Positioning Contemporary Asian Art Practice: Presenting a Well-Reasoned and Informed Point Of View

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Abstract
Future directions position the study of Asia as a mandatory, cross-curriculum dimension in the proposed Australian Curriculum (Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010). The study of Visual Arts requires a rigorous content framework to develop informed attitudes and values and facilitate coherent, well-informed viewpoints. The functionality of content in NSW Visual Arts syllabi provide a platform for establishing a sustained and layered dialogue with the art world, through authentic interaction between artists, artworks, audiences and interests of the world. Multi-representational exhibitions are a catalyst for the active construction of knowledge and primary engagement with the agencies of the art world. They provide meaningful intersections between artists, artworks, diverse audiences and ideas. Exhibiting contemporary Asian artists fosters and sustains understanding and connects audiences with critical political and social issues, diverse art practice and the voices of artists, curators, critics and writers. Essential learning will need to address a network of procedures that underpin practice as making and studying in the Visual Arts with a continuum of learning that acknowledges conceptual shifts in students’ understanding over time. The current rubric for the HSC Art Criticism and Art History written examination and years 7-10 Visual Arts outcomes in NSW are crucial sites of reflection for learning experiences that provide a scaffold for students to present a well-reasoned and informed point of view. This paper will provide a reflective framework which locates NSW Visual Arts syllabuses as sites of knowledge and understanding of Visual Arts practices, with the study of Asia as cross-curriculum content in the proposed Australian Curriculum.

Sites of Critical Reflection
Backward mapping from the HSC Visual Arts written examination rubrics and marking criteria, together with year 7-10 Visual Arts learning outcomes, reveal key aspects of learning in NSW and position critical and historical study in scope and sequence, from year 7 to year 12. The continuum of learning in Visual Arts acknowledges conceptual shifts in student understanding from describing to explaining, from dependent to authoritative practice, and from being an explicit learner to a more reflective practitioner.

HSC written examination rubrics (Board of Studies NSW, 2010) require students to present well-reasoned and informed points of view, in both short and extended responses. Examination questions acknowledge a range of issues, themes and ideas that reflect the historical and contemporary study of Visual Arts, through an understanding of practice, the conceptual framework and the frames-as-content organisers. Practice is identified as making, and the critical and historical study of Visual Arts, the conceptual framework as the interaction of the agencies of artist, artwork, audience and the world with the subjective, structural, cultural and postmodern frames providing different lenses to construct knowledge and understanding.

Higher-order criteria in the HSC Visual Arts written examination marking guidelines include representing a coherent and well-reasoned argument and comprehensively explaining and interpreting relevant aspects of content (Board of Studies NSW, 2009b, 2009c). Students are required to select significant examples to support their responses and reveal a highly developed understanding of the Visual Arts.

These sophisticated learning outcomes acknowledge the pivotal role of critical and historical study in NSW Visual Arts syllabi and the importance of a continuum of learning to construct knowledge and understanding over time.
In the Stage 6 Visual Arts Syllabus (Board of Studies NSW 2009a), knowledge in art criticism and art history is constructed by learning how to evaluate and explain the significance of selected artists, artworks, audience responses and ideas circulating in the world and locate them in critical narratives and significant histories. An exchange of opinions and viewpoints are informed by knowledge of practice. Learning how to construct descriptions, narrative accounts, interpretations, comparisons and judgements facilitates the development of a well-reasoned point of view.

Within the context of the HSC course, students research specific themes, issues, expressive forms, styles, subject matter and individual practitioners in case studies. Case studies provide opportunities for students to define theories, describe concepts, analyse facts, interpret opinions, clarify interpretations, and evaluate and draw conclusions to support their critical and historical investigations and develop well reasoned accounts.

The continuum of Visual Arts learning in Years 7-10 recognizes that students understand how their intentions, actions and judgements occur within particular contexts. They learn how to investigate the relationships between the agencies of the art world, in both their art making and critical and historical studies of art with increasing complexity and how different interpretations of art, informed by different theoretical views, are possible.

A diverse range of suggested assessment strategies supports the development of knowledge in critical and historical studies from Years 7-10 (Board of Studies NSW, 2003). In Years 7-8, recommended activities include writing short explanations, engaging in debates and role-plays, planning short research tasks, writing catalogue entries and reports. In Years 9-10, activities include writing extended explanations, preparing written tasks explaining an artists practice and investigations of the agencies of the art world, writing reports or reviews, delivering written and oral presentations in PowerPoint and multimedia technologies and engaging in role-play as an artist, audience member or critic to examine how artworks can be explained and interpreted from different points of view. Students may also curate an exhibition to represent a particular point of view or idea and respond to extended research tasks.

Positioning the study of contemporary Asia practice in the context of exhibitions provides a catalyst for the active construction of knowledge and primary engagement with the agencies of the art world and galvanises the rich content framework of NSW Visual Arts syllabi.

The study of Asia as a cross-curriculum dimension

The term ‘Asia’ is described and interpreted in different contexts and can be defined as a geographical, cultural, religious, historical and linguistic boundary or area. It is important to acknowledge different perspectives and cultural imperatives and the diversity of specific regions and countries within regions. Regions include North-east Asia - China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan; South-east Asia - Indonesia, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, East Timor, the Philippines and Cambodia; South Asia including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, together with the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region.

The National Statement For Engaging Young Australians With Asia In Australian Schools (Curriculum Corporation, 2006) proposes key considerations for student learning in the Australian Curriculum to develop informed attitudes and values about Asia, to learn about contemporary and traditional Asian practices and to develop intercultural understanding and communication skills that link Australia and Asia. The Visual Arts has a vital role in engaging in contemporary Asian art practice as a reflection of cultural connectivity and informed understanding.

Access to contemporary Asian artists in key reoccurring international exhibitions in Australia fosters and sustains understanding and connects audiences with critical political and social issues, diverse art practice and the voices of artists, curators, critics and writers. Exhibitions such as the Asia Pacific Triennial are sites

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of exchange between Australia and Asia which provide meaningful intersections between artists, artworks, diverse audiences and insights into ideas in circulation, in and between the sites of exchange.

Positioning contemporary Asian artists’ practice
As sites of discourse in the art world, exhibitions provide opportunities to activate Visual Arts content, focusing on the practices of art making and art writing, by engaging with artists, writers, curators and critics through artist statements, wall text and citations, media releases, catalogue essays, art journal publications, reviews and critical commentary.

The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art is held at the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, providing Visual Arts teachers with innovative teaching and learning experiences for students which reflect syllabus requirements, including HSC case studies, research tasks, debates, role-plays, reviews and reports. The exhibition addresses themes and ideas in circulation and how artists from Asia and the Pacific articulate personal narratives within a contemporary context and reference traditional values and skills. It is an ongoing project initiated in 1993. It is one of very few regularly recurring international exhibitions with a declared interest in a specific region; it addresses culture and ethnicity and acknowledges historical diasporas. (Raffel. 2010).

Themes and ideas in circulation
The most recent Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT6) was held from December 2009 to April 2010. It is the only series of exhibitions in the world to focus exclusively on contemporary Asian and Pacific art. Every three years, the economic, social, political and cultural dynamics of the region are revisited to continue the dialogue. The most recent Asia-Pacific Triennial profiled more than100 artists from 25 countries, including countries not previously represented, such as North Korea (DPRK), Tibet, Turkey and Iran and Cambodia and Myanmar (Burma).

The APT6 is characterized by a diversity of practice in a range of forms including painting, sculpture, installation, film, video, drawing and printmaking and, although there is no overarching theme, three areas of exploration reveal innovative departure points for research: collaboration, interconnectivity and cross-disciplinary practice; popular culture and the everyday or urbanisation and the influence of modernity.

In developing teaching and learning activities from years 7-12, Visual Arts teachers can focus their research on these suggested areas of investigation or create their own research pathways based on specific forms, such as painting or video, the works of particular artists, collectives or collaborations, or the practice of particular regions or countries, such as North Korea or the Mekong regions of Cambodia or Myanmar.

There are many innovative and challenging works. Key artists include Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan, YNG, Zhu Weibing and Ji Wenju, Chen Qiulin, Subodh Gupta, Shinji Ohmaki and Kibong Rhee. Originally from the Philippines, Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan work and live in Australia. They create works that reference the processes of collecting and collaborating to express ideas of migration, family and memory. In-Flight Project: Another Country 2009 is a suspended sculpture constructed from hundreds of small handmade planes by the onsite gallery audience reflecting personal experience, sites of exchange and communication that extend beyond borders.

Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara and the Japanese architectural creative designers graf known as YNG construct whimsical interactive environments. They have created a portable studio inspired by the Queenslander house using reclaimed timber and found materials Nara’s work occupies the interior of the YNG installation and references the anxiety of child like characters informed by punk music, anime and Marvel comics.

In the work People holding flowers 2007 by Chinese artists Zhu Weibing and Ji Wenju. Four hundred small figures each hold a large bright pink flower which references the purges of Chairman Mao’s hundred flowers campaign of 1957.
The symbolism of the flowers contrast with the de-individualising effects of mass consumption and the subservience of the individual to the state. Another Chinese artist Chen Qiulin centres her work on the village communities of contemporary China. Xinsheng no.275-277 2009 is a reconstruction of a traditional house demolished for urban development.

Subodh Gupta is one of India's most prominent contemporary Indian artists forms. His works utilize everyday products and focus on utility, travel and mobility. Line of Control (1) 2008 depicts a giant mushroom cloud constructed from brass utensils suggesting abundance rather than destruction.

Japanese Artist Shinji Ohmaki creates installations using everyday materials. Liminal Air-descend 2007 uses lengths of knotted thread to create an "immersive" environment that provides audiences with an opportunity to suspend reality and ponder other possibilities. Kibong Rhee from South Korea also uses everyday objects to create extraordinary encounters. In the installation, There is no place-shallow cuts 2008, light and vapour transform and shroud a willow tree in a composition reminiscent of traditional landscape painting.

Returning to backward mapping, the following HSC Section II Art criticism and art history extended response examination questions reflect autonomy in teaching and learning programs and acknowledge a scope and sequence of study from Years 7-12. The selected questions focus on exhibitions as a site of discourse and reference practice, the conceptual framework and the frames as content.

Practice questions include: Explain how exhibition sites affect the intentions of artists you have studied. Sites you could consider include: museums, open spaces, virtual spaces, galleries or community spaces (Question 3, 2009) and Why do artists exhibit? In your answer, consider the different reasons that artists have for participating in exhibitions as part of their practice (Question 3, 2007).

Conceptual framework questions include: Explain how particular artworks and/or exhibitions of art have caused changes in art world beliefs and practices (Question 7, 2008), Assume the role of a curator and write a proposal for an exhibition (Question 6, 2007) and Analyse the role of audiences in the changing reputation and significance of artists and their works over time. In your answer you consider audience to include the public, critics, and/or historians, patrons, sponsors and curators (Question 7, 2005) and the frame question, You have been asked to curate an exhibition called ‘Experience and memory’. Use the subjective frame to explain your choice of artists and their works (Question 9, 2004).

The diverse practice of exhibiting contemporary Asian artists connects Asia and Australia, generating an ongoing discourse between teachers and students. Students are situated in the contemporary and artists provide insights into their life experiences, traditional contexts, critical, political and social issues, with important links to the voices of curators, critics and writers.

Teaching and learning in the Visual Arts must address a network of procedures that provide for the active construction of knowledge in Visual Arts practice, acknowledging the pivotal role of art criticism and art history and a continuum of learning that establishes a scaffold for students to present a well-reasoned and informed point of view.

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