

**Research, Relativism, and Truth in Art**  
**By Dr. Dena Shottenkirk**

**1.1 Research**

Permeating the air as thoroughly as a perfumed teenager, ‘research culture’<sup>1</sup> has completely changed the climate of higher education. Where once sat securely entrenched academic routines and stolid, traditional practices geared to turning out generation after generation of rigorous-minded and disciplined graduates primed to enter their chosen professions in the wider world, there is now the new trend: post-graduate research.

Honing speciality skills and focusing on the creation of new knowledge that can then be disseminated to the larger public, the newly restructured universities are committed to creating not just well trained professionals, but researchers in every discipline who devote their time to creating a new perspective within their chosen field. The idea, generated somewhere in the non-locatable ether of European public policy making, encourages universities – no, ‘encourages’ is not a strong enough characterization – *ties the funding to* (now that’s a compelling form of encouragement) the numbers of researchers and research activity. In other words, the more researchers, the more money.

Fine. Sounds good in theory and probably in practice, too. The more really smart people, the better off we’ll all be. Certainly, encouraging people to think creatively and formulate new kinds of knowledge to then be shared with a broader circle in society is not a hard program to sign onto. But the relationship between the emphasis on research in the fine art field and the practice of actual art is not clear. Several questions come to mind. One can ask whether or not research in the fine arts is, in any way at all, parallel to research in the sciences. Clearly the latter has for long been a driving force in those fields in most universities. This is a question many people have asked, but I believe a more interesting question is whether or not an emphasis on research changes the kind of art that the academic world encourages its students to produce. In other words, how does an emphasis on research relate to contemporary art practice?

**1.2 A Brief History of the Avant-garde (in 6 ½ Paragraphs)**

What I intend to do in this article is examine how research fits with the broader practice of creating culture. And in order to do that, we must first recap just where we are in the history of culture, particularly the history of visual art. And in order to do *that*, we must (yawn, yawn) briefly revisit the wonderful past of the avant garde.

Some start it with Courbet, some with Impressionism. I prefer the Courbet starting point. Tradition was – in Brooklyn terms (my terms) –dissed. Courbet didn’t

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<sup>1</sup> The AHRC defines its mission in research as: ‘Support and promote high-quality and innovative research in the arts and humanities. Support, through programmes in the arts and humanities, the development of skilled people for academic, professional and other employment. Promote awareness of the importance of arts and humanities research and its role in understanding ourselves, our society, our past and our future, and the world in which we live. Ensure that the knowledge and understanding generated by arts and humanities research is widely disseminated for the economic, social and cultural benefit of the UK and beyond. Contribute to the shaping of national policy in relation to the arts and humanities.’

care if the so-called experts thought he was 'good'; rather, he wanted to accomplish the goals that he had set forth for himself: through less delicate brushwork and less constrained subject-matter Courbet was able to portray realistic people that gave a kind of sensibility that one could almost smell. Gone was the remoteness of academic painting. What we had was an invigorating slap in the face. It was life, pure and simple.

But those who came a decade or so after him were not content to follow in his tracks. They wanted their own truth, their own vision, and this freedom brought with it the desire to be the young Turks – the new boys on top. The famously patricidal need to over-throw the previous generation and establish themselves as the new powers-to-be was the motivating motif for the eighty or so years of the avant-garde. The Impressionists were disgorged by the post-Impressionists, and they were overthrown by the early twentieth century movements such as the Fauves, the Symbolists, and the Cubists. Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter on the German scene competed with the simultaneous movements in Russia e.g., the Constructivists and the Suprematists, and the Futurists in Italy. In all of these cases, the new was on top and the old was to be discarded.

This was the pattern to which the art movements adhered for several decades. Each generation saw itself replaced by the succeeding generation, and events conspired to speed that process. World War I thoroughly unnerved the world with all its unexplained loss of life. It was probably the western world's biggest dislocation since the plague of the fourteenth century.

But out of this dislocation, art responded with Dadaism: that wonderful movement that not only over-threw all previous art movements but, at least superficially, art itself. And then European society moved to Surrealism and the inner reality of dreams and psycho-analysis, to only again be displaced by another world war. Post-WWII moved the major part of the scene to America and we get the buoyant and large-scale Abstract Expressionism, which was then overthrown by Johns and Rauschenberg, which then morphed into Pop Art.

And after that it all gets murky. There's minimalism, but that is, some maintain, a mere re-working of what Malevich had figured out in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. But apart from that debate, the beginning of post-modernism is placed in the mid 1960s. Some place the moment with Robert Venturi's 'Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture'; but others think it has more to do with artists who felt free to draw from whatever sources they wanted – artists who knew the language of all kinds of artistic styles and, further, knew that they were all at their fingertips and available to them at will.

Whichever interpretation one chooses the results are much the same: the notion of linear patriarchal overthrow in the name of progress had ended. This is the important point: the notion of progress presupposed in the avant-garde had ended. Artists and architects could mix and match styles; all styles were equally valuable and, even more, what was now valuable was the mixing of those styles. Or they could re-cycle styles: 'neo' was one of the most frequent prefixes in aesthetic dialogue. Neo-expressionism, neo-pop, etc. An artist would choose his or her associated baggage e.g., if one wanted to be emotional and angst-ridden, one went for expressionism; if one wanted to avoid such emotionalism and lean toward the smart, one went for conceptual (neo-Duchamp); etc. The conveyor belt of history was fluid and fast.

### 1.3 Relativism in Post-modernism

Much like the quotation that is part of mannerism, post-modernism adopts an implicit commitment to intellectual decision making. The interesting argument behind this is that intellectual and hence conscious choices are superior to the mere brays of peer pressure. We don't, in other words, have to follow just whatever the crowd of the moment is doing. We can sit back and think about which language we like and deliberately choose the baggage that comes with that choice. As I said, if one goes for emotionalism and the gut-wrenching, then one would choose neo-expressionism; if we like Dadaism, then we do the new version in conceptual art; if we like Russian Constructivism, then we do its new version in political street art. It was like shopping in a big mall: you got to choose which store you went into.

The epistemological point of view that underlies this is relativism. There is no absolute right or wrong; post-modernism promises free no-obligation combinations. To-mate-toe, to-mat-toe. No reason to choose. One point of view is ultimately as good as another. It just depends on your taste.

What all of this gives us is a discarding of idealism, not in the philosophical sense of a theory that prioritizes ideas over matter, but in the ordinary sense of the word that claims an allegiance to higher aspirations and goals. Post-modernism was creating a history of art that was multi-faceted and written in parallel histories, instead of the linear history that modernism had offered. The notion of objective and universal truth was relinquished in favour of multiple versions of truth; truth is abandoned in favour of a tolerance for a diversity of opinions.

How that is an instance of epistemological relativism might not be obvious at first glance, but upon reflection it becomes clear: if anything goes, then standards and criterion are discarded because there is no clear and absolute standard to which we are wedded. There are many ways to do things, many standards of judgment that can be adopted, many viewpoints are tolerated. All things are relative to a point of view, not to an objective standard.

The consequence of this is that there are no absolute wrongs. But this also takes with it the ultimate notion of progress. For progress is a non-relative term; we all agree that certain things constitute a move forward. In other words, the notion of progress presupposes the notion of truth. But relativism can give no such absolutist promise.

### 1.4 Art as Knowledge

What then is the role of art and what is its relation to truth?

There has long been the suspicion that art is decoration. Hume, in his 'On the Standard of Taste' argues as much, as do almost all empirical philosophers. The idealists (Kant, Hegel, Croce), though fuzzy in their metaphysics (I would argue), at least have a sense of the value of art, though their notion is that it is an exemplification of the mental which (to them) is far more real than the material.

But there have been a few notable non-idealists in the recent history of aesthetics who have argued that art is knowledge. Art gives us, Wittgenstein argues, not merely a warm bath feeling – it also gives us substantial ideas. We learn about life when we look at art. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Nelson Goodman, and Richard Wollheim were only a few of those in the twentieth century to also argue, each in their own specific ways, that art is something more than pleasure and decoration. And it seems to me like a good argument. I don't just get a cosy feeling when I look

at art: I actually walk away thinking something different about life and about myself because I have looked at the world through someone else's eyes. Looking at the world through someone else's eyes is a kind of knowledge-transfer. I have learned something, sometimes something profound.

But we are now faced with a conundrum. For if we grant that relativism is our epistemological framework, (which it is in post-modernism) what kind of knowledge can simultaneously be granted within that framework? Don't we then merely have competing opinions and never genuine knowledge? For the latter presupposes something close to universal consent and in relativism there is no universal consent. So where are we?

### 1.5 Art and Dissent

In the era of modernism, with its conjoined beliefs in progress and truth, art served as the protest voice: the voice of dissent and truth against the forces of obsolescence and deceit. When the standard point of view became too entrenched and no longer accurately expressed the world as it was, art stepped in to explode the falsity of the old and replace it with a shiny new truth. Art was the brave voice – the shaman, as it were. Opposed at first only to be ultimately accepted at last. The avant-garde was like a market corrective in the world of culture.

How did that work in the era of post-modernism? Would it be possible for art to claim the pedestal of truth-teller? Clearly, in an era of relativism where truth had been discarded in favour of differing points of view, *all equally 'valid' though mutually exclusive with one another*, art would not have that position. It might be wild and irreverent still, or it might be shocking, but it could not maintain the relevance that it had during the avant-garde. There was no more truth to be claimed within a world loyal to relativism.

And art became perhaps more like fashion and fun. Post-modernism turned art into a branch of consumer culture and truly Hume's point of view was vindicated: art was taste. Some people liked expressionism just like some people liked chocolate. And some didn't. Big deal. It was just a matter of taste.

Whether one argues that post-modernism too is dead or whether one argues that it continues in its conveyor belt of choices is an important decision, for the role of art and its relation to truth in society is dependent on that decision. For if post-modernism is still in sway, relativism too is in sway and so truth is not relevant and art cannot provide that which does not exist.

This, obviously, makes post-modernism and the avant-garde incompatible. That has often not been recognized, but if terms are to be used consistently, the two terms cannot be thought of as coterminous. The avant-garde is a replacing of the past generation's stylistic innovations in the linear history of modernism that presupposes a progressive claim to truth. Post-modernism, on the other hand, is based on relativism and gives up claims to truth and to a linear progression. There is no more avant-garde in post-modernism. In other words, art is not the town crier in post-modernism.

But if, on the other hand, one argues that post-modernism is over and that we have entered a new phase, then art's relation to truth is up for grabs. If, for example, we have entered a cultural phase where knowledge is large-scale and a socially agreed upon phenomenon (though its 'constructed' nature is still debatable), then art must play some kind of role to that body of knowledge. It could, of course, be a negative relationship: e.g., it could be irrelevant to the body of knowledge, which

would be the traditional and conservative, scientific (and Humean) point of view. In other words, it could be that knowledge is equated to scientific knowledge only and that anything else is just non-empirical nonsense.

Or it could be that art participates in and adds to the fabric of knowledge. Artistic endeavours would be seen as adding to not only a cultural practice but to a culture and thus to a people's identity and their view of themselves. And that is a form of knowledge.

In this choice between the two competing views I don't hesitate. I would argue that post-modernism is over and that what art is now focused on, in the increasingly mono-culture of the world, is an amalgamation of the styles of modernism, formerly split up and used in a contrasting mix and match way in post-modernism, but now into a more unified language of visual symbolism. This symbolism communicates standard messages that vary not much more than the standard symbolism used in advertising. We all know what visual language is about. And that language is used in fairly uniform ways, thanks in large part to the ubiquitousness of art fairs, commercial venues, and publications. The world is getting smaller and the language is getting more universal.

So what role does art now have to truth? Is art the outside agitator as it was in the avant-garde of modernism? It is a little hard to imagine art resuming that role in today's very commercial world. That is not a (pointless) cry to abandon capitalism – it is only a recognition that the world is increasingly fast in its ability to absorb any comment and make it into a product. Communications are fast and trends sprout and spread, and someone is always there clever enough to figure in a profit. That quick move to commercial viability and mass consumerism absorbs very quickly the point of view, however initially radical or oppositional, into the fabric of everyday life. Outsider becomes insider in a flash. So the role of art is obviously less oppositional and turbulent, since those poses are so immediately turned into friendly consumables.

## 1.6 Conclusion

I am now in a position to answer the question initially posed in this article: how the research culture in universities fits with the broader practice of creating culture.

Research grants are given to those institutions on the basis of the numbers of post-graduate students actively engaged in research activities. But would the funding of those research projects conceivably turn on decisions such as which project is more likely to produce knowledge that is useful to a larger audience?

That kind of majoritarian criterion is certainly not going to yield to minority nuisance viewpoints. This is especially true if government councils have any oversight role regarding the content of the research projects. That of course is hypothetical and in the future but the issue is clear: if governments are funding on the basis so-called knowledge creation and if *that* is defined in terms of usefulness, then that bodes not too well for agitator art. But it is also a real possibility that governments will fund with no eye to the content of the research done at any particular institution. In that case, universities would be free to fund whatever research they thought would advance general knowledge acquisition.

But that leads us to the main point: if we presuppose that knowledge acquisition is possible, then we are committed to saying that there is a consensus as to what constitutes knowledge and therefore what constitutes truth. Let me put the matter more cogently: if we agree that there is such a thing as "knowledge" we are

saying, necessarily, that we have consensus about what is called “knowledge” and therefore we are claiming that truth exists. If we are saying that truth exists, then we are disavowing the reign of epistemological relativism, for relativism claims that no consensus on truth can be obtained.

So where are we at this point? Firstly, the avant-garde died with modernism. The claim that art had on truth during their town-crier phases in modernism is also long gone. Also gone with modernism was the claim for progress and the philosophical beliefs that underlie progress i.e., objectively substantiated truth. Modernism presupposed the ability to distinguish between truth and falsity.

Secondly, post-modernism is dead. And concomitant with post-modernism was epistemological relativism and a lack of belief in objectively substantiated truth. Post-modernism saw lots of parallel universes running all very fast right next to each other, non-warring but mutually exclusive. There was “my truth” or “your truth” but no truth in general; no knowledge in general.

Finally, a new phrase is being entered. We are becoming a more homogenous and mono-culture world. Standards are congealing, and arguments are put forth, in the political realm as well as the cultural, that appeal to universal rights and truths. Relativism is falling away.

And the research culture fits well with this new non-relativism, because research presupposes, again as in modernism, that there is a truth to be found. Further, it presupposes that that truth is useful for a wider public. It is, in essence, an attempt to raise the educational water-mark for the whole society, and not just to super-educate an elite.

Importantly, the new emphasis on ‘research culture’ calls all kinds of research ‘knowledge’, and does not limit it to the empirical sciences as many in the past would have done. This point of view is probably an instance of the epistemological point of view called ‘reliabilism’ e.g., we call it knowledge when we (‘we’ defined as the vast, vast majority of people) believe that it is reliable information. Pretty common sense. So, social sciences give us knowledge as does research in fine arts. To research is to research something about the world, to formulate things anew, and then pass that back into the world. And, I’m sure, to the post-mortem pleasure of Goodman, Wittgenstein, etc., art is finally counted as knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Exactly what form this knowledge takes needs to be unpacked; the subject hopefully of an upcoming book.