *how* of making rather than the *why*; the present rather than the past. Even their ideas about what design is, initially at least, may be extremely narrow. If they have had some preliminary historical or contextual studies at foundation level – and many have not – they may expect to be schooled in a canon of great names, works and dates, not to be challenged into thinking about issues of consumption as well as production; about the material culture of everyday life as well as precious objects in museums; about global as well as localized issues; about older as well as newer ideas.

Particularly at an earlier stage of studies, where secondary school-level students have been faced with a plethora of university and course choices and have carefully and progressively narrowed down their educational selections via secondary and further education choices, it can be a challenge to arrive at higher education and be expected to study a subject in its broadest sense, as those tutors who are ambitious about design history and its potential are wont to do. These unfamiliar aspects, however, result in reflective responses about their revelatory value: “Some of the lectures have been very inspiring and have prompted me to research things I wouldn’t have thought to” and “[It benefits my studio work] By giving me insight into many aspects of design I wouldn’t normally have considered”. Students relish, for example: “Learning about things that hadn’t even crossed my mind”.

These kinds of reflections may suggest that the content of historical and critical studies is about taking students out of themselves through challenging their personal securities and knowledge. Indeed, students acknowledge this expansive aspect, stating, “I think it has

helped me to think beyond and broaden my mind". A significant number of responses follow this pattern, describing the content challenging as "eye opening", and stating, "It broadens your horizons"; "Makes you think differently" and "Causes me to think beyond the box". While these qualities amount to what one student describes, pithily as "cementing understandings, questioning uncertainties", these challenging and ultimately transformational aspects are seen as productive, and - notably - are turned back, by students, to their own work and selves. As one stated, the program of study "leads me to be more analytical about what I am doing. Why?"

This kind of reflective self-questioning demonstrates that student design practitioners readily adapt the analytical frameworks of their historical and critical studies content to think through their own practice. These intellectual forms of engagement are therefore less of an abstraction, divorced from student experience, than a means of enriching conceptual and practical knowledge. Students state that the historical and theoretical element of their studies, "Gives me new ideas" and "Helps me understand where ideas come from" but also "It helps me analyse my ideas. It helps me to investigate. [It offers an] Intellectual approach to my work". This aspect of response reveals the internalization and personalization of theory that takes place in design students' learning. Far from being distant and abstracted, students bring the material close to their own concerns and locate their studies in what they describe as "my work". Several spoke in terms of integration, incorporation, application and inclusion: "Think more about current issues in design & how I can incorporate it into my work"; "Learning something new and influential which can be taken into my own work in terms of thinking more about design and different concepts I can incorporate" and "Interpreting what I have learnt and including it in my work wherever possible".

This is particularly the case for those students who reflected on the historical content of their studies. Historical elements were frequently perceived as a sourcebook or toolkit from which personal inspiration, resources and models could be drawn, for example: “We can see how things were done and apply them in a contemporary manner to our work”. In terms of learning about other practitioners and their contributions, this was not perceived as a process of self-denial, a thinking of ‘them’ rather than ‘us’, but as a further opportunity for self-fashioning. As one student put it: “Think you have to learn about the past and other designers/movements etc. in order to develop own style, no matter the discipline”. The range of exposure to new and old ideas, practitioners past and present and a diversity of attitudes and approaches to design show students the range of options and subject positions available to them. As one asserted of historical and critical studies, “It helps me realise which road I want to follow”.

This self-positioning can take place through exposure to the unfamiliar but also acts by creating imaginary communities of practice, helping students variously to distance themselves from and identify with practitioners and approaches, through ‘othering’ or through identification. As students note, it “Makes me aware of other ways of working to investigate further” and “Makes you more aware of who is doing similar work to you”. In this sense, students use their newly acquired knowledge as compass points by which to locate themselves, identify their direction and assume a subject position. Unlike studio practice, which may be more closely centered on the artist or designer’s statement of identity and intent, and be explicitly about articulating the maker’s own internal points of reference, as has been shown in the discussion above, historical and critical studies have

often been perceived as externally-focused. Yet the way it puts design practice in broader cultural context is understood and appreciated by students. In their own words, “I like learning about the world of design”; “Find it very informative; makes you think about moral, social and economical issues” and “I think it’s really relevant to design issues in the world today”.

In part this may be due to the way that historical and critical studies build a wide context, covering a broad range of concerns. The appraisals that students offer mirror observations collected by Sarah A. Lichtman as part of her research into the uses of a design history survey course to design students at Parsons The New School for Design in New York. Here students particularly value the structured opportunities to reflect on the applicability of history to contemporary design. They state that they enjoy incorporating reflections on history into their conceptual practice and cite the projects as “extremely important to inform studio work” and “excellent additions to studio”. Lichtman concludes that design history teaching offers “a singular opportunity to locate, or relocate, design students within debates essential to informing their field”, and, as such, can act as an interlocutor between designer and culture (2009: 347, 348).

Lichtman’s appraisal of the value of design history to the design curriculum – and indeed to cultural knowledge at large - offers a much more nuanced and expansive vision than the strikingly reductive account offered by Cameron Tonkinwise in a recent issue of this journal. Tonkinwise suggests, for example, that one of art and design history’s principal functions for the student designer is to offer an overview of past practices in order “to make sure that their propositions are not unwittingly replicating moves already made by the avant-garde at some point” (2014: 11). Such a narrow view of history - as a utilitarian checklist for ensuring

originality – offers a dispiriting and instrumental view of the subject that is unlikely to be shared by design historians (or designers) with a broader sense of their subject as a means of thinking through things. As students at Brighton articulate it, always from their personal perspective, historical and critical studies offers a larger view and a deeper conversation. One respondent wrote, it “[h]elps me think about all aspects of design other than just design and making process”. Another states, “I think it makes you think about lots of aspects that you otherwise wouldn’t, e.g. how our designs are influenced by our culture”. Yet ultimately, and appropriately, what may be valued most about this world-building is how information about the external is made internal. Students synthesize these outward and inward facing trajectories to own the content. As one put it, “It makes me think about my position in the design world”.

Subjectivity in the Design History Curriculum: New Approaches in Content and Method

Each of these student conceptualisations of history and theory acts as a counterpoint to accusations that the area of study is distant, disembodied and dismembering. In part, this viewpoint is fostered by giving students the opportunity to filter their studies through their personal experiences and by asking them explicitly to appreciate and reflect upon the internal value of their studies by identifying their points of proximity to the studio. In the teaching and learning context outlined above, student-led seminars also provide a space to develop group discussions based on personal experiences (sharing object memories, discussing treasured possessions); to develop taste (considering preferences and revulsions and how they are shaped). In these sessions students learn to articulate a descriptive language through sensuous object-based learning; learning how to look and, crucially, how to feel. They learn to take a position on issues that intersect with politics and ethics in

classes organized around live design debates. Student assessments inevitably also reflect their teaching and learning experiences, and a lively curriculum underpinned by tutors' passion and enthusiasm, and informed by the latest scholarship, will produce differing appraisals from the models of bad practice outlined in critiques where the inculcation of "facts" is delivered in a one-way stream of information, as was outlined in 2003 as "typical". More than a decade on, progressive developments in the subject area and in pedagogic education now challenge such claims; indeed, the dissemination of good practice included in the six volumes of Writing PAD's own *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* has added to this body of knowledge.

More broadly, in order to recognize and incorporate subjectivity in design history teaching and learning requires engagement with a number of core and emergent themes in both practice and theory. The prevalence of identity as a means by which the designed world can be understood necessarily foregrounds issues of gender, class and ethnicity that demand self-reflection and the adoption of a subject position. The autobiographical mode adopted by some of the most successful and well-known contemporary designers and makers – from Grayson Perry to Yinka Shonibare, whose work directly expresses their own subjectivity – needs surely to be considered in similar terms. Some of the most popular narratives about material culture – which is, after all, about the relationships between people and things – link personal storytelling to objects. Edmund de Waal's bestselling 2011 memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is a case in point; it is a cultural history that works outwards from the object and the personal to the social and back again.

Approaches from anthropology or psychology – whether focused on object biographies or theories of attachment - make their presence felt as subjectivity-inflected analytical models that travel through design history scholarship. These approaches are regularly evident in design history exhibitions, conferences and resulting publications such as *Biography, Identity and the Modern Interior* (Massey and Sparke, 2013) and *Love Objects: Design, Emotion and Material Culture* (Moran and O’Brien, 2014), to name but two recent design history publications that examine personal experience in a scholarly context. Design historians commonly draw on letters and diaries and other personal documentation as their source material (Purbrick, 2007; Vickery, 2010) and may reflect on their own particular and distinctive backgrounds in writing broader material cultural history (McMillan, 2009, as just one example of many). The popularity of memory as an area of research across the humanities is evidently linked to further disciplinary interests: the concern with materiality and the sensual turn. These kinds of embodied and affective approaches to objects can be seen both in recent and popular books and exhibitions – John Styles’ *Threads of Feeling* (2010) is but one example. They are also prominent in influential theoretical applications, such as Actor Network Theory’s earnest call to recognize the agency of things. For some subject pathways, such as fashion, textiles and jewelry, the close connection of the object to issues of memory and adornment make the subject of study inherently personal and sensuous; these objects are the expression of personal, family and cultural histories.

Shifts in historical practice that foreground rather than discount personal experience are evident in the popularity of oral testimonies in design and craft research (Sandino and Partington, 2013). The centrality of ethics in the production and consumption of goods and the never more pressing issue of sustainability requires all of us who engage with the

material world to reflect upon our individual lifestyles. This cuts across studio and theory territories. The central role of the hand in practices of craft production keeps its analysis close to the body, foregrounding tactile, sensual and haptic forms of knowledge. Each of these subject areas and methodological approaches requires reflexivity and engagement on the part of the researcher and the student practitioner, and requires feeling as well as thinking; each lends itself to embodied rather than detached forms of research.

Conclusion

Thinking of historical and critical studies as a form of knowledge and a method of practice necessarily informed by the subjective acknowledges the power of the visual and material world to delight and repulse, to make us laugh and cry, and provides a productive point of departure from which to study and write. Stylish and situated, evocative and imaginative thinking and writing is far from forbidden in academia; indeed professional design historians are likely to contribute to a range of media in a range of voices from reviews to museum labels, memoir to broadcasting. Each of these practices offers models for engaged and reflexive modes of study that do not preclude proximity to one's subject. 'I' may be better understood as a position of strength rather than a form of weakness; it can be reinterpreted as an opportunity instead of as a state of denial.

Objectivity is an overrated fantasy long since challenged by postmodernism's incredulity towards metanarratives. As design historian Louise Purbrick has argued, it "has been recognized as an unfulfilled promise of science that assumes hovering somewhere is a neutral space to which the researcher could remove his or herself from the context that he or she inhabits or studies". Were it ever desirable, it is certainly now outmoded. Recognizing

the place of subjectivity in our teaching and learning allows us to take a stand, get close to our object of study and get a feel for it from the inside. For students, it can bring history into view and ground theory. As Purbrick has also argued, all acts of communication are mediations of subjectivity and performances of identity. There is no 'outside' and no 'neutral' (Purbrick, 2007: 168). To know who we are and how we got there takes place through a close engagement with the material world.

Historical and theoretical elements of the curriculum are described by students in this study as helping in their understanding of themselves as designers through shaping their tastes, influencing their ideas, developing their attitudes and challenging their certainties. These rich and articulate comments demonstrate the value of historical and critical studies to the design curriculum. By providing a space to identify and appreciate these aspects of their studies, students are able to articulate alternative, subjective visions of design history as an activity that can say as much about their person and their position as can their studio practice. The myths of design history as dry, dusty and detached ignore its potential as a crucible where design students can self-fashion. Reappraising the subject's qualities – through passionate pedagogy and new dimensions of scholarship – offers new understandings of the discipline as necessarily engaged and embodied, reflective and affective, located in personal as well as broader cultural experience.

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