

TEACHING STATEMENT by Cornelia Sollfrank (PhD)

The Institution

My teaching experience over the last years has led me to the insight that the present art school is a battleground – a field in which values inspired by the Enlightenment clash with the need for vocational training as increasingly imposed by the economisation of education and culture and its underlying neoliberal agenda. The art school has responsibility to make young artists fit for future requirements. However, what these should be is not written in stone but rather needs to be continuously questioned and discussed. An open atmosphere that enables dialogue and controversial discussion between students, teachers and the interested public, therefore, in my view, should be one of the main characteristics of a contemporary art school.

Related to the changing notion of ‘what’ an art school is supposed to do is the question of ‘how’ this task should be carried out. The knowledge economy and the technologies on which it is based have brought about a general shift in terms of access to knowledge. The shift from teaching pre-existing knowledge to facilitating the production of new knowledge – often in a collaborative effort – is something which has affected learning in general, including the art school environment. What does it mean when the professor is no longer the embodiment of universal truth but rather has become the facilitator of new forms of learning and knowledge production based on reciprocal social relationships? How can educators and students together develop new roles and teaching practices with flat hierarchies? In any case, I believe that the ability to organise communication processes and distributed learning formats has become a central requirement for educators.

The Artist

Starting from traditional art training in painting, photography, video and performance, I have, since 1994, developed a conceptual artistic practice dedicated to exploring the potential of contemporary art to contribute to a better society with critical thinking being a central feature. I believe that art has a power of agency. The thematic foci of my work, which involve probing new models of organization and networking as well as challenging traditional models of authorship and originality, are characterized by a permanent engagement with new technological formats and their potential for new forms of (interactive) art, but also the impact they have on society at large. In my practice, I combine relational approaches with more traditional formats, digital and analogue ways of working. Performative practices and events, for which I often use social relationships as material for art, go hand in hand with video, performance and print. Numerous international exhibitions and lectures have provided me with the opportunity to hone my artistic position and to situate it at the cutting edge of contemporary art.

My practice-led PhD research has aptly located my artistic work in the context of art history and contemporary theoretical frameworks. I have explored the role of traditional aesthetics, including the role of the creative individual in the development of copyright and developed strategies for performing the paradoxes of intellectual property in the art context – and beyond. In the course of my research, I have conceived an original interdisciplinary methodology, in which I conjoin aesthetic practice, theory (art history and theory, legal studies and philosophy) and politics.

The Artist Educator – Pedagogical Approach

As an artist educator, I have realized how important the relationship between my practice as an artist and my practice as an educator is. Underlying both my practice as an artist and my practice as an educator is an emancipatory endeavour. Important references for me are early avant-garde models in which art education was driven by revolutionary ideas about art's contribution to the public good. Teaching and social/political engagement were self-evidently part of artistic practice. Such aspirations were partly renewed in social and political art in the 1960s and 1970s, which are another inspiration for my work.

Important pedagogical principles underlying my teaching practice are the building of students' self-confidence, the support of self-directed learning, the development of critical thinking and the capacity for collaboration and exchange (not only within one's own discipline). Successful art studies should help each student to understand where their talents lie and find their individual way of working; students should be supported in constructing a conceptual framework which allows them to integrate and organize new knowledge and information into a coherent structure. Knowledge of canonical art practices as well as a basic understanding of the history of ideas in art help in this endeavor.

These goals can be accomplished through a variety of teaching formats. Although the relationship between student and teacher has changed, what has not changed is the fact that teaching art –and studying art– are highly personal undertakings based on individual preferences, skills and talents. At the core of teaching art, the studio tutorial has proven to be fundamental. I have developed a method of conducting individual and group tutorials based on my pedagogical principles. Furthermore, thematic workshops are a good format for combining active and passive learning; the acquisition of new skills with the production of new knowledge and artworks. Workshops also foster a team spirit and encourage collaboration. Lecture and presentation formats, too, have turned out to bring about better learning results when combined with active learning formats. If suitable, collaborative thematic projects can take place throughout a whole semester. For my teaching practice, I'm in favor of integrating analogue and digital media as well as combining practice with critical reflection. A healthy balance between input/stimulation and leaving space for self-initiative and creation is crucial. Understanding students' needs, getting to know them and their hopes and ambitions is part of my pedagogical self-understanding. My own experience and practice as researcher enables me, moreover, to provide a direct access to practice-based research methodologies and new knowledge.