

Learning from Dr. Dre: Teaching Aesthetics and Art Theory to Artists

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Abstract

A major part of the work of most people in the academy consists of teaching, and theory teachers in art schools do not differ here from the main paradigm. Supervision is everywhere an essential part of teaching, although in art schools its role is even bigger, following the studio tradition of art teaching, where teachers often spent whole days working with their (e.g. painting) students. As an art school/(university) theory teacher, I also in some sense co-design the student's graduate work, as I take part in such a fundamental way in the building of the theses. Why is this? Students at the thesis level are less 'ready' for writing the theses in art schools than in science universities, following the fact that their theoretical studies often take place only after BA level – and still even then theory is just a margin in their education. This leads to a different role for the teacher, who has to turn into a living library providing ideas, concepts and materials during the process. Can we think of the work of the art school theory teachers as something at least closely analogous to the work that an executive producer does? Executive producers are central for example in rap music, where they in some extreme cases engage in creating the whole musical track for the rapper. It is not that we'd think that they are the artists, but one can hardly underestimate their role in the process. I take the analogy of supervision and executive production as a reflective mirror for my inquiry on supervision. I hope to produce reflections and questions needed for a further study of theoretical supervision in art schools/ universities.

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The student walks into the room. She is in the middle of a painful process of changing sex/gender. She also hates academic writing and desires to write poetically. She, increasingly he, has already worked out a series of artworks, where she goes into depth on this huge change in her/his life. The thing is that s/he has no texts s/he likes. "Have you ever read Hélène Cixous? I ask. "As I think you are very theoretical, there you would find another way writing than the main academic style you dislike." No? Well, what have you read, or is there something else that you have found that could support your work?" "No." I walk around the room and watch my bookshelf and think carefully what I could offer, something that could work for this type of an artist and something that would not just stimulate resistance. Besides Judith/Jack Halberstam's books I pick up some essays on sex/gender that I have printed for another supervision project – and I so hope that the student will find at least something that works. There is hardly anything one could force students to read in an art university, and there is no canon, there is no shared methodology.

This is a normal day at the office for me, really. I teach theory to artists, i.e. film makers, painters, designers and performance artists. Their topics have throughout the years varied from tropicality to shamanism, from textile art to museum cars, and the methodologies have ranged from analytic philosophy to semiotics, from Indian philosophy to phenomenology, queer theory and fashion studies.

It is not that someone, after four years of studying philosophy or sociology, could walk in and have a methodology, a theoretical position already at hand. Students at my job have a high level of artistic practice, but usually no research methods, no written sources and no idea on how to posit themselves theoretically, which makes the whole supervision dialogue very challenging from a theoretical point of view. (I read as broadly as I can to keep up with the situation.) Some have written hardly anything since they left high school so I have to revamp them to think that you could really do something with writing. Many of my students are into artistic research, and even if I teach three courses of theory in the MA programme I work in, theory is somehow also often just a supplement for the students, something that can be cut-and-pasted when one needs 'theoretical support' for artistic work, or something to play around with freely. Some students think of theory as a defence system, like karate, which they can use to shield off critique or prejudice. They want to use theory to explain what they do to a curator or a critic – or someone who is against what they do.

Sometimes, in the best case (for the teacher, who loves theory), the theoretical text of course also becomes an organic part of the artistic, curatorial work at stake. Some students also pick up theory as their main thing, and so their work changes. In that case, the end result of our dialogue is sometimes just text, and some of my students have left art behind them. They have become scholars only. But this is not the typical story. I recall, when I taught at science universities, that any kind of interest presented by a student would have meant a certain set of books read and methods chosen. There the student who came in with an interest in gender/sex came in with a bag full of books and s/he knew already how to approach the topic in writing. But art students have a different background. We, me and them, are not doing the same, which would be the case if we were having a dialogue in a department of aesthetics or cultural studies.

In some sense, when I was teaching at a science university, I showed what I do, or explained it, and the student attempted to do the same. You could think that it was like the mimetic tradition in old art schools. I showed the model. The student followed. But in art schools the students use theory for their own work nearly always in some sense as amateurs, as this is – this is a typical comment from them – 'not really their stuff'. As a theorist, in these dialogical moments, I of course learn a lot from my students too. I am getting knowledge straight from the scene and I learn about new movements, institutional problems that young artists face, and from time to time also about practical problems in art production. This has made me wiser in the arts. After 14 years in this job, I also perceive rapidly the philosophical potentials in the work of the student.

Working as a theory teacher in an art school, one really has to keep an open mind, methodologically speaking. I have to try to grasp every work and consider what theoretical material would be good reading for the student, and what would be something the student would be able to grasp. Often, to get the process going, I really need to think what could be "inspiring". And I have to – this definitely nails my role – have a very broad library in my head, and be very relaxed with different (often unorthodox) ways of applying theory. I have witnessed a (great) video work on Heidegger where two girls

were eating chewing gum. I have seen a variety of theories becoming installations. “This light here is Heidegger’s *Lichtung*.” “Max, the tapestry thing, its about Hegel.”

And the process of supervising... What happens? We discuss. A lot. Following the way painting teachers have for centuries spent days with their students in the teaching studios, there is an expectance that the theory teacher also will spend a lot of time with the students. Sometimes we have spicy debates, as artists are often fanatical about their life projects, and some of them really have a hard time accepting critical reflection. One can also say that art culture is more open to emotional expression than academic culture. Often our discussion is just about finding texts which mirror the practice of the student, or sheds light on it. The students often desire to find a theoretical mirror image for their work. I suppose these things are really universal. But not me. I want to see more: argumentation, interpretation or then a way of using the texts artistically. Anyway, I am a living library, I am a method bank, and I am a co-traveller, maybe a bit like a co-artist, a second author of a manuscript...

I studied 93 credits of pedagogy, in two different programmes and on one summer course, but I did not receive any teaching on supervision. Also Ian Dowey notes in his article “Reflections on Academic Supervision” (2008) the nearly total lack of education for supervision. It was sometimes referred to, but the scenario was always the same, and it was really, really simplified (and idealistic, one could say): you had a teacher, who had all the knowledge, but who needed pedagogical skills, to somehow ‘relocate’ this knowledge from the head of the teacher to the head of the student. But that is not what my work is about, and I doubt how good this formula is for understanding any supervision. Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson (2014, 158) say that “the supervisor embodies and mediates institutional and disciplinary cultures, conditions and conventions”, and this idea of the role of a ‘guide’ to a whole world of scholarship is of a good reminder when the student follows the supervisor into this field, but in my case the role is still something different (too). I suppose these things are really universal.

The etymology of supervision, which unites the Latin *super* (above) and *videre* (to see), tells us at last something about the practice: it is the act or function of overseeing something or somebody, of course also about providing knowledge to someone, helping to organise tasks, maybe even enhance motivation, and, as university work is also about assessing students, about monitoring activity and results. One side of supervision seems to be lost, and that is the one I started the paper with. Where and how can we start discussing it, finding a way to frame it, so that we can grasp its possibilities? I have always been in favour of finding somewhat away analogies to help in reflection. And here we are thinking about this way of sharing the trip with the student, taking part in it. How about turning to rap music? Why rap? Since starting to listen to rap, I have always heard more than in other types of music about the role of the executive producer, and often, as a rap fan, I have recognised, while listening, that this must be produced by a producer I “know”. They often leave a recognisable trace on the “product”.

Watching the excellent hip hop history on Netflix, *Hip Hop Evolution* (Shad et al 2016-2019), I could not help getting back to admiring Dr. Dre, who produced many of my early adulthood’s favourite records. I have never been a fan of Eminem, but his sound and overall image is a product of Dre’s sensitivity. 50 Cent, Snoop Dog, Kendrick Lamar, Raekwon from Wu Tang Clan, Jay-Z, Gwen Stefani and Mary J. Blige (Ro 2007) also have “works” which strongly show the presence of Dre. There is a certain atmosphere there, a way of handling the beat, cutting-edge rhythm and the rappers often seem to rap a bit

more sharply when “working” for Dre. There are noises hijacked from traffic, radio and/or horror films, which intensify the thick and heavy texture of the soundscape.

I can imagine Eminem walking in, and Dre starting to work on background and the holistic life work. Am I like Dre? Someone said that he could see that I had been the supervisor of a thesis work. Are we talking about the same thing as in producing rap music, the touch of a producer(/supervisor)? At least the example of the producer takes us further than the hierarchical anti-creative scenarios presented in discussions of supervision in pedagogy.

“[...] Dre had the awestruck kid in his home studio. Dre sat near the Solid State Logic 4000E/G console, playing a dopey horn-laden track based on Labi Siffre’s ‘I Got The.’ Em created a hook (‘Hi, my name is Slim Shady.’) and lyric that described him and Dre as a team. Dre played another instrumental and Em had something for that, too, about smoking weed, taking pills, and dropping out of school. [...] Dre waited until Em finished a jeremiad against white Detroit group the Insane Clown Posse [‘When Hell Freezes Over’] then played another track. ‘Are you diggin’ this?’ he asked. ‘Yeah, I got a rhyme to spit to it.’” (Ro 2007, 159-160)

Someone who is doing their thing walks in and I start working on bringing that thing onto a second level, at least theoretically speaking, adding material and knowledge which the person does not possess. If Dre comes with beats and backgrounds, I come with methods and texts. One could say that I “play”, as a test (as I have seen the student’s genderdriven works of art) Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and the student realises that this is exactly what they need for their “rap”. Or, the student comes out with a jeremiad against some of the class and race structures of the art world, and I start playing bell hooks’s *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* to support it. Like executive rap producers, for example Dre (who started DJing outside his house in his early teens; Ro 2007, 4-5), I have no education for supervision, but I have learned it the “hard way” (not in any way claiming that this “hard way” would be comparable to Compton, LA, even if I am from the working class myself) – not from the streets, but from the challenging neoliberal reality of today’s fast-paced university world, where colleagues drop out on sick leave following their burnout every year. The end result is controlled by me and Dr. Dre to quite an extent (he releases material he feels is ready, I say at some point that you can leave this in now), but it is always about someone else, the artist/rapper doing something on their own, having the voice.

I would not think of myself as a co-author, but to some extent I think we need to even ask this question: How much can a supervisor be a co-author? In all supervision there is a sense of co-production. In some forms of supervision, this takes a stronger role. For some readers, this might sound like taking away some of the Gloria of the student’s work, but if executive producing does not – many producers are famous for their work – why would supervision then do it? It is no big news that philosophers have a role in co-steering lives, life works and careers, as we know for example from the ancients’ “philosophical supervision” of rulers (Confucius, Aristotle). Moreover, the dialogical mode of working has been fetishised right from the beginning of written (Southern) European philosophy, just to recall Plato’s work (on Socrates, who he appropriated for his own purposes, like a rapper appropriates an already dead soul singer).

Theorists often work with artists in art schools, and many major names have made a career while working in art universities and colleges. One could mention here for example Peter Sloterdijk, Umberto Eco, Camille Paglia and Eugenio Trias, but the list is really

long. Still, we do not yet have any public or even scholarly, reflective account of the way we theorists have an impact on artists and art as supervisors. Has anyone, for example, studied how Eco, Paglia and Trias have affected their students artistic work, or their thinking? I suppose no.

And if, for example, John Dewey thinks he is ameliorating art by changing our conception of art and aesthetic experience (1980), could one think that I am ameliorating art already in this educational dialogue, right from the beginning, when it is still in the process of developing into a professional practice? What could ameliorative work here mean? Maybe helping the artist to become more reflective and conceptually bright in their vision? In Arthur Danto's (1964) footsteps, one could ask if this is the moment when art sometimes becomes philosophy, long before the touch of the professional world of art and its art histories and "theoretical atmospheres", where Danto traces it.

The art world builds a great deal on art school education. Dewey wanted to free artistic practices and (aesthetic) experience from the constraints of the art system. So, he focused on experience. On the other hand, his museum critique nailed the problem with art museums, which, at least in his time, (to use a rap term) "killed" art works by cutting off their relationship to the lived world. Here is maybe an opening for us, if we want to find a way of discussing and developing the idea of this supervision as executive production with the help of classics. In some sense, our canons, matrixes – journals with their referees – and overtly (in a Freudian manner) anal interpretations of texts do not maybe have that much in connection with the living/original ways of reading or writing philosophy. One could write a Deweyan institutional critique of the academy and ask what philosophy is really about and if the institution supports our philosophical needs. Classics are quite often read in a stiff and dead way – analogous to the way paintings were put on the walls in an archiving manner in the Louvre in Dewey's time. In a sense, teaching theory for artists is – I am borrowing this banal (but good) expression from rap music – about "keeping it real". Rappers sometimes say that they come from the street. Artists who turn to theory could say: I come from art! This affects their way of reading philosophical classics about art. When Descartes is horrified about his phenomenologically sceptical thoughts in the *Discourse on Method*, art students read the text as an account of the sheer craziness of his practical project of doubting everything in his life, more than science university students, who taxonomise the text (one could even say that in our business you do taxidermy to classics), and focus only on the epistemological outcome. In some sense, the artist reading has at least a complementary truth to it, as for example Descartes' text also is an anxiety-driven adventure (this literary model of rationalist doubt was probably taken from Teresa of Aquila), which nails the fact that suspecting everything in everyday life is not just a small intellectual 'choice', but a project which experientially takes us further in a shocking way if we really start to apply it (and this is what Descartes did).

I do not mean that I would like to accentuate any ideas of authenticity, but that many classics and key texts of philosophy are philosophical in a passionate, artistic way, and in a way that shows an experimental attitude. Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp", Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", and for example bell hooks' *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, are about care, fostering a position in a problematic environment, and even about creating a life philosophy, although in the academy the texts are often just analysed as complex webs of true and false notions, or well-working and problematic argumentation. Are we true to the originals? (We do not have to be, but it might be a

good question to ask.) The aforementioned texts have anyway made my students happy. And recycling them for a theoretical art world audience which is also practically perplexed by issues, and passionately working on them hands-on, starts again to sound like an analogy of rap music. Most aestheticians and art theorists know the work of Richard Shusterman, who in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Shusterman 1992) accentuates the way that rap music recycles old classics to make them groovy again – living art – and I have sometimes felt that the way philosophical texts find a novel role in the art world comes close to this. Susan Sontag becomes live again, from being a piece in the idea historical machinery, as artists struggle to keep their work living and resonating with contemporary culture and society, and in this way, I might be like a DJ in my work, as I help the texts to become read as lively companions in artistic and curatorial production. As the executive producer of rap music (for example Dr. Dre) recycles music, the theorist philosopher here works on recycling theory; theory which will for sure change in its new context (and change the context too).

It is of course about a broader issue in the art scene. Attending a panel discussion or reading an exhibition catalogue, one finds philosophy the most important partner for dialogue for contemporary artists, although it is surprising how little this dialogue has so far extended into for example aesthetics – as many artists only want to discuss politics, climate change and gender. At the same time, they often have, in art schools, already inhaled aesthetics and art theory, to become part of their work on a deep level, so it might be invisible in the end result. Aesthetics thus comes in sneakily. Often only the surface is tagged with theorists like Antonio Negri and Chantal Mouffe. To understand this relationship of teaching aesthetics in art schools and the end result of the work of successful artists is at least one thing we might want to note. I just read an interview where a student of mine who runs a rock band, talks like Adorno, who was the key figure of his thesis which I supervised. When one looks at the increasingly anti-consumerist discursive production of the band, I can see and feel my touch there, in the work, like an executive producer can see/hear their touch in a rap piece – not as strongly in this case, but still. In the end, exploring the role of the “executive producer” in supervision has to be conducted with an eye on ethics.

Iwan Dowie discusses neatly the challenge of keeping distance from interesting theses and accentuates the ethical need for leaving the student “ownership” of their work even while teaching nursing students (Dowie 2008, 36). Art university teaching, though, differs from most academic work, as the students do not actually, often already at the BA level, create sketchy inquiries to support their future work, nor do they simulate real work: their productions are already part of their life work, and sometimes presented in central venues for art. In the museum, the role of the supervisor will (maybe already during the studies) to some extent be taken by a curator/mediator of art. Kamler and Thomson (2014, 22) suggest that thesis writing is a task differing substantially from other scholarly writing practices, but even this becomes blurred in an art university environment, where the authors have more freedom for experimental writing and where the writing also often becomes an integral part of the artistic production. It might be that the only difference between their dissertation and their later work is the presence (and impact) of the supervisor.

Should we theorise this topic, work more to understand it, and should we try to find ways of developing it – and in the end: should we at least give a thought to giving more credit to the theory supervisor in arts? I think so, yes. I realize I am a kind of a “figure”

(and male, if that helps – already old enough too), and, at least partly following this, I think I get credited quite often in some sense, but not all of us receive as much of a response as we should. Thinking about the education of aestheticians, art educators and art theorists: how could we offer support for the students who will work one day with artists, if not in art schools then at least in the art scene? Could we build systematic methods for this or a good set of background facts to share on a course? Are there dangers in the practice, or problems that we have not yet mapped out in this preliminary analysis? Can we audit the practice? And how does one document this in a portfolio? Or should everything continue to happen organically as it has done for ages? Could one write a history of the theoretical supervision of artists and its impact? One could, and we might even need this idea historical work to really understand the impact of this work.

Theoretical art school teaching is all over the place when we engage with the products of education in arts, i.e. the art works. Yes, I think that there is a lot of interesting work to be done here, and I am sure more questions will arise if we take up the challenge. For this paper, the scope needs to be kept narrow, as this is more of a proposal. I have aspired to convince you that there is an issue at stake, which might connect teaching theory to artists to the executive production of rap music, and even more, lead, if studied well, to a deeper understanding of art, art education and supervision.

There's one more layer to it, of course. If the philosopher here enters artistic production as an executive producer, we might have to think of philosophy itself, now through this extension, as a form of art. As we have here made it clear, the role of the philosopher here is not just a source of inspiration. It is one collaborator in the production itself. I have only showed what the philosophy of education might need to learn from this. Philosophy itself, and maybe art too, might be the next fields, where the fruits of this might have to be discussed.

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(Thank you, Slavka Kopackova. This talk was originally presented in the conference Teaching Aesthetics in Presov 2019 at the University of Presov. Another less edited version, with a bit of a different outcome, will be published as a part of the proceedings of the conference.)

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