

Painting, Gesture, History: The art of forgetting

Slide: Piero

We thought we would start our talk off with a narrative image for you.

The painter walks out of the house and across the yard to the studio, and opens the door. Musa Meyer's recollection of her father, Phillip Guston's words about his studio life went like this: "When you start working, everybody is in your studio - the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas - all are there. But as you continue, they start leaving one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave." This fable suggests that forgetting is necessary to the creative act. Extending matters beyond Guston's echoes of the gendered myth of the 'pram in the hall' as an obstacle to artistic achievement, his little narrative may remind us of how some artists and art students believe or want to believe that painterly acts can – or should - be uninterrupted by culture, society, politics or history. We could surmise from this tale that for an artist history is burdensome. But we find this burden interesting and we will argue later that Nietzsche has something to offer us on the matter of history as something to forget.

The very act of applying paint to a surface takes place, and intervenes, in any number of social and historical contexts. As art history tutors, we think it's important for students to be reflexively aware of their historical situations. Yet we face a dilemma. We also think it can be valid – if not vital – for artists to at least *act* as though they have excluded historical consciousness from moments of creative activity. We can all think of painting students who have said that they prefer not to look at the work of

'other artists' for fear of their unique 'vision' being corrupted by outside 'influences'. It is easy to dismiss this as naivety. But perhaps history *is* sometimes a stultifying presence. Likewise it might sometimes be fruitful to separate creation and analysis; in the famous words of Sister Corita Kent (but misattributed to John Cage): "Don't try to create and analyse at the same time. They're different processes".

Yet neither the Kent quote nor Guston's paintings fit squarely into the mould of the splendidly isolated, intuitive artist. Guston said he needed to forget his familial comforts in order to return to **his originary phantasmagoria** of Piero's *The Flagellation of the Christ*, an illustration of which hung in his kitchen, suggesting he couldn't didn't forget the famial, or himself. Yet the 'intuitiveness' or apparent 'spontaneity' of Guston's images and gestures – and his act of 'forgetting' - belie how imbued his paintings are with allusion, knowledge, memory, and therefore with painting's social and historical conditions. His 'presentness' in the creative act didn't require and didn't result in historical, contextual, or theoretical unknowing.

Clearly the relationship between history and creativity – or even, if you prefer, intuition and intellect - is often fraught, perhaps to the point of paradox. It seems the painter can't live – or at least create – either with or without history. This is the quandary we address in this paper. But we don't propose a neat solution. Rather, we draw upon Nietzsche's approach to a similar problem in his "On the advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life", which forms half of his *Untimely Meditations*. In this essay, Nietzsche describes how on the one hand "the power to use the past ... and to refashion history" is needed for life and art; and on the other hand, how "an excess of history" prevents us from thinking and acting freely in the moment. History can't

and shouldn't be escaped, yet according to Nietzsche we need often to wear what he calls the "**cloak of the unhistorical**" in order to gain agency. This is Nietzsche's model of 'active forgetting', and we suggest that it can productively be applied to art practice.

Before we get there though we should say that such dilemmas are obviously connected to one the oldest bones of contention in the university 'art school', which is to say, do historical consciousness or 'theory' motivate or hinder creativity? Obviously, there can be no straight answer because it isn't a straight question. Nevertheless, as we all know, there is an enduring debate about the extent to which painting students need to be 'taught art history' or 'contextual studies'. If so, how should such things be taught, and by whom? In the face of an increasingly market-led instrumentalisation of higher education, art students' and educators' relationships to history have become a pressing issue. Whether departments name the area Critical Studies, Contextual Studies, or Complementary Studies, this component of art teaching is often treated as the frail, poor relation of 'main studies'; the very uncertainty around what to call it seems to indicate a lack of clear purpose, and its frailty seems to justify its marginalization. To dramatize the situation a little, the indifference of the conspiring politicians in Piero's painting, reminds us of the indifference of the Neo-Liberal bureaucrats to History and to the eradication of Art History from the curriculum. This situation has arisen partly because 'main studies' departments themselves are riddled with a legitimization crisis as they struggle to locate a role for art and to define its cultural values.

A little more context will help us to see why reading and writing about art history is good for art students. Once upon a time, that point would not have needed making. But today the gradual erosion of critical and historical studies often goes hand-in-hand with particular interpretations of inclusivity, with the writing of lengthy essays, for example, seen as a challenge too far for today's anxious art students. It would be worrying enough if this concern with supposedly rising levels of anxiety dovetailed into a romantic mystique of artistic suffering. But – even worse – the deflation of 'difficult' academic tasks is presented as a remedy. We would argue that such tactics divert attention from systemic problems such as extortionate fees, space shortages and widespread reductions in teaching contact. To put it bluntly, if you saddle students with 52,000 pounds worth of debt and increase student numbers to the point where staff can barely remember their names, you can hardly be surprised if they implode into stress about every grade given to them by the university.

The shrinking of academic expectations where art students are concerned reflects the institution's displacement of economic and social failings onto 'feelings' rather than knowledge. Managerial efforts to mollify students through a therapeutic, even pathologising, view of education are in turn bolstered by a discourse which insists that the creative and 'visual' character of art students is inherently antithetical to reading, writing and verbal language. To quote one text on inclusivity in the art department, there is a "longstanding **anomaly** in art education. Art and Design courses focus on creative processes which are mainly non-verbal, but assessment is traditionally based on verbal accounts of these". We would agree that not everything in art can be translated into, or accounted, for verbally. The invitation to 'read' artworks

semiotically seems impoverished and reductive. As Petra Lange-Berndt puts it, “the materiality of an artwork is never completely absorbed into representation” (p.15) .

Nevertheless, concepts of materiality are all too easily seized upon and trivialized by those who would privilege sensation over thought. And we should be wary of those in the University who would unquestioningly assert the primacy of non- linguistic creativity over the unwelcome interruption of language. This would presumably leave text-based and conceptual art out in the cold. Such an argument also begs the question, what should ‘feedback’, crits and tutorials comprise of, if not of words?

Artists read. Artists write. Artists discuss and debate. Art students read written feedback; perhaps even more importantly, they need highly developed verbal skills alongside a facility with historical and cultural references in order to participate in discussions about their own and other’s art work. Reading and writing are part of ‘cultural capital’, the citizenship of art, so any erosion of historical awareness, knowledge and competence can only be disempowering.

Historical consciousness is necessary for the student to come into greater critical understanding, and therefore teaching some version of the history of painting is the most appropriate place for critical reflection and self-reflection. This is not to say that history, theory and ‘context’ do not, cannot or should not take place in one-to-one studio tutorials – these kinds of awareness are often implicit in studio teaching. Yet diminishing staffing and resources arguably threaten to eat away at focused specialized debates about value, meaning and politics.

Slide: PAW

The historicisation of gesture is central to all our concerns for a better description of painting's pedagogical aims in an art school. To clarify: the word 'gesture' as we are using it is not restricted to the normative understanding of 'the gestural' as a particular way of handling of paint, which is often taken as a register of radiant individualism. Rather, we see gestures as events or decisive actions which take place, and gain meaning, through historically existing social relations. Part of our conditions of possibility are that we articulate ourselves from the language that precedes us and through which we announce ourselves as subjects capable of speech. The gesture is disobedient because it at once a decisive moment acting within multiple historical vectors, and also a displacement of precepts.

We are arguing that one of art's historical aims has been to problematise the field of knowledge. The student encounters problem-making every day in the act of painting, including the problem of encountering history that is embodied in the mark and the gesture. One way of problematising painting is to use Nietzsche's approach to history. His approach to history involves what he describes as the antiquarian, the monumental and the critical. **Antiquarian** history amounts to unthinking reverence for the merely old or antique. **Monumental** history involves the construction and perpetuation of a canon of 'greats' in a teleological grand narrative. If we applied this model to the Art Department, monumental history might enshrine the painting tutor as a guardian or passer-on of tradition. This is a situation that Nietzsche would describe as potentially comforting, if not self-satisfied, but equally liable to produce in the student an incapacitating awareness of history as a static burden. Nietzsche argues that through the authority of history the work of the artist "may be beaten to

death with art” (18), not least because historical “idolatory” (47) can lead to paralyzing comparisons between ourselves and previous ‘greats’. We may feel then like latecomers to the historical scene, a position that Nietzsche would say can “make it impossible to live at all ...[since] ...there is a degree ofhistorical sense which injures every living thing and finally destroys it” .

Critical history, for its part, reacts against this suffocation at the hands of monumentalism and antiquarianism, and is perhaps closest to what ‘contextual studies’ or art history can help to provide. It is also aligned to what we see as Nietzsche’s productive idea of informed, active forgetting, for as he writes, “all acting or action requires forgetting but it depends on one’s being able to forget at the right time as well as to remember at the right time” . Critical history, in other words, is a space wherein forgetting is an active judgement based on need. Nietzsche argues that deliberate forgetfulness is essential to action and agency, because it is a foil to what he calls a feverish surfeit of historical sense. It differs vitally from mere ignorance or amnesia, which may be as onerous and restrictive in their own way as the monumental. For a painter to temporarily act as if they had forgotten what they know may be productive, but it is isn’t the same thing as ignorance because in Nietzsche’s terms to be ignorant is to be passive and merely reactive, rather like his example of the happy bovine beast. You can only forget what you have already known; applied to teaching, this could suggest that painting and contextual studies tutors alike approach history not as a monolithic, all-determining force, but as a point of departure and active engagement with social forces.

Nietzsche remarks that “the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people and a culture” (10). But this version of health has nothing to do with the litany of “wellbeing”, “mindfulness” or “resilience workshops” that many see in today’s increasingly palliative yet marketized university sector. Indeed, the creeping reductions in ‘art history’ in the curricula of Higher Education art departments not only plays into the hands of a neo-liberal agenda pervading the sector but damages the autonomy of the student. Rather, this “health” is presented by Nietzsche, not as an emollient, but as a necessary condition of the human organism’s **creative tension** with its environment.

The gesture and the mark *embody the history of the medium* in a way that cannot be easily described in any other medium. The difficult historicisation of the mark/gesture – removes it from personal gratification of pre-linguistic ‘sensation’ and shifts the centre away from the therapised self. The subjectivity we propose at the heart of painting is one that is always engaged in active forgetting and active remembering.

Imagine our student entering the studio. She sits down, reads the paper online and has a cup of tea. She slowly looks at yesterday’s work. The painting is half way through, you might say. Layers of colour lie across each other, off-yellow - half remembered from Chinese silk scrolls at the British Museum - pale lilac as if from a bad ‘60s bedroom. Some marks follow definite contours and outlines. The washes still have their drips showing. Today she mixes a pale blue, tonally similar to the yellow yet pulling away from it. She picks up a number-one pointed brush and climbs the step-ladder to start painting, slowly and methodically touching the canvas with marks that demonstrate nothing more than being in the present. Stroke after stroke across the

canvas from left to right: is it a gesture or a mark? Is the whole screen of marks one gesture? Where does her gesture and the mark begin and end? Does the mark left on the canvas now confront the world in its place and time imbued with a certain history? The time of its making and making time and history coalesce in its tiny moment.

So the mark belongs in history, yet that history can be neither monumental nor archaic. She discovers at this moment that her labours exist within social relations and therefore she realizes herself as a historical subject: a constructed self in a continuous process of self-development. It is this moment of gesture and mark that painting affirms and through which the student can grasp a way of being that has enormous ethical implications.

In her reflection upon gesture, mark and history, the various voices of art education resonate in her studio space. Studio teaching and 'contextual studies' involve many different voices and modes of engagement, and these differences are manifested physically in the organization of workspaces. There is nothing wrong with studio and seminar looking askance at each other, looking at and defining each other's 'objects' in potentially oblique and inventive ways. There is no reason for these two sites to assimilate. History and contextual teaching are part of the art student's aesthetic-political field of possibility.

We are not asking for the integration of these voices into a seamless art course. We ask that historical and contextual studies continues to rub querulously against practice as often as support it. Such an 'anomalous' position might suppress solipsistic discourses of style, expression, influences and feelings in favour of a questioning of

values. All of which is to say that there is something fruitful in separation: things happen in intervals. So we have offered less a programme for change, and more a polemic for a friction between contextual studies and studio teaching which the marketisers of the university would like to smooth away. One thing we might teach painting students to remember is that tensions between unstable points in our culture are necessities for creative action and purposeful self-cultivation. Only through a constant movement between our active engagement with history as a tool for living and the decisive action of forgetting can students realize themselves creatively in their painting and in their aesthetic life.