Decolonisation as process: Rethinking Critical and Contextual studies

Rina Arya

There has been much talk since 2011 about decolonialising (or decolonising) the curriculum within Higher Education. Its impetus has been strengthened by the Rhodes Must Fall movement in 2015, and more recently by the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which led to a spate of global protests against institutional racism. What followed were efforts to remove or damage public monuments that were part of the history of racial oppression. The action of identifying a problematic symbol or ideology and then taking steps to remove it constitutes one of the main approaches involved in decolonialising the curriculum. This paper examines the role that Critical and Contextual Studies can have in the process of decolonialising Art and Design curricula within Higher Education.

In Britain, within Art and Design education in Higher Education, whether in the Art School or university, the historical and theoretical part of the degree course is comprised of Critical and Contextual Studies; the other part consisting of studio practice.[i] Overarching in scope, the purpose of Critical and Contextual Studies is to equip students to evaluate images, objects, artists/designers and ideas critically and situationally by examining contextual information. The presupposition made is that art/design work is not produced in a vacuum nor is its meaning-neutral. This means that socio-political and other contexts need to be identified and included in interpretation. This critical reflexivity differs in stance from the monolithic presentation of Art History. Recognised as elitist, Eurocentric and patriarchal the discipline of Art History came under scrutiny because of its inherent biases where it purported to present the history of art but actually was a presentation of the history of *Western* art. This lack of qualification; the invisibility of bias, was a mark of imperialism. The reasons for its decline as a degree subject since the late 1990s are not solely due to its uncriticality and biases although this played a part in diminishing its interest and relevance within contemporary British society.[ii]

In its evaluative and analytical framework Critical and Contextual Studies was a welcome corrective to the art historical approach. That being said, however, it was often not perceived favourably by students and even academic staff where it was thought of as an

inconvenient but necessary bolt-on to Art and Design courses that validated their credentials as an academic degree course for post-1992 university provision (see Rintoul, 2017, ch. 7). It continued in the vein of the Coldstream Reports of the 1960s that enforced the study of academic learning vis-à-vis the historical and theoretical aspects of Art and Design (HMSO, 1960). In reality, however, Critical and Contextual Studies was often relegated in importance to studio practice, which involved a combination of tacit approaches to making and the acquisition of technical skilling in the subject area.[iii] The approach to, content and delivery of Critical and Contextual Studies vary tremendously from institution to institution with no policy requirements beyond its provision mandated in the Coldstream reforms. In some cases, it is centralised and taught across different subject areas within Art and Design whilst some courses and departments take a more local approach. The persistent problem is its lack of standardisation and uniformity, which is often directed by the interests and expertise of the academic staff who teach on it. Critical and Contextual Studies has developed with little consensus about its theoretical underpinning and this has had consequences for the study of Art and Design subjects.

This issue has been the focus of a number of studies including Helen Scott's PhD thesis *Putting the 'Critical' into Critical Studies in Art Education* (2014) and Jenny Rintoul's *Integrating Critical and Contextual Studies in Art and Design: Possibilities for post-compulsory education* (2017). Scott attempts to find creative ways to integrate these two aspects of the curriculum, which Rintoul rightly identifies that 'at times appear inseparable and even indistinguishable, and at other times isolated and in conflict' (2017, xiii). Rintoul draws upon case studies to look at various different models and practices of Critical and Contextual Studies in a number of settings.

In 2015 Glasgow School of Art's Forum for Critical Inquiry organised a seminar on 'The Role of Critical and Contextual Studies in Art School Education in Scotland' that examined delivery across the four Scottish art schools (Smith, 2015). The report looked at foundational pedagogical questions about the nature of art school education in the twenty-first century. One of the challenges that emerged about Critical and Contextual Studies that went someway to explain the lack of uniformity about its content was the lack of a natural home given the range of subjects it spans (cultural studies, philosophy, gender studies etc), a fact

that raises an allied problem: the lack of overarching responsibility (Smith, 2015). The lack of systematisation of study in Critical and Contextual studies has resulted in the haphazard accommodation of themes and approaches. When these aspects are about the work of minority or excluded groups, it can have a detrimental impact on inclusion. Consider, for example, the work of Black and visible ethnic minority artists in Britain, which is explored in a variety of ways, many of which are not integrated. Through the lens of postcolonialism, the focus is almost exclusively on identity politics, sometimes at the expense of the work. Leon Wainwright's phenomenological turn addresses this issue by shifting the lens onto the direct experience of the artwork, thereby letting it speak for itself (see Wainwright, 2017). His argument is that all too often the work of black British artists is read through a critical framework which results in the lack of engagement with the 'sensual and affective power' of the work and furthermore the lack of attention to the diversity of the artwork (2017, p. 17). The work of BAME artists often makes a tokenistic appearance through Black History events, or in the wake of racially aggravated incidents, such as the murder of George Floyd, but only rarely is sustained attempt given to offer a corrective or alternative to erstwhile histories of art or to examine the way in which the histories of these artists should be accommodated. Funded projects and initiatives such as the 2015-2018 AHRC funded project Black Art & Modernism[iv], led by Sonia Boyce, sought to address omissions and lacunae of black artists in mainstream narratives of art but until the process is joined up, and good practice embedded, long-lasting change will not be brought about.

The recent turn to decolonialising the curriculum within the UK and the US has presented an ideal opportunity to rethink Critical and Contextual Studies given the common objectives shared, that is reflection and analysis, prompting the notion that they can work together to mutual benefit. The task takes on urgent focus when thinking about related but wider issues such as the recruitment of BAME students onto Art and Design courses, and the subsequent attainment gap between these students and white peers.

The philosophy and purpose of decolonialisation has been discussed widely but inconsistently by different institutions, with some formulating their own position through policy (see Bhambra *et al*., 2018). Keele University's 2018's Manifesto is one of the more developed formulations (see Gokay and Panter, 2018). Another noteworthy contribution is

the University of Kent's research project of 2019 *Decolonise UKC: Through the Kaleidoscope* (Suhraiya, 2019). Decolonisation involves a twin-track strategy of critiquing the biases in extant approaches and structures of knowledge (knowledge production) whilst also making insertions and additions. The first step involves identifying the problems with the discipline and thinking about how these issues perpetuate inequality. This involves reading against the grain of the subject and exposing the partisan view that often purports to be representative. The second step involves the implementation of change. Apart from uncovering what purported to be neutral it addressed what further steps need to be taken to make the curriculum less biased. This often necessitates the inclusion of voices that have been so far excluded or placed on the margins. What decolonisation doesn't (or shouldn't) mean is the erasure of history, what Paul Gilroy aptly calls the 'purging' (Park, 2017), whether benign or malign. Nor should it involve merely the addition of authors from diverse backgrounds to the curriculum, which is very often treated as a quick fix 'solution' to the decolonialising 'problem' and runs the risk of doing more damage in the long run. It is equivalent to the sampling of cultures, the 'saris, steel bands, and samosas' outfit to make a case for diversity whilst failing to address the structural problems of racism (Troyna, 1994; Modood & May, 2001, p. 306). Decolonialisation is crucially about recognising, non-complacently, the impact that colonialism and imperialism has had on the way knowledge has been structured and being aware of this in its reading whilst introducing other histories and narratives.

As discussed earlier, beyond the need to provide a critical and theoretical lens through which to read artefacts and images, curricula for Critical and Contextual Studies do not have further prescriptions. Certain themes or issues are widespread across universities, including feminism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and Marxism. One way of bringing about more standardisation within the curricula would be to ensure the representation of a multiplicity of viewpoints, itself an essential part of the decolonialising agenda. This could mean the representation of diverse topics that cover different cultural traditions and/or the representation of viewpoints from diverse groups that go beyond privileged (male, white, middleclass) standpoints. This should pertain both in terms of the backgrounds of makers and critics. In addition, one of the pedagogical aims should focus on critical reflection about the truth claim – what it is about and from whose vantage point. Approaches of this kind demand a certain type of philosophical training that is focused on investigation and enquiry

rather than on the historical training of the acquisition of knowledge. This diminishes the demand to name, or even know about, contemporary theories such as Critical Race Studies or their theorists, and places the emphasis on the acquisition of critical skills that brings awareness about the relativity of truths/histories/narratives. And it means that even if there is variation between the content of the course, which there will invariably be, then it will not detract from understanding of intersectional inequalities and the recognition of the importance of multiple viewpoints with their competing and contesting claims.

Reforming Critical and Contextual Studies is a necessary part of the whole degree programme because embedding theory in practice is one of the primary objectives of the degree. The steer for critical interrogation comes from Critical and Contextual Studies which enables students to reflect on their ideas and place it within a larger scheme of ideas, without which the work becomes dangerously self-referential. The ability to be able to identify and select artistic and theoretical references and to negotiate their meaning in relation to one's own practice is what qualifies the academic status of the art/design work.

Concluding remarks

Art and Design courses continue to innovate in line with market demand (a reference here). Whilst the focus on the new may make less visible the problems that persist in the offering of Critical and Contextual Studies, the initiative of decolonialising is an ideal opportunity to reconfigure this integral part of Art and Design education. It might not be possible to standardise fully the content of what is constituted in Critical and Contextual studies but if the intellectual and pedagogical approach can be streamlined in dialogue with the objectives of decolonialisation, then this ensures reformation of the curricula, more specifically students inherit vital skills during their education that benefits the development of their practices and equips them for a global art world.

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[i] Critical and Contextual Studies is also taught at secondary school and in Further Education where it adopts the same practice in Higher Education of being the counterpart to practical modules.

[ii] Art History became less appealing because of factors connected to the job market, for instance, and the widening access of university education. Some universities, such as at Leicester, have expanded the scope of the History of Art department to include other subjects such as Film Studies.

[iii] The rigour of this varied often according to the subject area, of which health and safety played a significant role. In subjects such as glassmaking or ceramics, which were potentially more hazardous than painting, for example, stipulations were stricter.

[iv] The project is outlined in the following: http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/about/