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TEACHING DISCOURSE

REFLECTION STRONG, NOT THEORY LIGHT

What is it that we do when we do what we do?

1. Aristotle, *Ethics* (London: Penguin Classics, 1976).

This opening sentence is not a riddle. Nor is it a tautological dead end. Instead, it serves as a very practical way, a guide, for those of us in any given field or domain of action and expertise to find the necessary focus in our activities. With its emphasis on pushing something forward, the question is meant to function as a welcome wake-up call for each of us, in our specific site and situation, to think through critically yet constructively what we do, why, how, with whom, and for whom. Putting aside taken-for-granted boundaries and habits and seriously taking up the challenge of communication, we can approach the performative act of doing things with words with an open playfulness.

Obviously, there are other ways to describe this needed process of framing and concentration. My aim here is not to attempt a full-scale survey of potential strategies, but to address the issue in a productive fashion for this book. This pragmatist's credo translates into the concept of "A Good Practice": an Aristotelian idea of defining what we do through acts of doing and experiencing; an idea of knowledge produced in and through a practice that seeks to be open-ended, reflexive, self-critical—a practice that looks for confrontations and challenges.¹

So this opening "serves" us with a complex demand. We are both lured and forced to define how we want to, need to, and wish to articulate these central concepts in and through our activities: What is good in what we do, who defines quality, and what exactly is this practice in which we actively participate?

A third way to describe the scope of this essay draws upon the simplifications of sports idiom: nothing more and nothing less than keeping our eye on the ball. This

2. Ute Meta Bauer, ed., *Education, Information, Entertainment: Current Approach of Higher Artistic Education* (Vienna: Edition Selene, 2001); Gavin Butt, ed., *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005); Irit Rogoff, "Academy as Potentiality" in *Academy*, ed. Bart De Baere et al. (Frankfurt: Revolver Books, 2006).

3. Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

4. Irit Rogoff, *Terra Incognita* (London: Routledge, 2000); Grant H. Kester, "Community and Communication in Dialogical Art," *focus: Forum on Contemporary Art and Society*, vol. 4 (2002).

5. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999); Maeve Cooke, "Questioning Autonomy: The Feminist Challenge and the Challenge for Feminism," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999).

common saying allows us to ask what kind of ball we are talking about, generating in the process a conceptual precision regarding differentiations within a given frame—let's say, with a game of pool, whether it's snooker, eight ball, or acrobatic tricks on the billiard table.

The focus here is not on a ball or a puck, but on the theme of what it might mean to try to teach theory in art academies and, more precisely, how we should go about it. A set of questions with theoretical and practical implications are currently anxiously being asked in a large number of institutions providing higher education in the fine arts and visual culture.² This is a theme that has social and cultural, hence political, implications. I would classify it as an honest dilemma, and it is a theme to which there cannot be a single all-encompassing answer, but always particular working solutions in constant need of revisiting and rethinking.

The background of the shared dilemma is somewhat unchallenged. We have the historical change and shift in both what artists do and how they define what they do as artists. We also have the vastly altered scope of media accepted as art and available for artists. Art is no longer limited to activities within the studio but allows, for example, walks in a park or socially engaged activities.³ There has been a huge increase in artistic activity, as seen in the number of students, schools, and professional artists, and simultaneously, a paradoxical fragmentation of individual artistic practices, along with approaches that seem apparently interdisciplinary in character.⁴

Finally, we have a true plurality of discourses, ranging from the re-visioning and reinterpretation of art history through, for example, feminism and postcolonialism, to active inclusion of cultural identity politics and the politics of representation.⁵ There is no longer one clear center, no permanent king of the hill in terms of style, geographic area, medium, or theoretical approach. All this dramatic change (or mess, if you like) signals a need to think through what kinds of theoretical views and tools are adequate and, consequently, how should we teach them.

What this apparent and (I hope) cherished plurality implies is a need to open up the discourse in a productive and intellectually honest way. A broad view is required, one that will allow us to get out of the cul-de-sac of vehemently debating, for example, whether to have art history at all, or whether to introduce critical post-World War II thinkers into the curriculum. The scope and demands for artists and students of art are so wide and at the same time so specific that we must admit that no answer fits them all. Instead of hunting down the all-encompassing truth like good old John Wayne, we must first recognize and then respect the fact that there are no universal answers to this dilemma, just contextual, localized versions of interpretations of what, how, where, and when.

Based on my experiences of teaching theory and practice for more than a decade, mostly in various Nordic art academies, the essential question is not whether to have this approach or that. Nor is it about deciding once and for all whether we should do art history from the beginning to the end or in reverse. Nor is the question about swapping art history or the theory of representation, for example, with the theory of network sociology or the theory of urban gentrification.

6. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 196.

As someone with a background in classical Aristotelian ethics, I realized how unproductive and silly it was to pretend to be playing along these constructed juxtapositions while repeating the old prejudices and tunnel visions. We have a wide variety of experiences that are all potentially valuable. There cannot be any a priori hierarchy between approaches and views. Anything we try to do, if (as I certainly think we should) we take pluralism seriously, cannot be about *what* it is, but *how* it is done, here and now, linking it to the past, present, and future. One wholesale perspective is never enough; but we must recognize that we can only have one credible view at a time. To quote a modern classic: “To say that you can ‘have experience,’ means, for one thing, that your past plays into and affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience.”⁶

Any one of these potential theoretical and historical approaches is an attempt to describe and define reality. Not more but not less, either. Sometimes one of them makes sense; sometimes we have to be awake enough to recognize when one of these approaches, even if it worked amazingly well in a previous case, is no longer helpful at all. We have to trust the strategy of being particular, specific, and situated. We must keep our eye on the practice—what it opens, introduces, and requires. We must learn how to listen, to listen carefully and with patience, and act accordingly. Listening is a time-consuming strategy, but it also both allows and forces us to get out of the blame-game. We must try to articulate what we are *for*, instead of merely define what we are *against*. Such articulation can be achieved only within a practice that is open-ended, self-critical, and reflexive, in constant search for ways of doing what we do within a flexible frame and in a bit pleasanter and better way.

One of the practical ways to proceed in finding an anchoring approach to the question of “what is it that you do when you do what you do?” is to distinguish between the means to and the end in itself for a given activity. This distinction should help us focus on what “it” is about and, ultimately, what’s going on in our practices.

In terms of the practice of teaching theory to students in the fine arts and, in a broader sense, visual culture, I believe it is important to be very rigid in the initial approach to this subject. This does not imply that we must pin down all the content of concepts we use forever and ever; on the contrary, we have the responsibility to

provide contextually specific definitions right here and now. Versions are challenged and continuously renegotiated through a self-critical and open-ended practice of using and defining the content of concepts. A lot of the unnecessary confusion about how to deal with theory in art education starts with how this practice is named. For various reasons, this part of the curriculum tends to be labeled “theory.” But theory of what and for what?

I want to argue that this dilemma can be resolved by naming it the teaching of discourses, not theory, and to suggest bringing in discourses from any field, be it art history, political psychology, or sports journalism. This solution may seem a rather “cheap” conceptual trick. While it is true that by changing the naming concept we do not change the content of the practice, we nevertheless win the ability to direct and redirect our focus. At the same time, although anything may be possible, not everything that is possible will prove to be meaningful as an approach, view, or strategy.

But why discourse instead of theory? First, let us recall what this is all about. To do this, we need to answer the question: for whom are we offering and doing this? Granted, one of the inherent characteristics of students of fine arts and visual culture is their plurality. The scope of what these students want to study and what is expected from them is multifaceted, as is what they end up doing as their profession. The range of activities starts from painting and goes all the way to sound art. In terms of art school graduates, we have some surviving as artists and others opting for an array of other professions—from teachers and social workers to management consultants. Regardless of this plurality, what unites all these students is their primary interest in the processes of making and shaping visual information as pictures, images, objects, or processes. Their practice is visual communication—a statement that should not be read as reductive but as a setting of priorities. What these students are taking part in and with is not theory *an sich*. That focus is found in other disciplines, and cruel or not, if students want to study theory, they should go to institutions that specialize in theory.

I have the feeling I must proceed slowly and carefully here. The reason I insist on the need to find a focus and make a decision on one’s priorities about what one wants to do is not to deny that whatever we do is connected and cannot be autonomous or seen in isolation from similar views and actions. Obviously, whatever we do in the fields of knowledge production is inherently linked through backgrounds, contexts, motivations, comparisons, and competitive drives. But the point I am trying to make is that before you can even start to link yourself to something—X, Y, or Z—you must have a certain idea of *what* you want to link these views and versions of reality to. You need to have a clear-enough base from which to speak and act.

We are now back at square one, keeping our eye on the ball. And while doing this, while keeping the process going, the initial distinction between means and end becomes handy. It allows us to find the combination between theoretical and practical ways of relating and shaping our ways of being-in-the-world. And yes, because this “dirty” concept of being-in-the-world has slipped out, let me take a short detour before continuing.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), 449.

This detour is important because it allows us to think about the presuppositions of the whole issue, not only combining but also productively cherishing the interconnectedness of practice and theory. The notion of our being-in-the-world is not an essentialist or existentialist statement—at least that’s not how it’s understood here. This notion underlines two things: (1) We are what we are as parts of the physical, mental, and emotional reality that is formed and maintained collectively. We are never completely outsiders or insiders; we are both/and, in and out, constantly having an effect on the world and being affected. We are part of the mess, part of the problem. The question always is, not what we are, but *how* we are. (2) The realities we inhabit—and to which we are embedded in the simultaneous sense of the triad of timeframes of past, present, and future—are plural, insecure, and without guarantees. But our view of “reality” and our position in it, which constructs what we see and what we expect, cannot be multiple—we can only experience one reality at a time. In the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “We have no way of knowing what a picture or a thing is other than by looking at them, and their *significance* is revealed only if we look at them from a certain point of view, from a certain distance and in a certain direction.”⁷

But let us get back on the track. Through my practice of teaching discourses of contemporary art during the last decade, I have learned by trial and error, both overreaching and underperforming. One helpful starting point is to distinguish between seeing theoretical ways as tools and as means. Whatever these theoretical ways are, they are there to help us relate to and reflect on who we are, where we are, how we are, and with whom we are. Thus, they are the means to achieve an internal connection to our ways of being-in-the-world.

This again forces us to ask: how do we teach these discursive means (because that’s what they are)? They are plural and they are constantly shifting and changing. The starting point is to come to terms with the uncertainty and impermanence inherent in this continuing, unending process. Discourses are not things sitting on a shelf; they become, they are actualized and situated. This implies our responsibility to participate. Rather than seek to pin them down and conquer them, the task is to find ways to take part in the shaping and making of these discourses. It is not about having it right, but about getting into the groove. This task cannot be grounded on

some solid-gold position that insists on being neutral or natural, but rather on a constantly evolving, reflective, critical yet constructive, questioning, redefining, continuing, and fully value-laden process. It is a process only possible if and when we localize and situate ourselves, talking and acting in and through a specific site, not a generalized domain or area.

The central question, then, is: what discourses do you wish to be part of and how can you participate in them? The first part of this question is something none of us can determine by ourselves. We all come from somewhere, but the point is how we deal with the past, and how we attach to or detach from the articulations and utterances that occur within the context in which we wish to be included. The second part deals with the practicalities of being able to address and articulate through our own version of values, wants, aims, wishes, and fears how we want to work and with what and with whom. This does not happen via abstract notions, but only through our personal experiences and processes of thinking and acting.

The somewhat perplexing aspect of discourses is that, in the end, it does not really matter which one you want to actively be part of. This is not to say they are all the same, but to underscore that while a prioritizing approach is important, any coherent and consistent approach has potential. The most significant fact is that you must start from somewhere, go and throw yourself into the issues, take up chances and challenges through a given discourse. You have to make a commitment and an effort. And since the end is not to become a philosopher or a sociologist, you treat these discourses as a means to thinking. It is not about mastering the discourses, but using or not using them. These tools are available for critical reflection, as with a trampoline, not to stay captivated by them, but to do and say something with them—again in connection to your practice (a notion to which we will shortly return).

The task is not to figure out what a given concept in and of itself means or what's the truth in this or that claim, but to bring you close to the concept that plays a role in the discourse you want to participate in, *to think with it*, and to provide your version, your reading of it. This process cannot be done alone. You need a group context within which and through which you can debate your same or similar-enough practices to arrive at what makes sense and what does not, working through what is meant in each case in regard to the central concepts such as empowerment or subjectivity. Unless you do this collectively, together with others, not only do you stay a tourist in the game but you also feel as if you have been left out in the cold—on your own, in the dark.

This change of perspective should benefit from the fact that you cannot and should not try to understand it all. We do not need to tackle the whole library or the entire

book. It is enough to focus on a specific substantial essay, and to read and re-read it. We can then, in practice-based fields, take smaller, meaningful steps rather than grand leaps. Since we do not want to tackle the complete writings of, let's say, Michel Foucault or Judith Butler, we have the alternative of shifting from the macro to the micro level. As a result, we may concentrate on certain key concepts (here respectively, for example, eventualization or performative gender difference), opening the door through them, and going into the details and nuances that way. This route has the advantage of letting us proceed slowly and carefully, paying attention to the connotations and implications of these concepts. It is a route that also allows us to highlight the origin of each concept—to see that each has a distinct past, present, and potential future. We also become aware of the differences and conflicting versions of the same concepts based on their specific background and situation.⁸

8. See Mika Hannula, *Everything or Nothing: Critical Theory, Contemporary Art and Visual Culture* (Helsinki: Academy of Fine Arts, 2005).

Even if you and nobody else ends up deciding which of the hundreds of potential discourses to focus on, you never participate in them alone. The process is about how to create and generate collective sites of exchange—to have a discussion with the author, with the text, as well as to find others who touch on this discourse in their way, too, or whose discourses elaborate or clarify your own. It is about give and take, push and pull. In any circumstance, you have the chance to affect the discourse. At the same time, others have an effect on it, and the discourse has effects on its participants. Another important aspect of a reflective process of discourse is that it is never ready or done. It is a process that must have the ability to be opened, a process that has to be able to allow and cherish internal conflicts and doubts. It cannot take itself too seriously or for granted.

But how can we help students choose the discourse appropriate for them? Besides the obvious rule of needing to see what makes sense for each individual based on his or her needs and demands, the relevance of a discourse is determined by what the person is trying to do. We are back to the very basics of the whole issue. We are at the intersection where one has to be able to provide a working solution to the question: what is your practice? And yes, by stating that you are a video artist, you are not yet saying anything at all. The statement remains hollow and empty until you make yourself accountable by articulating what kind of a video art and artist you have in mind, what part of the history and tradition of video art you connect to, where you locate yourself right now, and where you want to go.

In one sense, the practice of a student is the factuality of being a student. A not-so-elegant sentence, yet one that embodies an important claim. We have to be very careful not to limit the scope of activities beforehand for our students. They must be able to try out and experiment with different themes and media—creating a huge copy machine of an art academy for an endless series of one-trick ponies is not a good idea.

9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 187.

At the same time, and here comes the central content of teaching discourse through an evolving idea of a practice: we must push students to take initiative and to define what they want, how, and why, not in universal themes, but through their own choices and focus, not in a closed-up, narcissistic fashion, but by linking themselves to works of art, to artists, to discourses, and to exhibitions. It is the task of deciding how to relate to the past of the site where you act, and also to create self-reflective and self-critical versions of the practice that are pushed forward by your own actions and articulations. This is to ask how a practice is defined and who defines it.

All of this deals with and is about (I can't emphasize this strongly enough) being a practicing professional artist. A practice that, first of all, is not that of a theorist out there, but of an artist or a group of artists to whom one must find ways to get next to. This act of "getting closer" does not necessarily happen through personal encounters (maybe not at all), but through the experience of works by artists. And it occurs not only through works, but also through words—words not perhaps so much uttered by others (critics, curators, etc.) but by colleagues and by the artists themselves about their works, the content, scope, and framing. We find works and words in direct and fruitful interplay in reflections by Bruce Nauman, Adrian Piper, or Gerhard Richter, to name some of the well-known artists articulating their practice and the discourses in which they participate.

But how should we understand a practice? It would be disastrous to expect each individual to invent the analytical frame and tradition of a practice. What we have is an abstract version of it—a version to lean on, to talk with, and with which each of us can define our own interpretation—a definition that emphasizes how our actions are context-bound and site-specific. As Alasdair MacIntyre phrased it: "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and the goods involved, are systematically extended."⁹

What we are after is not a theory of a certain practice, such as narrative video installations or figurative paintings. That would be asking for a solution to a dilemma that has no solutions, no stopping point, but is rather an ongoing process, and where the importance lies in how to keep the process, the carousel going on. Without a priori answers, knowledge is shaped and made in and through the particular processes. It is a personal journey, but something that must find its way into articulation so that it is available and comprehensible to others working in the same field or in a similar fashion.

But once again, this act of defining the production of knowledge in and through acts of practice does not happen in a vacuum or in isolation. There is no void, and we should not have any illusions about inventing the practice from the scratch. Instead of believing the hype about the latest *new* thing, or following the trendy flavor of the month, we must value practice-based, practice-bound activity, with its benefits of slowness and stamina. Who, we must ask, is doing the talking? Who uses or abuses the power to describe and to redescribe?

Changing our perspective and rephrasing the task to teach theoretical tools within art academies as discourses, rather than as clear-cut theories of this or that, enables us to reflect realities as intersecting, overlapping, and contradicting. Our being-in-the-world is described as both/and, not either/or. We are in a mess, but it is our mess, and the ultimate task is to make that dilemma into a productive dilemma. If we throw Jacques Derrida or Gilles Deleuze at the students, we have to make sure we are there to help them catch this. Not just once, but through a long-term commitment in which knowledge does not evaporate into thin air but has the possibility to build and accumulate. It is, yes, about sharing and caring, which are both on the agenda and which are both pursued because it's in the deepest self-interest of anyone wishing and willing to maintain and develop a self-critical and reflective practice.

Teaching the ways to learn the tools of how to participate in discourses is not about discrediting the contents or potentialities of any given theory. Nor is it to make a pre-given hierarchy between various approaches. Teaching discourse is not a lame simplification. It is not a watered-down version of the "real" thing. We are not talking about using an analogue from another field, of a wine that has been robbed of all its alcohol. Teaching discourse is not Bordeaux light; it is not a no-version of anything. It is something different, something else.

And yes, this something else is our awareness of being-in-the world. In one word, it's about reflexivity. It is not about who goes home after a hard day's work with a theory of correct and right practice in his or her back pocket. It's about the necessity for each of us to participate in the framing and focusing of the context we are part of. Teaching discourse is reflection strong, not theory light. A decisive distinction that is not an answer but an opening, a beginning of a beginning, a chance to take seriously the task of thinking with and thinking through who we are, where we are, how we are, and with whom we are—and not to forget where we want to go next. We are not talking about free-floating avatars that may last for the next twenty-two seconds. No, it's about of the lifelong project of a situated self with the freedom and responsibility to participate in defining and redescribing the content of concepts and the elements of the practice within which you are and wish to be engaged when you keep on keeping on doing what you do when you do what you do.