

Introduction
The interiorised Academy ;
copying, repeating and working
through



Roger Fenton at the British Museum 1900s. This photograph it turns out, was taken the day after the ban on drawing at the museum was lifted and artists and students were allowed back in to draw. Between the distant, dark shapes you can make out some easels and seated figures and towards the front some wooden boxes with the 'S' shaped void. These boxes were the standard equipment used for drawing. You can sit on them upright or flat, with two you have a table and stool, they are easy to carry, your hand fits easily into the 'S', they persisted for hundreds of years. Here students drawing in the cast collection of the Royal Academy London, in the old rooms at Somerset House. The boxes were handed down to the school when it opened in 1768.



My great aunt when she was just a small girl running to her mother's arms. Then again, on holiday in France some eighty years later, Esther turns to look at me, me behind the camera and another friend's elderly mother echoing in the background. It's only later, at home, with these images ranged out on a table that random repeats take on significance in their frozen form.



Another group of school children at a museum. They are drawing works from the canon; the girls around the Medic Venus and the boy behind an Apollo, in Kassel at the Orangeie Karlsruhe. We are here to see Documenta, September 2002. For myself, never trained in the antique, the collection of casts is an empty mystery. Only after a few years of absorbing the Academic curriculum during this research can I identify certain casts of distinction, but I still grapple with incomprehension trying to assess their significance. I used to live around the corner from the British Museum, and every time I walked by my head would punch out, Reuter news style, "Why does the British Museum look like a Greek temple?" It seems to mean a lot and it seems to mean nothing.



October 2004. The large metal gates at the entrance to the cast hall at the Beaux Arts in Paris carry the inscription Musée Des Etudes. Inside the vast hall, once open air, a huge empty space, dotted with empty plinths. It was once crammed with an exhaustive collection of canonical plaster and marble statues, now packed up and stored at Fontainebleau, leaving the Musée Des Etudes empty and available for hire. For centuries this collection was the curriculum of the school. See the photographs of the same space from the the 1930's and the eighteenth century drawing by Natoire, of a life class taking place in the same collection, when the academy was housed in the Palace of the Louvre.



While I was there, I witnessed this big empty space, so eloquent, asking all sorts of questions. By the afternoon seating and equipment had been laid out for a huge media event run by a Catholic television company.



The Academy Museum, St Petersburg October 2003. A student copying an academic nude by Riboussin (1887), a famous Russian artist and academician, who won a silver medal for this painting, onto which he painted an inscription presenting the painting to the school for the purposes of offering a good example... to be copied. So here is a classic academic nude being painted from a painting of a male model posed after the antique. Here of course it is not any art that is copied but only the best examples.

On the uppermost floor of this massive building I found very young students copying architectural columns. There was a strange feeling of time having come to a stand still, not being in any historical time or place.



Then an intake of breath when I came into the restoration and copying room, situated in the middle floor of the main building. A room full of copies of medium sized European oil paintings; portraits, still lifes, and religious scenes. I could not help but consider this space, this teaching space in its context - post-Soviet embrace of a lost bourgeois history - by faithful copying - thus breaking all the private property laws so basic to our (art) market. The copying we see here being demonstrated looks timeless, but it was only kept alive in the 20th century with the insistence of Socialist Realism that returned to the academic curriculum while much of Europe and the USA was going abstract. As you ramble around the vast space of the Beppin Academical Institute it feels as though there is a complete gap and no gap at all between the old Academic Regime and the present, yet no obvious trace of what bridged it. There are no signs of the Soviet period, except that the clothed life models I saw seem to come from the 1950's, the pipe-smoking, coated man looked like a caricature of a KGB agent..



Eventually we found the sculpture department, a cluster of single story buildings around the back. The studio for the younger students was classic copying of the antique, then portraits. Again this feeling of timelessness, not stuck in the time of the classic or the antique, but here was a stopped clock in modernity, a different modernity. The life room modeling where the older diploma students were working was extremely depressing, something about the nude couple and the life size copies made me feel unwell. A sort of sea / see sickness.



June 2003. A small collection in the archive at the Universität de Künste de Berlin, from the end of nineteenth, beginning of the twentieth century, they are anonymous, and show the odd regiment -ality of copying. Here a quote from the more recent history of art education in the UK.



'An enduring memory remains of the internal assessment of dozens of almost identical figure drawings in pencil, varying only with each student's position before the model; of the strict invigilation of most examinations, and a general plethora of rules and restrictions...; of a visit paid to the South Kensington headquarters of the ministry's examiners, and the sight there of hundreds of plaster cast figures of the nude model, like the drawings, identical in size and frequently in style and treatment.

Strand, A Good Deal of Freedom: Art and Design in the Public Sector of Higher Education, 1960-82 (Council for National Academic Awards, 1987)

The image conjured from the late 1950s echoes the kind of seriaty I've seen in archives, cupboards and books around European art academies I have visited. Things only begin to change here in the UK after the Bray report suggested setting up the National Advisory Committee on Art Education chaired by William Coldstream, in 1959, which would modernise art education moving it beyond the classical harness. In a single generation the remains of the academic curriculum unwound, and was forgotten totally in the state funded art schools in the UK. University art departments changed more slowly, according to their own proclivities as did those in Scotland. The Royal Academy in London remained primarily a life drawing school until quite recently when the compulsory two year life drawing course was dropped in 2000.



And Hornsey sign, a year later, the summer of 1968 erupting in student protest. Only these images come from an artists re-enactment of The Sit-in, that took place in 2005. Artists still copy. The building meanwhile has now been demolished, except for the facade.



February 1999. Waiting on a bench for a group of my students to arrive just by Goya's Shooting of 31 May 1808 at the Revolt. I fell asleep with a touch of fever. The tiny room at the hotel where I was staying was over heated, and the temperature outside was cold and crisp. When I woke up the room was full of a school party with note pads and pencils drawing the paintings. From where I sat I took a photograph of a group of boys. Then feeling more brave, and realising my students had not turned up, I asked a group of girls to stand, as they had been, looking at the painting, and let me stand in front of them to take a picture.



At home I drew the photograph of the girls looking at (me), a painting. I projected it in negative, just as a way of breaking into the flatness of the picture. The image is a bit posed, but I was interested in the space of the looking, and what might be going on when children are set the task of looking at a painting.



Yelasquez's Las Meninas, was just down the corridor from where we were with Goya where the scene of the boys had assembled itself. I snapped a photo of the Las Meninas, in passing, just thinking how hard it was to be there looking at it, almost not being able to look. Only when I got home did the strange double unfold. I can look at these two images for a long time, moving from point to point of mirroring.



The Gladiator by candle light, after Joseph Wright of Derby, 1765. A long time ago, at school we were taken to the collection of plaster casts at the Archaeology Department of the University. I really enjoyed it, our own time, escape from school, we could stop on the way and buy sweets. The building was old and forgotten, like a vault, with a high ceiling, very high huge windows, walls painted pale blue, like a huge swimming pool with frozen athletes. I did a painting with the discus thrower in red at the front, but I had no idea why, or where any of the statues came from and what their relevance was.



August 2004. Arriving at the Royal Danish Academy of Art, Copenhagen. I found the cast hall empty, the collection was no longer housed here in the Figursalen, but had been moved away, near to the Palace. The exhibition they were installing in this big empty room was going to pose traditional plaster casts of canonical works next to contemporary work using plaster. This struck me as hilarious, like the Venice Biennale.

One of the images I took on my first site visit to Italy, in 2001 was of a lecture theatre in Verona at the Accademia Cignaroli. There was something immediately edgy about this room, with its casts, terrazzo floor and vaulted, painted ceiling and those recognisable plastic chairs, the small television, white projection screen and blackboard. It seemed to show a comparison of modes of teaching - from copying examples, to looking at projected photographic reproductions and reading about recent art in books.



August 2004. Visiting the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. Bertel Thorvaldsen was the most famous Danish artist of the Academic tradition. His cast collection from the 18th century is extensive and largely stored in the basement of this museum. When I visited, the entire cast collection had been brought up and installed and narrated by two architects, Alexander H Damsgaard and Henrik Ingelmann Nielsen. This sleeping Hermaphroditus is a copy of a Roman copy that was unearthed at the beginning of the 17th century. The original dates from the first centuries BC, Athens. We all want to look at this lovely reclining figure. They all want to look at this lovely reclining figure.

There is another version of the sleeping hermaphrodite, by Antonio Canova, now the V&A in London. Here, at the Serpentine, curated by Hans Haacke 2002. This one does not have male genitals, so one just looks at a sleeping nymph and knows no more. Bowdlerisation! Outrageous deformation of a complex work on sexuality and curiosity, flattened. No one should be allowed to draw this.



November 2004. A very speedy visit to the Art Academy in Florence had me sitting waiting to get an OK from the director, for hours. Wandering through the extensive building I found a large room lined with gigantic casts just visible above a wall of boards, partitioning them off. The room was part of the Architecture Department of the University, that had once been part of the Academy. The room was now a lecture theatre and was being used for exams. These casts behind the makeshift, temporary wall gave a graphic picture of the steps modernism has had to take, to make space. If we are born into blank modern spaces it is difficult to fit the pieces together.



Hornsey School of Art, 1967 - the new Dip AD in place. You can see the kind of chaos that became normal at art school. Everyone doing their own thing. There is still some kind of reference to life drawing, but it has wholly transformed, from a compulsory, almost military training, to a self elected, half-asleep, bohemian activity. This is more the artist's studio taking form in the art school.

