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HOW ART CAN BE THOUGHT

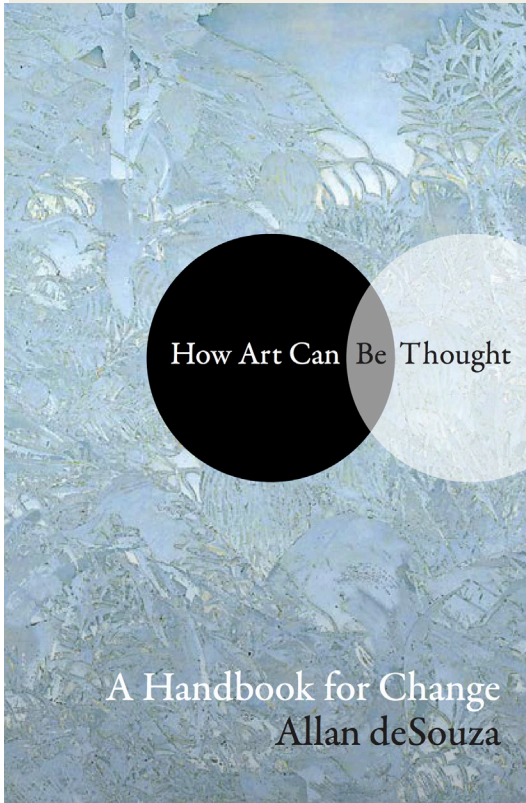
A Handbook for Change

Allan deSouza

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University of California, Berkeley

What happens in our encounters with art, and how might we think through and understand those encounters? What terms can we use to translate and share our experiences with others? How do we judge if art is good, and if it is for the social good? In *How Art Can Be Thought* Allan deSouza investigates such questions and the popular terminology through which art is discussed, valued, and taught. Adapting art viewing to contemporary demands within a rapidly changing world, deSouza outlines how art functions as politicized culture within a global industry. He emphasizes thinking and talking about art as active processes that not only produce meaning and direct how viewers experience art, but steers viewer experience towards decolonizing possibilities. In addition to offering new pedagogical strategies for art education and the training of both viewers and artists, deSouza provides an extensive analytical glossary of some of the most common terms

used to discuss art while focusing on their current and changing usage. He also shows how these terms may be crafted to new artistic and social practices, particularly in what it means to decolonize the places of display and learning. He considers different methods, outcomes, and values of critique, at a time when higher education is under threat and arts and humanities programs are under particular scrutiny as to their social and financial value. The book concludes with a close examination of viewing habits through the example of Mark Rothko's abstract paintings, and how the conventional language of abstraction can be repurposed towards new priorities within the contemporary world. DeSouza's work will be invaluable to the casual gallery visitor and the arts professional alike, to all those who regularly look at, think about, and make art—especially art students and faculty, artists, art critics, and curators.



How Art Can Be Thought

A Handbook for Change
Allan deSouza

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KEYWORDS

THIS WORK WILL BE
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CRITICS, AND CURATORS.

AESTHETICS

ART CRITICISM

CONTEMPORARY ART

CULTURE

DECOLONIZATION

DIVERSITY

POLITICAL ART

POSTCOLONIALISM



Photo credit: Taro Masushio

ALLAN DESOUZA

is a trans-media artist whose works restage colonial-era material legacies through counter-strategies of humor, fiction, re-inscription, and (mis)translation.

His work has been exhibited extensively in the U.S. and internationally, including at the Walther Collection, Germany; Pompidou Centre, Paris; 2008 Gwangju Biennale, Korea; 3rd Guangzhou Triennale, China; ev+a Festival, Ireland; and in recent solo exhibitions at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, SF; the Phillips Collection, DC; SF Camerawork; Fowler Museum, LA; Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, IL; Talwar Gallery, NY, and Talwar Gallery, Delhi. His writings have been published in various journals, anthologies, and catalogues, including *Third Text*, London; *Wolgan Art Monthly*, South Korea, X-TRA, Los Angeles.

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He is the author of *The Sikhs in Britain* (Batsford, 1986), coeditor of *Crossing Black Waters* (Working Press, 1992), as well as numerous essays and text works.

He is represented by Talwar Gallery in New York City and New Delhi.

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CHAPTER BREAKDOWN & ABSTRACTS

INTRODUCTION. *A Foot in the Door*

The book begins with a biographical narrative of the author’s racialized experiences as an art student and faculty at different schools. It considers modes of inclusion and exclusion, and possibilities of decolonizing art education and art practices. These are in turn considered in relation to artistic aspirations and idealism, setting the stage for multiple perspectives, and pushing towards languages and practices that can meet the challenges and conflicts of the contemporary.

KEYWORDS

- ASIAN AMERICAN ART
- BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT (BRITAIN)
- COLONIZATION
- DECOLONIZATION
- DISCRIMINATION
- IDEALISM
- INSTITUTIONAL RACISM
- MEMORY
- MODERNISM
- PEDAGOGY

CHAPTER EXTRACT

“... I was accepted to Bath Academy of Art in the Painting department, possibly because a number of their faculty—including the just-retired Howard Hodgkin—were Indophile painters. However, when I arrived for my first semester, I felt they were disappointed that I wasn’t Indian enough, and unlike some of the faculty who made regular trips to India, I had never been there. Despite encouragement about the “wonderful opportunity,” I also declined to be Hodgkin’s gardener. It wasn’t the last time I’d be told how ungrateful I was.

Not being Indian enough was probably getting under my skin, so to speak, and so, during my first year, I went to India. With the brashness of youth, I simply showed up at art schools, looking for artists. With unbounded generosity, I was welcomed and introduced to artists and critics like Vivan Sundaram and Geeta Kapur in Delhi, Nalini Malani in Bombay (now Mumbai), Bhupen Khakhar, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Nasreen Mohamedi, and then-students Rekha Rodwittiya and Ajay Desai in Baroda. These artists were establishing international careers, prompted in no small part by the incisive writings of Geeta Kapur.

After my BFA, and back in London, the idea of a career for an “Indianish” artist, with now Indianish work, seemed too distant. I was repeatedly told that I was too tainted by the west. This was an obvious Catch 22, an effective lockout. Whenever I would walk through any door, I was too westernized, but not western enough—“white, but not



Allan deSouza
Polar Sky (fghtbtwntgrndbfff), from the *Redactions* series, 2011, digital painting, 60” x 40”. Courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York and New Delhi.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

quite," in Homi Bhabha's inimitable phrase—or I would be required to perform an orientalist Indianness. If I were an actor, I would have only got auditions for roles with bad accents."

...

"In the U.S., it made no sense for me to claim the term black, or it was understood only as that I was mixed-race. On the other hand, when I said that I was Indian, I was once asked, in all seriousness, "What tribe?"

After moving to New York in 1992, I became involved with Asian American art, and in particular with the artists' network, Godzilla. Godzilla's focus, and the coalitional possibility that attracted me, was the space between Asia and America, as a space of multiplicity, connection, and possibility, rather than how the "hyphenated identities" are framed as sites of isolation, segregation, and limitation."

...

"I was never an exemplary student, and seemed to consistently generate low-or-no expectations from faculty. At worst, faculty's sweeping pronouncements about art and society rarely were sweeping enough to encompass my experience. Not only did it make them seem limited, it placed me outside of their knowledge, as though there was no place and no language for my own. Even as I was molded through these institutions and their behaviors, I reacted against much of what they thought they were imparting to me. However, I am entirely in their debt, and in the case of the U.S. institutions, I mean this literally."

...

"Who succeeds, on whose terms, and what constitutes success form the macro and

daily politics of academia, and also of art. They mirror artistic questions about art's function in and with the world (I am using Paulo Freire's phrasing of "in" and "with" to emphasize being as relational).

What does art do? Should art respond to the present? Is art's purpose—as one is often taught in art schools—to



Daniel Joseph Martinez
Museum Tags: Second Movement (overture); or, Overture con Claque (Overture with Hired Audience Members), 1993 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art. Metal and enamel paint, 12" x 15" / 30.5 x 38.1 cm. Collection of Michael Brenson, New York. Courtesy of the Artist and Roberts & Tilton gallery, Los Angeles

THE BOOK GREW OUT OF QUESTIONS THAT MY STUDENTS HAVE ABOUT ART'S FUNCTION IN THE WORLD. WHAT DOES ART DO? SHOULD ART RESPOND TO THE PRESENT? IS ART'S PURPOSE—AS ONE IS OFTEN TAUGHT IN ART SCHOOLS—TO TAKE THE LONGER VIEW, TO NOT BE SWAYED BY EVER-CHANGING CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES AND CRISES, TO NOT BE CAUGHT IN THE SHORT-TERM OF ONLY EVER REACTING? SHOULD ART HAVE A CONSCIENCE, OR IS IT MEANT TO BE ABOVE THAT? WHEN DOES BEING "ABOVE" CONSCIENCE MEAN AVOIDING ONE?

MY OWN QUESTIONS AS A TEACHER PARALLELED THOSE OF MY STUDENTS. WHAT IS MY ROLE AS A TEACHER? TO REMAIN ABOVE BOTH CONSCIENCE AND THE FRAY? TO KEEP MY "POLITICAL" VIEWS TO MYSELF AND ADDRESS ONLY THE "ARTISTIC" ISSUES OF STUDENTS' WORK—IF THAT SEPARATION CAN INDEED BE MADE?

AT VARIOUS SCHOOLS WHERE I TEACH AND VISIT, THESE ARE NOT ISOLATED QUESTIONS: I KNOW THAT MANY STUDENTS ARE FRUSTRATED WITH THE LACK OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT; THEY DEMAND INCREASED DIVERSITY OF FACULTY AND PRESUMABLY OF OPINION. THEY WANT THEIR WORK TO MEAN SOMETHING IN THE WORLD. BALANCING THIS, THEY ARE PAINFULLY AWARE OF THE LONG-TERM FINANCIAL BURDEN OF ART EDUCATION, AND WANT REASSURANCE THAT THEY'VE MADE THE RIGHT DECISION TO PURSUE ART.

THERE ARE NO REASSURANCES, AND ART DOES NOT SUPPLY EASY ANSWERS, WAYS FORWARD, OR A VIABLE CAREER—PAID OR OTHERWISE. NOR DOES EDUCATION. BOTH CAN BE FULLY COOPTED TO BECOME MEANS OF CONTAINMENT AND SELF-PERPETUATION, WHILE SUPPLYING PROMISE, ENTERTAINMENT AND ESCAPE. AND YET I PURSUE BOTH ART AND TEACHING, BELIEVING THAT THEY HAVE IMPORTANT ROLES TO PLAY IN HOW WE ARE AND ACT IN THE WORLD.

ALLAN DESOUZA

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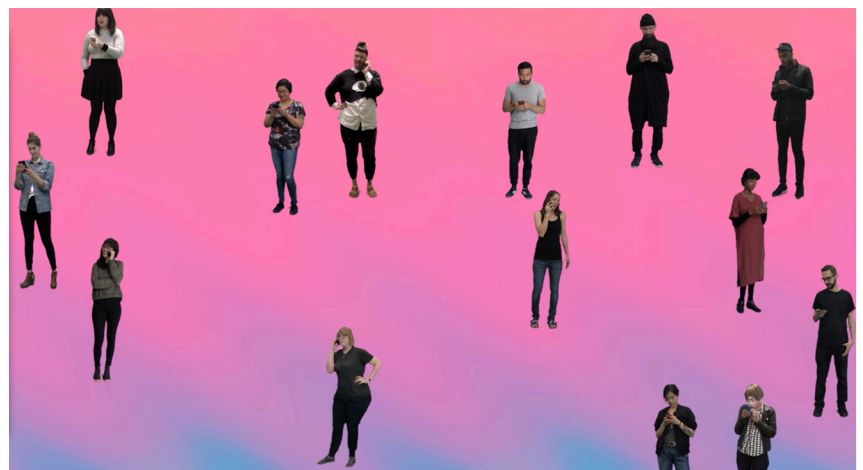
take the longer view, to not be swayed by ever-changing current circumstances, petty politics, and crises, to not be caught in the short-term of only ever reacting? Should art have a conscience, or is it meant to be above that? When does being “above” conscience mean avoiding one?”

...

“Like an exhibition, a book does not mark an end of a project, but its entry into public dialogue. The impetus is always to what comes next. In this, I draw support from the current resurgence of discourses and activism that seek to dismantle discriminatory practices, particularly around race and trans/gender. While education and pedagogy are certainly implicated, art may be seen to be less so in its material effects and consequences on which lives and how lives matter. For educators, the lives of each student have to matter equally, but to arrive at that equality requires institutional and societal overhaul—with policies of inclusion as only a first step. To maintain, in the present moment, that all lives matter equally, ignores the sometimes blatant effects of how policies and policing treat different people differently. Pedagogy can be utopian in its ambition, but it is a necessary practice towards the possibility that all lives might matter equally (notice to what extent this claim is qualified).”

...

“Decolonizing culture, and the modes of art-political inquiry that I am proposing, cannot exist in isolation or with any claim to autonomy. They are entwined with and can only be experienced, understood, and enacted as decolonizing through art’s institutions, practices, discourses, and participants. Like any other object or event, art/political work becomes politicized through the culture, agents, institutions, and systems that (re)produce it, through which it operates, and which it in turn produces.”



Laura Hyunjhee Kim
(Modern) Formations III, 2016, still image from video
(single-channel), 24 minutes 42 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

*DENOTES UC BERKELEY ALUMNI

CH 1. How Art Can Be Thought

KEYWORDS

- BEAUTY
- DISCOURSE
- IMAGINATION
- LINGUISTICS
- PROCESS

A precursor to Chapter 5's Glossary of Contested Terms, this chapter lays out some groundwork for beginning discussions on the term art. It analyses some popular definitions of art for their usefulness and limitations in engendering understandings about how contemporary art functions in our rapidly changing political landscape.



*Isaac Vazquez Avila
figure with bug shaped birthmark on face, 2017, 11" x 9"; oil on paper collage. Courtesy of the artist.

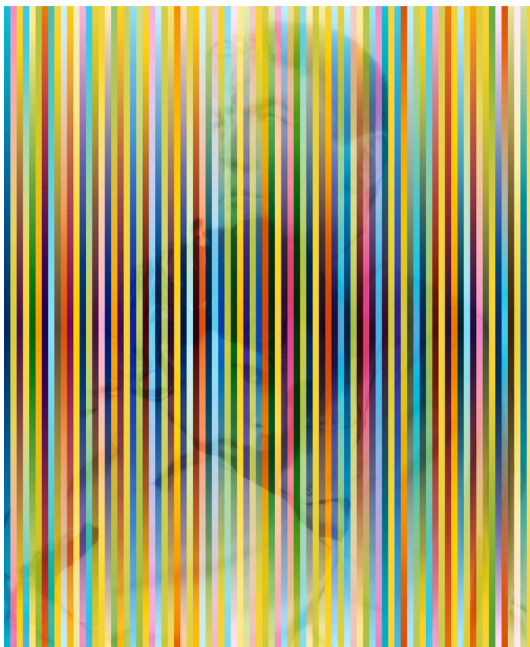
CHAPTER EXTRACT

An important consideration across any medium and discipline is how art “comes into being.” This can occur through a multiplicity of manifestations, practices, and functions: individuals and groups constantly amass data through multiple means, including experience, surveillance, research, investigation, imagination, and memory. We store, decipher, categorize, translate, reconfigure, speculate, forecast, endure, replay, act upon, and are acted upon by these through complex bodily, emotional, intellectual, material, social, political, technological, and virtual systems. Any of these activities, in any combination, and the gestures and forms they produce might be what we inadequately call “art.” This is another way to say that art is anything and everything. This provides rich potential, but it doesn't really help as a definition. Slightly less expansive (and without

judging which are “better”), are a number of working possibilities:

artworks are design elements and spatial enhancements, affective encounters, sensory and ethical triggers that can be both activating and placating, transformation devices, identity and communal markers, cultural values and ritual practices, archives of the contemporary and of the historical, provisional meaning systems and social interventions, entertainment and touristic attractions, luxury goods and status markers, stock options and liquid assets, tax breaks and trade goods, and histories of imagination, thinking and making; objects and acts that help us create and allot meaning, that define us to ourselves, that define us in opposition to others; vessels and conveyances that paradoxically direct us toward the uncontained and uncontainable; and practices that we believe (and hope) can aid us toward understanding and insight, that connect us to each other, to transcendent experiences, and to “higher powers.”

Only some of these possibilities might be widely considered as art, and others are popularly rejected. They are all social practices, with political and material consequences, processes that are always in flux, impermanent functions even as they are invested with the semblance of permanence, always being tested and adjusted, always responsive to codependent factors and forces. The designation “art” itself is a political naming, with choices made by artists, galleries, and viewers (or producers, distributors, and consumers) based on vested interests. Those interests need investigation for us to understand why and how certain forms of art are recognized and valued over others.



Susan Siltan
On the Beach, from the series, *The Day, the Earth*, 2007, chromogenic print, 72" x 65". Courtesy of the artist.

CH. 2 Entry Points

Examines the pedagogical field where art language is used. It considers primary questions of how viewers evaluate what is good art, and how quality becomes the defining criterion for art, which is set against the contested relationship between quality and equality. Using the example of Daniel Martinez at the 1993 Whitney Biennale, the chapter stresses the negotiations and refusals artists make when working within institutions, whether galleries or academia.

KEYWORDS

- ART CRITICISM
- ASSIMILATION
- DIFFERENCE
- DIVERSITY
- EQUALITY
- QUALITY



*Sofie Ramos
decorate/defecate, 2015, multimedia installation, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist

CHAPTER EXTRACT

“A supposed signature of the art school is its “academic” and “theory-laden” language, pitted against the “plain-speaking” language of the real world, and, better yet, the no language at all of true art, which apparently speaks for itself. A secular parallel to religious-speak, plain-speak is the purposeful language of advertising and commerce. It is the language of conviction, repurposed to convince the viewer to invest themselves in art, whether ideologically or financially. In its conviction, plain-speak is a forked tongue, a doublespeak of non-sequiturs made meaningful by repetition.

This is a problem for theory, a set of tools to reconfigure previous tools that have become fossilized in their conversion into the common sense of the everyday. Theory sounds difficult, it sounds convoluted, it sounds boring. And it’s no match for the populist allure of plain-speak, of *telling it like it is*.

Plain-speak is a numbing, dumbing, colonizing language. It reduces possibilities for—and I will refer here to myself—addressing the nuances of what my senses are experiencing, that can help me sort through the connections my brain is making, that helps me ask questions, that can help me situate the art I encounter into the world in which I, we all, live.”



*Paige Davis
Reflecting Woman at Bar, 2017, ink on paper, 34" x 29". Courtesy of the artist.

Megan Wynne
Untitled (Postpartum Nightgown I), 2016,
9" x 12". Courtesy of the artist.



CHAPTER EXTRACT

“While art is coded knowledge, generated and interpreted through learned and historicized disciplines and media, an artwork is a manifested “object of experience,” of being in/with the world from the very particular perspective of an artist’s historicized, embodied, located, enculturated subjectivity. Viewers engage this complex of perspectives with their own similarly complex subjectivities.”

...

“Teaching art is most commonly approached through techniques of making. Students are taught various technical skills, which might be accompanied by histories of making. Knowledge of who, what, where and when are certainly necessary for any artist to understand the sources for “their” ideas. But these can mislead and misinform—in that they invariably consider only Europe and North America, almost exclusively white EuroAmerican and predominantly male artists. Art history books, for example, might try to compensate by having a concluding chapter on “identity” in which women and non-white artists are grouped; art schools may also provide an addendum in the form of a “global perspectives” course. Both strategies leave the canon uncontested, intact, and centralized, and suggest that identity is the concern of only women and non-white artists (and that identity is their only concern).”

...

“I’m not proposing that the canon should no longer be taught, or simply replaced by a “more colorful” roster. Any work needs to be historicized in its own time, in relation to other works, ideas, movements, and practices that both support and counter it. Students cannot be taught to think critically if they are provided with only singular narratives. Nor am I suggesting that one can adequately teach any kind of global scope within the limited frames of art school classes. No curriculum can cover everything, but nor should anything (art history, a skill, a mode of thinking) be taught as though it were the only knowledge or the only method. If technical skills, language and information are tools of instruction, three of the means through which art can be taught, those tools not only need to be placed and nurtured in the hands and minds of students, but the skills, language, information and tools to examine skills, language, information and tools are a crucial part of that teaching to better enable students to advance and invent new means rather than replicating only what they have been taught.”

CH. 3 How Art Can Be Taught

In an era of art professionalization and economic justifications, this chapter considers what roles outside of career prospects an MFA can serve. It looks more closely at pedagogical structures and practices through which art is taught, or in fact, if and whether art can be taught, including ideological battles over practical skills and critical thinking, and how they function alongside other values of talent, creativity, and originality.

KEYWORDS

- ASSESSMENT
- CREATIVITY
- MFA PROGRAMS
- SKILL
- TEACHING



*Behnaz Khaleghi
In Heaven, installation detail, 2017, Mixed media,
variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

IMAGE NOTES

WITH THE EXCEPTIONS OF DANIEL JOSEPH MARTINEZ, AND SUSAN SILTON (BOTH OF WHOM HAVE BEEN COLLEAGUES AT DIFFERENT SCHOOLS), THE IMAGES IN THE BOOK ARE THE WORKS OF MY FORMER STUDENTS.

I HOPE THE READER DOES NOT PERCEIVE THIS AS NEPOTISM, BUT AS A DELIBERATE CHOICE CLOSELY ENTWINED WITH THE BOOK'S ARGUMENTS ON PEDAGOGY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTISTIC IDEAS AND PRACTICES. THE ARTWORKS I DISCUSS IN THE BOOK ARE MOSTLY WELL-KNOWN, EVEN CANONICAL MODERNIST WORKS BY THE LIKES OF HENRI MATISSE, PABLO PICASSO, ET AL. MY INTENTION IS TO PROPOSE CONTINUITIES AND INTERRUPTIONS BETWEEN THESE WORKS THAT ARE DISCUSSED AND THE WORKS THAT ARE DEPICTED, AND REGARDLESS OF THE INTENTIONS OF THE FORMER STUDENTS. IN THE CASE OF SHARI PALADINO AND PAIGE DAVIS, SELECTED BECAUSE OF THE GENERAL TRAJECTORY OF THEIR WORK, I ASKED THEM IF THEY WOULD "RESPOND" TO THE WORKS BY MARCEL DUCHAMP AND EDOUARD MANET, RESPECTIVELY. DAVIS MADE A "BLIND" CONTOUR DRAWING FROM MANET'S PAINTING, A BAR AT THE FOLIES-BERGERE, 1882, AND DESCRIBES IT THUS: "A DRAWING DONE BY LOOKING ONLY AT/INTO THE WOMAN'S EYES, USING MY PERIPHERAL VISION TO FILL IN THE REST OF THE IMAGE." READERS CAN TEASE OUT RELATIONS BETWEEN HER METHOD AND THE VARIOUS DISCUSSIONS IN THE TEXT AROUND THE GAZE AND VISUALITY, AND EMPLOY SIMILAR MODES OF

KEYWORDS

- ARTISTIC ENCOUNTERS
- CONFLICT
- DOUBT
- PEDAGOGY

CH. 4 Critique As Radical Prototype

This chapter proposes different methodologies and vocabularies for critique, as the principle art pedagogical practice for discussing student work. Methods are closely examined for their intentions and various outcomes, and for how they train students to experience art as embodied encounters, from which more collective and social meanings are produced. Factors such as doubt and conflict, which inhibit collective participation are also considered.



*Andrew Wilson
Ship (Detail), 2015, Cyanotype on Cotton,
Sewn. Courtesy of the artist.

CH. 5. How Art Can Be Spoken: A Glossary of Contested Terms

The book's core chapter discusses 113 terms commonly used, from *Abstraction* to *Work*, and encompassing terms such as *Inspiration*, *Originality*, *Transcendence*, and *Universal*. It clarifies the shared language—its effects, functions, and (mis)uses—through which popular discourse is generated around artworks. Unlike a dictionary, the emphasis is less on defining terms and their proper usage, and more on investigating their social and political values, histories and artistic claims.

KEYWORDS

- AESTHETICS
- ART THEORY
- CONCEPTUALISM
- CREATIVITY
- IMAGINATION
- POSTMODERNISM
- SOCIAL PRACTICE

CHAPTER EXTRACT

"I've mentioned that "an artwork is a declaration of being in the world from the very particular perspective of an artist's historicized, positioned, embodied, enculturated subjectivity." [#Art] This is one productive way to conceive of authenticity, that an artist pursues knowledge of and strives to work from the very specific ways that they have been located within the world. This is not autobiography, but a criticality from one's location and being located by others, also akin to what Mary Louise Pratt proposes as an autoethnographic text, "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them." This is counter to conventional ideas of authentication, since it is engaged more with intertextuality



*Shari Paladino
The Urinas, detail of *Habitas*, 2017, variable
dimensions. Courtesy of the artist

excellence is facilitated, promoted, rewarded, empowered, and those less than excellent taught separately but unequally? Excellence presumes a hierarchical, competitive system (that some will be *better* than others). How is such a system compatible with the art school's parallel rhetoric about art's equalizing, liberating powers? Do tiered systems promote different (and self-fulfilling) *expectations* of excellence from different rungs on the hierarchy? Should schools operate on varying expectations of excellence mitigated by the unequal entry points of students to art industries? Can one have the same expectations of excellence from a financially poor student who works part-time jobs and who has a child, and from a student from a wealthy background who can afford to not be employed, who can attend gallery openings and evening lectures, and who can spend all their "free" time in the studio? These might be questions that are impossible to answer beyond specific cases. But they point to two primary issues for education: the difficulty of unquestioned notions of excellence, and that excellence is ultimately a question of ethics."

...

"Creativity can be considered as a universal attribute, one of the factors through which we provisionally recognize what it means to be human (while acknowledging that being human has and is still not universally attributed to all peoples). In this universal application—and we can insist on it being universally applied—we can consider creativity as the manifestation of sentience. I am being deliberately broad, in order to suggest that creativity is an ability available to everyone (as well as—why not?—to non-human sentient beings). The creative act is an affirmation of being, and in this it can rebel against constraint, and be empowering of the self, even when its manifestations are destructive to its enactor or to others. To insist on the autonomy of creativity is to allow for acts that may be otherwise repudiated as misguided, irresponsible, criminal, hateful, destructive, violent—an allowance that is one of the consequences of a blanket insistence on "artistic freedom," or "freedom of speech." In practice, no society allows such license; each society negotiates or imposes which speech acts are taboo, hateful, and/or criminalized (and subsequently censored, legislated, or banned)."

...

"Artists speak of "my culture," principally in terms of discovery, affirmation, recuperation, maintenance and opposition. Culture might be thought of in terms of loss of something that has been erased or is being threatened, with artists undertaking salvaging operations of maintaining culture. This may also entail the tactic of using cultural specificity as the site of opposition. Claiming proprietorship over a specified culture leads to other forms of policing, most notably in relation to purity and authenticity, and to who has rights of access to and representation of that culture. While I fully

and performance. This use of authenticity is a practice rather than a noun or fixity, it can be the process of coming into fuller being, similar to how Freire considers freedom, as "*the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion.*"

...

"If we accept that art is a form of knowledge of being in/with the world, can there be excellent/good/bad knowledge or is all knowledge equally valid (if not equally relevant or differently consequential)? Is a bad artwork one that fails to exhibit knowledge about its own coming into being, its history and location within art histories, its material properties, and its possibilities? Is a bad artwork one that is too closed in upon its own regimes of truth and ignorant of what it means to be more widely operational in the world? One that a viewer cannot connect to their own knowledge of being in/with the world (or does this make for a "bad" viewer)? What are the relationships (and outcomes) of a good/bad work and a bad/good viewer?"

...

"How are students to be prepared for excellence? Do schools and faculty habitually act on the presumption that only some students will be excellent? Does the focus on excellence produce a tiered system, where

IMAGE NOTES

contd.

INTERPLAY WITH THE OTHER IMAGES.

THE SELECTION OF OTHER FORMER STUDENTS' WORKS WERE MADE DIRECTLY BY ME. THEIR INCLUSION IS NOT TO SINGLE THEM OUT AS THAT OF THE "BEST" STUDENTS, BUT BECAUSE OF THE COINCIDENCE OF THEIR WORKS TO THE ARTISTS I HAVE DISCUSSED. HOWEVER, I HAVE TO ADMIT HOW PROUD I AM—THOUGH I TAKE NO CREDIT—THAT AS ARTISTS IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS, THEY ARE EACH DEEPLY ENGAGED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR WORK AND IN HOW IT WILL FUNCTION IN THE WORLD.

LAST, THOUGH FIRST ENCOUNTERED, THE COVER IMAGE IS FROM ONE OF MY OWN WORKS, CONNECTING MY WRITING (AND PEDAGOGY) WITH WHAT MIGHT BE CONSIDERED A MORE CONVENTIONAL STUDIO PRACTICE. IN THIS CASE, THE IMAGE IS FROM MY REDACTIONS SERIES, IN WHICH PAINTINGS BY PAUL GAUGUIN AND HERE, HENRI ROUSSEAU, ARE "REDACTED" BY OVERLAYING A SINGLE COLOR, CHOSEN FROM THE HORIZON IN THE ORIGINAL PAINTING, ONTO THE REST OF THE PAINTING SURFACE. THE REDACTIONS HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT ELSEWHERE, SO I WILL MENTION HERE ONLY THAT THEIR PROCESS OVERLAPS WITH THE INVESTIGATIONS AND INTENTIONS IN THIS BOOK, OF DECOLONIZING EUROAMERICAN MODERNISM BY RESTAGING OR PERHAPS TRANSLATING ITS AESTHETIC AND AFFECTIVE POSSIBILITIES.

understand the impetus to hold on to what little one might claim as one's own, this claim to a slice of culture—while tactically necessary at times—runs the risk of the artist being locked into these operations—salvage/opposition. Their art, required to authenticate "their" culture or provide proof of its authenticity as a culturally legitimate practice, is likely to become a document of the authentic, and becomes locked into and out of time much like the "living" museums of heritage industries. The artist is then expected to speak only of their culture—to become a native informant, assuming the burden of representing one's group or culture—usually in roles that can only be uncritically celebratory of one's group and/or oppositional to others."

...

"During the time of writing, various art industry controversies, or rather protests—against Kelly Walker, Dana Schutz, Sam Durant, Jimmie Durham, and Joe Scanlan—have been occurring over who has the right to speak/represent a culture. While these artists have been institutionally celebrated as transgressive and innovative, their transgressions have been criticized as trespassing into other cultures through prevailing colonial patterns of cultural appropriation. These appropriations can be made as "benevolent" claims, such as through empathy—and here empathy is an emotional claim upon the other *for* oneself—but in effect can be acts of incursion, occupation, and eradication closely tied to other forms of violence. What has been protested is not just the place of individual white artists to represent blackness or Native American-ness, but the art industries' eager commodification of those cultures and histories—through its celebrity artists—to embody and enshrine omniscient white freedoms of speech (which are rendered white by being simultaneously denied to artists of color)."

...

"Identity tends to be applied to and by those who form a speaking site (an identity) from which they may organize for recognition and rights that approach those already available to the normative. The corollary to this organizing is the normative complaint that "minorities" are demanding "special treatment." Identity as a site from which to speak offers at least the semblance of a stabilizing platform in otherwise unstable conditions. A limitation of occupying pre-named positions is that they are already spoken *for*. One risks being fixed into those sites by others, to speak only *from* and *to* those sites. . . . To speak "as a gay man," or "as a woman of color," for example, excuses others to hear one's speech *only* as a gay man/woman of color. . . . While identity can and does speak to such specifics, it operates more broadly in ways that can't be fully contained within any of those speaking positions. A question, then, is how to act and speak multiply, yet specifically, without the recourse to the humanistic "we are all the same.""

...

"To be universal is one of the most commonly encountered desires voiced by artists, that their work is accessible to any and all audiences. There are many things that are commonplace, and the ways that viewers experience and respond to them might follow certain patterns, but that is different from the imperial presumption that everyone else experiences things the same way that one does. On the other hand, global capitalism—through its ideologies, spectacle, and mass consumption—is the closest to universal experience, although that's not what artists mean. Another increasingly possible universal experience is global destruction, though that's not what artists mean either."

KEYWORDS

- ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM
- ABSTRACTION
- CULTURAL AMNESIA
- PRIMITIVISM
- SPIRITUALITY
- TRANSCENDENCE

AFTERWORDS: How, Now, Rothko?

The book's closing chapter tracks the experience of looking closely at art, by analyzing an exhibition of a canonical artist, Mark Rothko. The chapter examines why we might look at abstract painting, what feelings it produces, why we think that art is good for us, how it comes into meaning, and what interests it serves. It locates Rothko in relation to cultural memory and amnesia, connects his influence by Assyrian work to the current Syrian war, and considers other interlocutors for creating different meanings through contemporary abstraction.

CHAPTER EXTRACT

Standing in front of a Rothko painting, *Untitled* (1957), which we typically think of as a "Rothko," I slow down and allow my vision to relax into the paint, lulling my mental chatter. The rewards of this are immersion into the paint, whose luminous layers and brushstrokes one can follow as though choreography, the swimming into the optical dream space; an immersion that promises a merging. My eyes float into this space, which feels like the miasma of my own consciousness, or rather, unconscious. I can't help interjecting—to myself—that this is an inherited, learned concept that now resides so implacably within my body that I imagine it was always there, a primal, atavistic throwback. It feels like a potentially liberating and affirming space, one so active and activated that it feels more like an event, an event space of being able to drift within it, a twofold experience of coexistence within the painting and within my own unconscious. This particular dual space would have been literally unthinkable in Western art before Freud, and before Surrealism's visual inventions (though, as always, there are precursors). Perhaps, with the ingestion of pop-Buddhism (Budd-lite), meditation, and yoga, we—a contested Western "we"—are ever more adept at entering these dual states. This dream of drifting within an event space is highly alluring and physically pleasurable, but it is a learned concept.

Referring to Pollock, Harold Rosenberg spoke of the transformation of painting into an existential drama, in which "what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event," and that "the gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation from value—political, aesthetic, moral."¹⁰ The action painter becomes an action figure, striking a blow for liberty, if not justice for all. (The) painting is where the artist, and the viewer in their wake, encounters liberty—at least metaphorically. This has become a deeply embedded desire for art.

*Nicki Greene
Sex Objects, 2009, Glazed porcelain, 4" x 8" x 2". Courtesy of the artist and [2nd floor projects], San Francisco.



*Matt Smith Chávez-Delgado
Frankenpainting, 2016, acrylic and acrylic ink on paper, 17" x 14". Courtesy of the artist

The Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS) at the University of California, Berkeley, one of the world's foremost institutes for research and programs on South Asia, works with faculty members, graduate students, community members, private institutions, and non-profit organizations to both deepen understanding of the region and create new generations of scholars of South Asia. South Asia Research Notes (SARN) is published by ISAS to promote dialogue and exchange between scholars who work in interdisciplinary fields related to South Asia, as well as to convey to the wider public the variety of exciting projects going on at Berkeley. It is published annually every Spring. Its e-version is available at southasia.berkeley.edu/publications.

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HOW ART CAN BE THOUGHT COMPELLINGLY INTERROGATES THE ART WORLD'S LANGUAGES OF DIFFERENCE AND ITS EDUCATIONAL APPARATUSES IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY ARE DEPLOYED AND HOW WE CAN TURN THEM ON THEIR SIDES TO EFFECT A DECOLONIZATION BOTH OF ART AND ART PEDAGOGY. WITH ALLAN DESOUZA'S INCISIVE STRATEGIES FOR CREATING CHANGE, THIS BOOK IS A MUST-READ FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN INCREASING MEANINGFUL DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN ART AND ITS INSTITUTIONS.

STEVEN NELSON, ART HISTORY & AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES,
DIRECTOR OF THE AFRICAN STUDIES CENTER, UCLA

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