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Other Lessons Learned From Relational Aesthetics

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In 1966, John Latham, an instructor at Saint Martins College of Arts and Design, checked out Clement Greenberg's book *Art and Culture* from the school library, a rather routine and uneventful task (de Duve, 1993/2007). What followed was a not-so-predictable consideration of the ideas that Greenberg had presented in his book. While the thoughts of Greenberg were consumed, the process by which this was done was rather unconventional. Working collaboratively, John Latham and his accomplices tore pages from the book and then chewed them into mushy lumps of pulp. The masticated chunks of literature were then deposited into a glass jar, which was then returned to the Library a year later. Not amused, the school fired Mr. Latham, but the piece, *Still & Chew*, left its conceptual mark in the practice of art (de Duve, 1993/2007).

Still & Chew presents the viewer with little to excite the senses, no really lovely objects that could inadvertently distract us into a cursory and topical approach to exploring the work. What we have instead are the peculiarities of the event and the actions of the participants to consider, the story of the work. Exploring the story means engaging with possibility and resisting a complacent and fixed understanding of the work where meaning becomes managed. When we attempt to manage meaning, we run the risk of building evidence and not ideas. For example, if our investigation of *Still & Chew* begins with the torn pages from the text and the jar of pulpy words, we frame our examination around things. We could discuss the form, texture, and composition of these objects, but eventually we would reach a non-place and inadvertently crush the pithy and oppositional critique Latham was engaging in (Walker Art Center, 2008). The lack

of objecty-ness within *Still & Chew* provides us with the opportunity to do more than just manage the burden of gaining a correct understanding through an examination of things; we can instead put our efforts toward considering the layers of ideas in the work (LeWitt, 1967). When we move our focus from the objects to the stories, we come to realize that objects and things are often more interesting when they are supporting cast members of the ideas and not the lead performers.

Critique often infers finality, something we experience at the end of the project, but within Latham's work, critique also became a collective experience. When Latham collaborated with other individuals, those willing and those not so willing, communication and exchange created a framework that opened up dialogue around the role, function, and power of critique (Kester, 1985/2005). When a critique is applied like a sticker, we miss the potential for it to activate continued inquiry and dialog. With *Still & Chew*, Latham did not apply the sticker; instead he illustrated how complex the idea of critique can be if "viewed as a kind of conversation; a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view" (Kester, 1985/2005, p. 79). Learning through collective experiences can inform and broaden perceptions and constructions of meaning. We don't need advanced degrees or privileged knowledge to explore critique as a concept, but we do need collaborative engagement, careful listening, and thoughtful conversation (Pasternak, 2012).

It is the disruption of the customary through a collective experience that fosters engagement beyond appreciation. The solicitation for participation in post-studio art practices rearranges the viewer-artist relationship from one where we respond to a finished work with our sticker of approval or disapproval, to one where dialogue creates, activates, and sustains meaning (Thompson, 2012). As a teacher I am always seeking ways to do just this in my classroom, push my students to look beyond the safety of the things in art, and to take risks with their collective inferences. Unfortunately, I rarely afford myself the time needed to do the very thing I ask my students to do. I build my curriculum alone with texts and periodicals and then present the material to my students, safely containing their responses to the finished product. Rich tangential threads of thought do result from many of our class discussions, but I often wonder how incorporating unexpected responses to my curriculum before instruction would change how and what I teach. Even the words on these pages are already designated content and can only provoke a response as a finished product. So I propose the idea below, wondering if there are others who want to expand their practice beyond the safe confines of their instructional spaces to incorporate aspects of relational aesthetics into their practices.

Proposal | 9 × 12 in. Curriculum MashUp

Curriculum MashUp is a call for participation utilizing the format of dialogue on paper to create a library of ideas through collaborative engagement. As a process-based call for participation, collaborators would build up, not edit down content, so that the ideas developed are able to grow into layers of possibilities that can be utilized as needed. Those interested in participating would submit a lesson plan on a sturdy sheet of paper that can fit into a 9 × 12 in. manila envelope. I use the term “lesson plan” loosely, as the document needs to only reference an idea for instruction that you’re curious about. It can be a simple question like: “How can I blend critique into my curriculum so my students use it?” or maybe it is a lesson that you want to breathe new life into. The document you submit would then be sent to other community members who would then add to the ideas on the page using various 2-D techniques and processes. When your conversation with the ideas ends, send it back in to Curriculum MashUp, and the material will be sent out again. This process will continue until the document is saturated with ideas. The completed MashUp will be scanned and posted. The original works will then be archived in books that can be checked out of the MashUp library. Inquiries and submissions for the MashUp should be directed to Rachael Delaney at rdelane3@msudenver.edu.

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