

Art's Disclosive Dimensions: Reflections on Work of Peter London

By Aaron Darrisaw

Introduction

While my central areas of research lie neither in the fields of art nor education (and so certainly not *art education*), I have had the privilege over these past several months, while working on the archiving of the Peter London papers, to be exposed to the writings of an individual quite committed to both. Consequently, I thought it would be most appropriate to offer some reflections on art (and art education), which have developed through my engagement with Dr. London's work in the process of archiving. Beyond simply reporting on the *materials* of the collection, I feel these reflections will better provide a *sense* of what the collection offers.

When I initially came to this project, I vaguely remembered hearing of Peter London once before – in passing perhaps. Yet I knew nothing really of his art or his work as an educator. Each day I came into work, however, I was met with a series of very interesting correspondences, articles, conference presentations, lecture notes, and more that offered a thoroughgoing vision of art as a personally, socially, and spiritually transformative and enriching enterprise. The collection contained document after document of valuable contributions to the instrumental role that art can and does play in opening up individuals to their own forms of inner expression *and* in revealing to society its own internal structures. It is around these two points – that of the personal and social disclosive dimensions of aesthetic practice – that my following reflections will revolve.

Disclosure of Inner Forms of Expression

Firstly, to the disclosure of inner forms of expression: I'll begin with a quote, taken from a personal statement provided by Peter London in a brochure for one of his exhibits in the late 60s. He writes, "I see the artist as a person able to extend and clarify the vocabulary of nature." Initially, any discussion of art as a vehicle for giving expression to nature might seem to have little to do with inner forms of expression. After all, nature or the world *out-there* is intuitively understood as a domain external to us, in which case, the extension and clarification of nature by the artist's creation might appear to make the artist only something of a handmaiden, merely acting at the behest of nature. To be sure, this role is valuable in its own right. However, we might push this idea further, recognizing that the extension and

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clarification of nature has everything to do with extending and clarifying the artist's own forms of creative production, deepening and furthering her own inner vocabulary as much as nature's. How might this be the case?

The artist, like all of us, stands in a constant *relationship* to the external world, in which she is always navigating, contesting, and dealing with the varied structures of her surrounding environment. Doubtless, the nature of these many *dealings* bears upon the artist's physical, emotional, and psychical makeup, and often times, the diverse manners in which we are impacted and influenced (through these connections to the outside world) can go unseen and unacknowledged. We carry on with our lives, allowing those influences to take their course as they will. The artist, however, stands vigilantly at the threshold of that self-world contact, seeking to give a shape, a form, a colour, a line, a sound, a voice, and a texture to the kaleidoscopic encounters that are undergone in waking life, and these encounters cultivate the artist's *own self-understanding*. One's being-in-the-world – if you like – is defined by these encounters. The 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger speaks of this encounter in his landmark book *Being and Time* when he writes, “Dasein itself [and Dasein here basically refers to the *human being*]...gets its ontological understanding of itself in the first instance from those entities which it itself is not but which it encounters 'within' its world, and from the Being which [those entities] possess...” To wit, an understanding of one's own being unfolds through encounters with the outside environment, the out there of nature. (It should be said at this point that when I speak of *nature*, I mean more than simply birds, mountains, rivers, and trees. I mean something more like what Ralph Waldo Emerson refers to when he speaks of nature as being the totality of that which stands out, over, and against the self – the “not me”.) In any case, when the artist gives visual or sonic form to the encounters she has with that outside environment, it extends and clarifies not only that outside but also her own voice, a voice which then (through the making of art) ushers into the world new forms with which we can all then come into contact. The work of art is something of a donation to the larger social world, a donation which then enhances our own social-understanding – either by challenging our current forms of social life or revering them. I turn then to my second reflection on art as disclosive of not only our inner forms of expression but of our social forms of relating.

Disclosure of Social Forms of Relating

If the work of art is born out of a relationship between the artist and the surrounding environment, the work of art has a two-fold character. It is at once a product of current forms of life as well as a new instance of form that demands our re-engagement. In both instances, however, art (and the process of artmaking) leads to a disclosure of our (i.e. society's) aspirations, frustrations, challenges, triumphs, and complications; understanding these can reveal and inspire our modes of social relating. This, of course, is what some of the most notable artistic productions in history have done: those of Rodin, Picasso, Michelangelo, Mozart, Billie Holiday, Goya, O'Keeffe, Pollock, Dali, 2Pac – just to mention a well-known few. Whether their art provokes adoration or disgust, we are all made to take up reflection on our socio-cultural situation with one another; if you like – the social conversation changes.

This disclosive feature of art and artmaking, with regards to our social world, seems to bring into relief those avenues we have at our disposal to not only reflect upon (or pay attention to) our forms of social relating but also to respond to them. New artifacts of inspired creation allow for the opportunity to address and transform our situation, that is, when what is revealed to us by art indicts us, or to further invest time and energy into aspects of our life-together that art acclaims and commends. Whether through affirmation or negation, art, in revealing ourselves to ourselves, can, in various ways, manifest, articulate, and/or reconfigure the ontologies undergirding our social and culture world. On this point, I'm inclined to suggest that art, insofar as it operates in this way (and doubtless there is much more to be said about the role and significance of art), offers a unique service to society – something only art can do. And the benefits of this service can generate insights for how different societies might position themselves toward future development. Consequently, it would seem to me that it is vital for art to be a central aspect in our models of education.

Art Education: It's Value

It has of course been well attested that art (particularly in grade school education) is associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skills. Moreover, arts learning can also improve motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork. More than this, however, (and I don't say "more than this" lightly, because those abovementioned contributions are rather significant) art can connect people more deeply to the world and open them to new ways of seeing, which can then create the foundations to forge social bonds and community cohesion – *or*, perhaps, to disrupt and call into question the status quo of things. (Both are important – I think.) This, to my mind, is what the disclosive dimensions of art and aesthetic practice allow us to experience. It seems

incontrovertible to me that the uncovering of one's own inner forms of expression and the revealing of truths about our social world are critical to human development. If, therefore, education has as one of its goals (if not its primary goal) the cultivation of skills and abilities that can bring about such development, art must be an indelible and decisive feature of any learning avenue or institution. Through the work I've done on the Peter London papers, it has become apparent to me that the value of art in education is seen as a priority in Dr. London's work; indeed, it has been throughout his career.

On that note, I'll turn to the collection and say a little something about what materials researchers can expect to find.

The Peter London Papers

The Peter London papers are housed in the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) on the first floor of Morris Library at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. While the collection is not yet available on the SCRS archival portal, in the coming months, researchers will be able to go online and search the collection's materials. For those unfamiliar with the process of searching collections through the archiving portal, what you'll find are the details of a given collection, with summaries of the contents in each series (or major division) of the collection as well as lists of what is available within each series. This information allows for a researcher to pinpoint something of particular interest, after which they can visit the research center and request to see those articles of interest, perusing them at their leisure in the reading room of the SCRC.

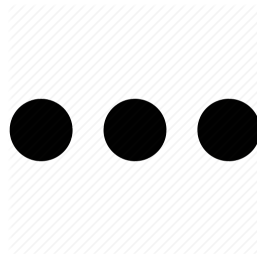
With regards to Dr. London's papers, there are, to date, over 500 folders of processed materials (and I expect that number will be closer to 600 when all is said and done), arranged in 13 series. In these series – and I won't mention all of them just now – researchers will find, for example, manuscript drafts of Dr. London's books (such as his *No More Secondhand Art: Awakening the Artist Within*, published in 1989); writings from his time as an MFA and Doctoral student at Columbia University (e.g. his doctoral dissertation); personal and professional letters of correspondence; course and lecture notes; various published and unpublished writings; photographs, prints, and artist statements from exhibitions; as well as a host of outlines and session notes from the many workshops Peter has conducted.

For me personally, after having had such a close connection with the collection for the last 7 months or so, I've found that one of the most fascinating aspects is witnessing the marriage between the theoretical and practical aspects of Dr. London's ideas, as they obtained diverse iterations in different times and to different audiences over the years. Being able to read an article written for an arts education journal, say, in which Peter articulates innovative theoretical models for the practice of art education, and then to subsequently see those models produced and played out in one of his workshops, brings together a full and

engaging picture of the ways in which Peter's ideas have shown themselves effective. All of this is then tied together quite nicely when I come across correspondences from colleagues, former students, and mentees that express their gratitude for the effects that Peter's teaching has had in their lives. It's truly fascinating to be privy to such a revelation.

In any case, I mentioned above that the collection bears witness to Peter's commitment to an understanding of art and the practice of art as a personally, socially, and spiritually transformative and enriching enterprise, and so, above all the particulars of the collection, I think researchers will discover the sense of Peter's commitment to that understanding, and that, in the final analysis, is what I think researchers will take away from the Peter London papers. Thus, I invite all of you to come and view the collection in the hopes that you too would be led to various reflections on the value and import of art's function in your life and the life of your society/community.

I'm very much of the impression that the Peter London papers will prove to be a boon not only to Morris Library but to the Southern Illinois research community more generally.





Aaron Darisaw with Peter London