



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Critical Studies in Art & Design Education
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Publisher / distributor details:	Intellect Books, PO Box 862, Bristol, BS991DE
Publication / release date:	Second edition (paperback), May 2008
ISBN number (if applicable):	9781841502052
Price:	£14.95

Review:

The terminology used to describe the area this book addresses is telling: 'complementary', 'contextual', 'critical', 'cultural'. A string of 'c' words often raising heckles in arts education, from students and staff alike. 'Complementary' assumes a kind of adjunct to practice, 'contextual' a perhaps default socio-historical foundation for it, whilst 'critical' can slip between critiques of practice and critiques of, well, anything really, through 'theory', an already nebulous zone in itself. 'Cultural', as Raymond Williams has already shown, is perhaps unhelpfully one of the most sprawling words in the English language.

This spread of terms illuminates the way in which critical studies for arts teaching is currently not a fixed set of values or practices, something reflected in this collection of papers from the Journal of Art and Design Education (JADE). As apposite metaphors, they range from the provocational to the righteous - justified or otherwise - to the outdated, possibly a required field in an area often accused of irrelevance. There are many instances when the justification and context within these papers could have been stronger. For instance, David Thistlewood's article contains some strange allusions to the often morally ambiguous lives of artists (Gauguin is given as an example). I began to assume this was a pastoral concern for younger students, but became unsure, as he extends this to describing the surrealists' pre-occupations as 'unhealthy', using an almost Victorian language of contagion that seems subjectively wide of the point. Leslie Perry troublingly writes of 'pure knowledge' and 'pure art', without, as I see it, a proper grounding. What worries me is the possibility that those who already do so may point the finger at contextual studies providers who themselves lack the ability to contextualise. Thistlewood's bibliography is a single note pointing towards Berger and Mohr's *Another Way of Telling*. I'm unsure how he'd fare under his own assessment with this. Nick Stanley's call to employ the

language of theme parks will doubtless enrage those who rail against the hegemony of the language of capital, and have traditionally seen Art School as a place which can simultaneously resist and re-energise such spaces. Yet there are doubtless those who will welcome the attempt to engage students on more familiar terrain: what this book occasionally lacks in structural coherence, it gains in the range of propositions it makes.

The provocational positions I find most engaging, as critical studies is an area in need of constant revolution. David Thistlewood's 'radical heresies' are, firstly, that critical studies should not necessarily inform practice, and, secondly, that practice should sometimes serve critical studies. I can already hear the gasps, some I think justifiably alarmed at the potential for 'radical heresy no.1' to turn into a green light for pedagogical self-indulgence. However, I do think that Thistlewood's urging could create a space for experiment and a type of engagement with practice which isn't merely our first 'c' word, the 'complementary'. This would have to be carefully managed though. He also points to students as future consumers of art, and although he isn't referenced, Bourdieu's ideas around gaining cultural capital ghost this argument. This other 'heresy', the unspeakable truth that few of our students become highly innovative practitioners, is gladly brought into the open here. 'Cultural capital', as Bourdieu knew in both theory and practice, is a transferrable, socially-mobilising skill. The points where this text and many of its authors encourage the theoretical and visual literacy of students through pedagogy is the strand that I find the most congenial. To enable students to decode images in galleries without the anchoring texts and narrowing interactive gallery guides is surely both a way of giving them critical autonomy and of re-approaching their own various practices.

Sue Cox's paper is about primary education and is less relevant for the purposes of this review. This said, it is highly informative, as is Nicholas Addison's praiseworthy defence of teaching Semiotics within the Secondary Art and Design curriculum. This is very welcome. I know from an FE/HE perspective that it would make my work vastly simpler. We need a gentle slope, propelling students into more complex understandings, rather than a brick wall for them to painfully hit during the first or second year of a degree.

This book, although with its weak spots, is a welcome addition to an under-discussed and thorny area. Maybe with further discussion, our 'c' words could be reconciled, or turned into 'r' words, as a set of *reflexive repertoires* for teaching the cultural issues which penetrate and surround art and design making. Many of the papers here make worthwhile interventions to that end. If all the strong points made could be taken into consideration, perhaps we could move towards a layered delivery of critical studies within art and design which can simultaneously provide for future producers, consumers, practitioners and theorists.