

**Joining the conversation,  
how teachers and students can engage with contemporary art as equals**

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*The following text represents the introduction to a presentation that engages young people in a dialogue around contemporary art practice. The remainder of the presentation takes the form of a discussion of a number of artworks, documentation of which will be shown to the participants. These artworks, in the view of the author of this text, represent a number of different ways in which contemporary artists have addressed ideas surrounding dialogue, communication and conversation within their practice. The aim of this presentation is to stimulate a conversation around the notion of art as conversation, or exchange, and to encourage participants to discover that they can have a part to play in this ongoing conversation.*

Hello and welcome.

My name is Alison Cronin. I am a practising artist, and arts facilitator from a rural region of South West Ireland. I have worked as Schools and Youth Coordinator at West Cork Arts Centre in Skibbereen for the past 7 or 8 years. My work there involves regular engagement with the worlds of contemporary art practice and both formal and non-formal education. I run programmes for primary and second-level schools as well as working with young people outside of school contexts.

Most of our programmes are based around our gallery programme, which features regular exhibitions from local, national and international artists. So I spend a lot of time figuring out ways to engage young people with the contemporary art passing through our gallery, and I've found that contemporary art practice and education, when they are of a high quality, have one key factor in common, although often expressed or delivered in very different ways. Both sectors are, or should be, interested in creating a sense of exploration or enquiry into our world, and our lives. Essentially, they should be a creating of knowledge.

Through this presentation I want to explore how looking at and considering contemporary art can develop our ability to question, and learn about the world. Alternative forms of education that emphasise our own creation of knowledge, are closely linked to many of the approaches found in contemporary art practice. This is an idea that has been explored by many artists, thinkers and educators over the past decade, and has given rise to what has become known as an educational turn in contemporary art practice.

I will be explaining briefly about this educational turn to give some context to my approach, but my main aim is to explore how both knowledge, and contemporary art, can be seen as ongoing conversations to which we can all contribute something, and to encourage both teachers and students not to be afraid of having an opinion on contemporary art, even when they feel they know nothing about it. Knowledge is constantly changing, as is the art world. The sheer amount of artwork being produced worldwide today could be enough to put us off even beginning to attempt to understand. New discoveries are made, new theories proposed, debated, exhausted, and then we move on to the next big thing. Schoolbooks and curricula are constantly being updated to reflect this changing knowledge. Science would often like us to think of 'facts' as definitive and immutable, when in reality they are constantly changing.

Within this mutable, constantly shifting knowledge, we can find a space for all of us to get involved. If facts are not fixed then education is about more than learning, or memorising, the facts given to us, which may well become out of date before we have a chance to use them. Education instead should be providing us with the tools to discover and explore the world for ourselves. It becomes a conversation that each of us can contribute to or have an opinion on. I see contemporary art practice as an important tool providing us with a way to engage with this conversation; a making visible of a thought process.

As an art educator lucky enough to work in a contemporary art institution, I can explore ideas without the pressures of exams to prepare for, or a syllabus to fulfil. This is not to say, however, that I can ignore these needs completely. I work with schools on a regular basis, and teachers would not return to work with us, year after year, if what we offered was not supporting their requirements. I believe that exposure to contemporary art experiences, delivered in a way that places as equal a value on our contributions (as facilitators, students or teachers), as the 'professional' artwork presented to us, can develop the confidence in understanding and responding to the world around us, as well as to contemporary art practice, that a good education should be aiming for. Our programme at West Cork Arts Centre reflects this through our annual Youth exhibition, allowing work created over the year through schools and youth programmes, that respond to other exhibitions throughout the year, to be celebrated in the same venue and hung on the same walls.

I hope that this belief in the equal value of all our contributions will be reflected in the approach I am taking with this presentation. I will begin by explaining a little more about the background to these ideas and discussing why it is important to value our own opinions. I will then go on to introduce a number of artists and artworks that each in their own way address different types of conversation or forms of communication, and invite you all to engage with these artworks through discussion. Be assured that your responses cannot be wrong, you are not expected to know the histories of these artists or be able to reference others opinions, only to respond to the work with

your own thoughts and reactions, and, importantly, to attempt to explore those thoughts and reactions, and relate them to other experiences. In this way we will be creating our own knowledge over the course of this presentation, which may deviate from the artists original intentions, but will be no less valid for doing so. The artwork is a starting point, where we take it from there is entirely up to us.

First, some background. The art Critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term 'relational aesthetics' back in 1998. He was referring to a type of art in which artists were “modelling possible universes” and “learning to inhabit the world in a better way”, by which he means;

“an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private space” (Bourriaud, 1998).

In other words he is describing the type of art that engages with the world around it rather than being a separate entity, something to be placed in a museum and gazed upon. He describes the artwork as a space for encounter, and arena for exchange. It is this idea of an artwork as being a place in which we can encounter and exchange, a place in which to hold a conversation, that is important, rather than being a definitive answer the artwork is more like an open question, that gets us talking and thinking.

This idea of art as an arena for exchange has led directly to the educational turn in art I mentioned before. Many of the projects associated with this 'turn' have sought to create events where conversation can take place – such as the unitednationsplaza project which classes itself as 'exhibition as school', open formats in which participants exchange ideas through discussion, aiming to increase the knowledge of all those involved, much as we aim to do here (unitednationsplaza, 2007). No awarding of marks, or certificates, nor anyone named as either teacher or student. They are aiming for an equality in which those involved in organising the school are merely enablers, creating a situation in which learning can take place, through exploration and experimentation.

This approach to education is inspired by the work of various writers and thinkers on education including, Paulo Freire and Jacques Ranciere, both of whom questioned conventional approaches to education, particularly in terms of where the power lies within the educational process. Friere suggests the traditional approach to education as being like a banking system in which the teacher 'deposits' knowledge in the student in the same way we might deposit money in the bank (Friere, 1996:52). The teacher owns the knowledge and the student, if they work hard, can receive this knowledge from them. This puts the teacher in the position of power. Friere's alternative to this is that the teacher and student explore questions or problems together through dialogue – in other words conversation.

Friere said; 'At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses, nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting together to learn more than they now know' (Friere, 1996:71). Applying

this principle to art education, it does not matter if you know nothing about contemporary art already when you come to look at it, you can still have a contribution to make to the conversation. Then perhaps, within that conversation, we all might find out something new, whether it be about the artwork, about the subject of the artwork, or about ourselves. We will be creating our own knowledge linked to the artwork, rather than being given knowledge about it that has already been formed, and does not really belong to us.

Jacques Ranciere, the other writer I mentioned also explored this idea in his book 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster'. He suggests that it is perfectly possible to teach something that you know nothing about. Which will be a great comfort to any teachers here that have little confidence in their knowledge of contemporary art practice. The teacher's role he sees as enabling the desire to learn. "Explication is the myth of pedagogy" he says (Ross, 1991: 67). Meaning that explaining something as the best means to teach is a false assumption. As we look at artworks today I will only offer as much explanation to begin with as is necessary considering we will be looking at images of artworks rather than actual artworks – so I would see this as a description rather than an explanation. If something is explained to us we are essentially being told what to think about it, instead of using our own minds to decide what we think.

As you progress through education you will be expected to think for yourselves, you will be expected to have opinions. If you go on to study art you will be expected to create your own artwork. The best way to begin this process is to start now. Why should your opinion and ideas around an artwork, either what you think of the quality of it, or what you think it is expressing, or trying to say, or what it suggests to you, be any less valid than your teacher's ideas, or my ideas, or the critic's, or the gallery owners', or the art collector's, or even the artist's ideas. Much of the meaning in any artwork exists only in the mind of the person viewing it, without a viewer it is simply an object or image alone in a room. It is as a starting point for your thoughts or feelings that it begins to have value. This is why the value of an artwork is so hard to pin down- it is not in the value of the materials, but in the value attached to it by those viewing it, a subjective value.

Any artwork is a series of relationships, formal relationships within the work itself, its relationship to the space in which it is exhibited, to other artworks, historical or contemporary, to the time and context in which it is created, to the artist who created it, and, its relationship to the viewer, that's you or me. Within each of these relationships meaning can be found. This is where Bourriaud's term relational art stems from. The philosophical question asks: If a tree falls in a wood and no-one is there to hear it does it still make a sound? You could also ask: If an artwork is not seen by anyone, does it still have meaning? The role of the viewer is important, any viewer - you and I.

The important thing here is that your views are expressed. This is what forms a conversation. We will be looking for connections, connections to other artwork, ideas, artforms, life experiences. Each connection adds another pathway to the map of meaning. The dialogue created between each of us stating our own views will enable each of us to learn as we hear different views from our own, perhaps

taking the conversation down avenues we had not previously thought of.

Monica Szewczyk, addressed this idea, in an article for e-flux journal on the art of conversation. She compares the potential of both art and conversation to create new worlds.

“Art and conversation share this space of invention, yet only conversation comes with the precondition of plurality that might totally undo the notion of the creative agent” (Szewczyk, 2009).

She is referring to the fact that a conversation involves more than one person, more than one point of view, and that in participating in such an activity the individual is surrendering control of the outcome, by sharing that power with the other participants in the conversation. Those that step into that 'arena of exchange' that Bourriaud's relational aesthetics describes are sharing the power of knowledge creation, and that is what I want you to do today. The discussion of each artwork will focus on the relationships it suggests to us as viewers, and ways in which it references the idea of the artwork as a conversational space, beyond this framework I do not know where the conversation will lead.

A conversation, as in the making of art, is a process without a predetermined outcome. If the outcome were known, why bother having the conversation, or making the artwork, in the first place? Conversation by its very nature requires us all to surrender control, as the artist does when they put their artwork out in public for each of us to respond to differently. We can only control our own contribution to the conversation not other peoples, it is truly a group endeavour in which we all become equal. To quote Friere again, we will be “people who are attempting together to learn more than they now know.”

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