



The Future of Painting – sparking discussions around the world.

A panel discussion hosted by the Arnolfini Bristol and Drawing & Print

The University of the West of England

Thursday 16th January 2020, 12.30-14.30

Artists, writers and curators from across Europe came together to discuss the future of painting: where have we come from and where are we going? This ran parallel with an exhibition, *Signal*, at the Centrespace Gallery, Bristol, a collaboration between staff and students from the Slade School of Fine Art; Sokei Academy of Fine Art, Tokyo; LUCA School of Arts in Ghent, Belgium; and the University of the West of England, Bristol.

Conveners

Richard Kenton Webb, Programme Leader, Drawing & Print, University of the West of England, Bristol

John France, Senior Lecturer, Drawing & Print, University of the West of England, Bristol

Panel Chair

Gary Topp, Interim Executive Director, Arnolfini, Bristol

Panel

Dr Richard Davey, Senior Research Fellow, Fine Art, at the School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University, writer, and curator

Jan-Philipp Fruehsorge, The Drawing Hub, Berlin

Kate Hopkins, Tutor, The Slade School of Fine Art, London

Selma Parlour, artist and Associate Lecturer at UAL and John Moores Painting Prize Winner 2016

Professor Andrew Stahl, Professor of Fine Art, Head of Undergraduate Painting, UCL, Slade School of Fine Art

Patrick Verlaak, Professor in Painting and Drawing, LUCA School of Arts, Gent, Belgium

Introduction: Richard Kenton Webb

This event and the exhibition tonight, *Signal*, at the Centrespace Gallery (an exhibition of staff and students from four international universities: The Slade School of Fine Art; Sokei Academy of Fine Art, Tokyo; LUCA School of Arts, Ghent; and Drawing & Print, University of the West of England) have been organised to broaden our thinking about the future of painting. I ask this question as Programme Leader of Drawing & Print, where 80% of our 120 students have painting as their chosen form of practice, alongside the disciplines of drawing and printmaking. What is this panel discussion for?

We need a restrained period of reflection. We want to talk about our practice, its materiality, its processes, traditions, heritage, and future. So, today, we are asking **'what is the future of painting?'**

Discussion

Gary Topp

We're here today to think about something that we all care about. We're creating a space to see art and discuss and think again about painting. We're thinking about what we have dedicated our lives to. I am encouraging anyone to interject in this conversation.

We are doing this in a cultural institution – the Arnolfini will be 60 years old next year. We are coming into a new era of collaboration with UWE because we all care about creativity and the Arnolfini is a public-facing institution. The Arnolfini takes up less than a third of the building – the rest is the City Campus of the University of the West of England. There is huge cultural capital here in this building and we want to bring this to life so that people find it interesting and become curious to find out more. Over the last 60 years, painting has been an important part of the programme here at the Arnolfini. We opened in 1961 with a Peter Swan and Joseph Herman exhibition. Over these 60 years, many artists, especially from the St Ives School, like Patrick Heron and Peter Lanyon, have come through these doors. And now, we are taking a much more multi-disciplinary approach. We opened in this building with a Howard Hodgkin show and pioneered the late work of Jack B. Yates. In the light of

this history and new relationship with UWE, we are looking for new ways to bring together all this cultural capital. We are looking at how we can make painting a part of this. It is significant that we are doing this just before the opening of two shows: *Assembly*, a three-channel video installation by Angelica Mesiti from the Venice Biennale; and *Zanjir*, an exhibition of photographs by Amak Mahmoodian, an Iranian photographer. As these other shows are opening this week, we now asking, where does painting sit?

Panel discussion: What is the future of painting?

Richard Davey: For a long time, I thought I was out of step because I look at painting and drawing and my research background is theology. But the more I look, especially now that I am working on the West Coast and the Mid-West of the USA, I see that the UK is out of step with the rest of the world. In places like the Mid-West USA and China, there is a vibrancy of painting within the gallery and the art world generally – we are out of step here.

Selma Parlour

I did my PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London and currently have a show at Pi Artworks, *Activities for the Abyss*. I feel I am too late to be a modernist - I was born into an analogue world. My painting has gone through many transitions. I don't know where we are in it all....

Jan-Philipp Fruehsorge

I founded the Berlin Drawing Hub, and I am more interested in drawing. I don't think there is much of a difference between the two (drawing and painting) – both have a very intense relationship. Drawing is the beginning of everything and very closely connected to painting. I come from Germany where the painting traditions are very strong. I am looking as an art historian – I look, curate and talk about painting. The demand to see drawing and painting is high in Germany. Currently, there are four main museums, all showing the paintings of about 50 artists in their thirties in a touring show, *Now! Painting in Germany Today* (Bonn, Wiesbaden, Gunzenhauser and Hamburg). They are attempting to give an overview of the present state of painting in Germany. They are trying to address the issue, because the digital is so present and we need to look at this in the light of the rise of the digital.

Kate Hopkins

I don't know where we are right now. As a painter, I feel like an outsider. I paint from direct observation. This is a niche activity. Questions around this have troubled and occupied me. Recently, I have been researching Neuroscience in order to understand about perception. I want to help my students. Everyone has a different experience of their ability to visualise mentally. For instance, I am unable to do this – I don't have visual imagination. Therefore, painting from direct observation is my process. This explains why there is such an exciting variety of visual processes with artists. In self-

defence of what I do as an artist, I am thinking about the difference between perception and the idea of being able to copy that perception. Our perception is in relation to what we see in reality. So, what *do we see*?

Andrew Stahl

I am an artist who teaches on undergraduate painting at The Slade School of Fine Art. One of the most exciting things is that we present, and we discuss the medium – this is a gigantic discussion. We find what we believe in. I have never doubted that this is one of the most exciting activities. We are putting mud on a surface, leaving a footprint behind us. We have been doing this for centuries. It is so exciting to see the movements that someone made 500 years ago. Materiality can reflect feeling – by the way it's put on. They are describing the world as they see it around them. I am interested in painting *thoughts*. It's a journey. You can take on the language of something – it's dramatic. We live in an age where painting goes across the world. For example, in Chinese watercolours, the mark that goes onto the paper must go down perfect. They are leaving their mark. We can also learn so much from other cultures. I recently went into a museum in Beijing. I had always been told that shadows were invented in the Renaissance, but in Beijing, I saw a painting with a shadow – done in 800AD. We need to broaden our perspective.

Patrick Verlaak

I teach painting and the history of art. I want to say that when I was a student, we all looked at painting. We looked at conceptual art too, but we never stopped looking at painting. Painting in Ghent is big – most of our students want to paint, and there are many contemporary painting exhibitions. So, painting is back. There is much attention in the media too. It's a risky process. Many young people have grown up in the digital world and they want to use their hands and feel the material and slow down and be still for a moment. The process of painting slows down our thinking. This makes me happy. Painting is now a reaction to society where everything is going too fast. But we have a problem – our government does not support art in education.



This is the painting, *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet*, 1854, by Courbet, one of the first truly modern artists. Here, Courbet (on the right) looks a bit bohemian, more like an outlaw. The man in the middle is taking off his hat. He is an important art buyer who is showing him respect.



Courbet was inspired by this woodcut, *The Walking Jew*. In his painting, he is identifying himself with the Jew. Jews were discriminated against in nineteenth century France. So, what does this mean? I think he is saying that an artist is like a Jew, an outsider who is yet needed for their giftings and resources, but the community does not like them.

A third example would be the German word for a witch, *Hexe* – ‘a witch’. This word is very close to the German word for hedge, *Hecke*. As words, they are connected. The German word for ‘witch’ comes from *Heckse* (derived from hedge - a hedge or fence is a boundary) or also fence rider. The *Heckse* - witch - rides on the fence (hedge). This means that she is at home in two worlds. One part is in the physical world, while the other part is in the spiritual world. In other words - she (the witch / shaman) is a traveller between the worlds. She is therefore one who speaks in the context of healing, on the spiritual level. Unfortunately, witches and their work are often misunderstood in modern society. But that is an unfounded prejudice. A witch has one leg in the community and the other out of the community. People do not like or trust these fence-riders, but they are very important.

In the same way, we don’t trust the artist who often has one leg in society and the other leg outside. As a result, a painter can make very important images that can deeply affect society. The reason I’m not so happy with our ‘Neo-liberal world’ is that everything is based on economic outcome. The government asks us ‘what can you give back to me in an economic sense’. Art education should be critically defined beyond the art market. A university is the only place where we can think **freely**.

We need an open discussion now and we need to start with ‘what is painting?’.

Painting is aligned to drawing – how radical is painting as an art form and where is painting as a craft?

Richard Davey

I used to talk about the visual arts, but now I talk about the **embodied arts**. The focus always seems to be at a distance – thinking about an idea. However, I want to smell, lick and touch the paint. It’s physical, just like a writer who is moving words around. In this sense, writing and painting are very similar activities. It’s about the slowness, embodiment and perception. In painting, we are coming out

of the digital. People are thinking more about their experiences. For instance, we have the slow food movement and veganism. We are returning to a more bodily experience. If you go to Instagram and look at a large painting, you will not get a sense of its physicality – it is lost. Because painting is a physical thing, you can't react to the materials when viewed on a screen. When you stand in front of the actual painting, you see the rawness of the emotion, sometimes just expressed in a swoop of paint.

Andrew Stahl

It would be a mistake to say that there is only one type of painting. There are so many different mediums. Painting does not need to be slow. It can be fast. There is no single answer. We'll never all agree.

Richard Davey

Photography is often talked about as what changed painting. Kandinsky changed the way we see it – painting with its own integrity. Photography is the assembling images. Photography can never take the place of painting.

Patrick Verlaak

The paintings and drawings of the world need more time to make and comprehend than a photograph. A painting or a drawing cannot be made in just a second but can be done over days. A painting can be a synthesis.

Gary Topp

What do we value about this art form?

Kate Hopkins

I am studying Neuroscience to understand more about the choices that we make. Each one of us is genetically programmed to make these choices. Both deceit and the recognition of the observer can be going on at the same time. Authenticity may be a kind of fact of the mark-making. Autobiography is built into the mark-making and therefore painting is more authentic because it is all about recognising the mark of the artist.

Andrew Stahl

There is a discourse and a language that we are talking about here.

Richard Davey

There are different levels. As a writer, I can choose all my words. But, when an artist makes something with materials, there is a connection where we can resonate with the artist, where we experience colour, line and space and then take it into a fantasy.

Kate Hopkins

This is how we explore as painters.

Selma Parlour

I fell in love with the substance of materials as a child. Then, you start to read theory which is in direct conflict with your love-affair with the paint. I need to say that I don't have fun when I work. I use an invented vocabulary. I have closed down some things to focus on others. Photography is a big part of it, but materiality is the main thing. It's all about the surface. My work is 2D and I'm rigid.

Gary Topp

So, you are putting many processes in place?

Selma Parlour

I am very analytical. At home and in the studio, I'm a messy person. This contradicts the qualities in my painting. I am doing something analytical which is very different to me as a person.

Andrew Stahl

I have nothing against other media. I have been talking about what is special to painting. I want to make it clear that I love film, photography, etc. I don't think painting is better.

Jan-Philipp Fruehsorge

The German artist Katharina Grosse leaves a flat surface – it is more about colour and immersiveness. Her painting is about scale that gives you a feeling of being totally immersed. We have a very particular idea of what painting is, i.e. on a square, flat surface. Whereas, her recent show in Boston was alongside Jackson Pollock. Here was a female artist who is working on an even bigger scale than Pollock. There are not many female painters in the 'top ten' painters in the world. Why is this? We are lacking in publications about women painters. With Katharina's work, the idea of painting is bringing new perceptions: painting can be 3D and sculptural.

Andrew Stahl

Yes, we have shows in London on at the moment: Bridget Riley; and Rose Wylie at The Serpentine. There are so many examples – it is happening, but not enough.

Richard Davey

We are talking now about how we experience a work of art. Painting can take us out of the concept. Philosophy has made us think that our senses are false. Painting and other art forms are all about learning about the world through our bodies. Paintings and painters have helped me to understand the world. This is linked with my theology – painting can allow us to feel.

Questions from the audience

Gary Topp

I would now like to ask the audience something. What is it about painting that we might particularly respond to? Why did you come today? What excites you?

Audience

I go and see things. I am married to a painter. I am interested to know what is at the heart of a painter's motivation.

Audience

I am involved in vocational training, in art therapy. I am harnessing myself as the tool. There is a psychological link with art in our psychotherapy training. At art college, I was not encouraged to find my voice. This was not a great experience for me. I stopped painting when I went to art college and started painting again when I left. It would be so good if communities could share the activity of painting together.

Audience

We are now facing a culture of neo-liberal commercialisation. There is the manipulation of who is in and who is out, and we are told who to look at. We are told what is worthy of being discussed and what should be funded. We are in the grip of the large galleries over what is relevant. Painting has always been there, but you would not know this because you don't see the shows.

Audience

From the financial side, I studied a course that focussed on the art that is chosen. Patronage was strong during the Renaissance. Who has taken over the patronage that was led by the church? Which system works best?

Audience

As a student, I was drawn to study a degree in Drawing & Print because I wanted to study painting in Bristol. Painting seems so ridiculous in this modern age – it seems so redundant! I like the way it is so convoluted. It is not like looking on my phone. I can look at any work of anything in the world online. What I like about painting is that it makes things difficult and convoluted. There are so many different processes within painting to slow me down. I think this is why so many young people are drawn to it today.

Gary Topp

Yes, I would like to explore this. Who makes the decisions? For example, with the business of teaching, who is teaching painting? Also, I want to carry on discussing this idea about painting being more meaningful because it is so absurd.

Patrick Verlaak

I want to talk about art as therapy. Why do we want to be artists? I do this because I have a need to communicate about my feelings. The difference with painting is that it is not a diary, just for me. I am communicating with a community and I need to find a language for this. When painting, you need to give the public a small key to help them understand the painting. This can be classical and then you can take the viewer in with this key. This is very different to art therapy which is not about composing something. In art therapy, you are just unloading. But a picture needs to be readable for anyone. If there are too many keys, it can be difficult to read.

Andrew Stahl

We need to assume that the public is very clever. We don't give them a key. We make work that we really believe in. In the future, it can be very sophisticated. I became a painter and I have just done a retrospective of my 40 years. Feeling is central. If you believe in what you are doing, people will understand anyway. There is also commercial exploitation. There are galleries that control the material world. Not many artists say, 'if I do that, it will sell well.'

Kate Hopkins

Every painter develops their own process – you are inventing your own language.

Patrick Verlaak

Painting can communicate across cultures, like music – it is a discourse. When you want to be an artist, you have a feeling that you want to show people something.

Gary Topp

Curators need to unlock and translate.

Jan-Philipp Fruehsorge

There is no difference between a painting show and a video show. Look at the big galleries who make all the big decisions, like who goes into the art fair in New York. We need to sell work to collectors – if work is too large, it won't sell. With the rise of Art Fairs around the world, it has all become very confusing. There are certain art fairs where you can apply with a group of artists. The process of 'taste-making' is dangerous. I propose and then the fair tells me what to show – they want this one but not this one. They have their agenda. They avoid artists that are like the ones they want to promote. So, there is control and power in a new way.

Selma Parlour

Painting will always be there because it's portable. I went to the Hong Kong Art Fair where art is a consumable.

Audience

When you're at art school, why do you need to read philosophers in order to make art?

Richard Davey

Art doesn't get shown if it doesn't talk about language. Many get an idea and then they (or someone else) illustrates this philosophical idea. In the UK, art colleges in universities are going through the REF process which is assessed by academics. Making art should not be assessed as a sociological process because it is about **making**. Art is about community-building. The UK Government Research Excellence Framework and **practice** are two very different things. REF is the framework for an academic in a university, based on research outputs. I am now submitting portfolios which are based on the exhibitions I have been organising. As a writer, I have been made to tick certain boxes as part of the REF process. I need to understand how to look and then, how I feel when I look at paintings, for instance. The way I am writing about painting is very different to the way I am expected to write for the REF. How can we give authenticity to the experience of the grammars of painting? We need to experience these paintings, not theorise about them. As a writer, it is so exciting to see the world through the artists' eyes – to see colour and its sound waves that the artist chooses to express themselves. There needs to be recognition that these things are important.

Jan-Philipp Fruehsorge

There are many different discourses going on at the same time. The exclusivity of fashion makes us annoyed.

Richard Davey

We have lost the ability to look because art has become so concept based. This is shaping what people write about and how they write. We need to hold everything in balance between the way we respond with the philosophical and the way we respond with art. An example is Umberto Eco's description of the church in his book, *'The Name of the Rose'* – it works on many levels, by talking to both the educated and the peasant in different ways at the same time, fulfilling the needs of both.

Audience

Is the right stuff being taught in art colleges now? Students should not be taught what to say or talk about. We need something for the public to grasp and understand. We need to understand and see the narrative. It may not be what the artist intended. I have experience of working in the Australian education system where students are taught about how to look and understand art. I now work with years 7 to 12 in the UK. There is a lot lacking in British education. If students were taught properly in school, there would be a more thriving artistic community here in the UK.

Audience

Too much theory kills everything. Everyone is so different. It's important to discover what nurtures you. I read an article in the Financial Times recently. There are only five galleries in London that are not client-led. Capitalism is the driving force here.

John France

Art is a seemingly redundant activity for the young people because it does not seem to promise anything financially. Also, painting is a subversive activity. A painting in a living room can be subversive. Everyone has a painting on their wall. Some of these paintings are not radical. I grew up with paintings on the wall and everyone else here probably did too. So, as painters, we have a unique access into someone's life. I was making films but decided to switch in 1973 to painting because of the accessibility that painting and drawing offered.

Gary Topp

Let's talk about the celebration of painting. Why is it so exciting?

Patrick Verlaak

Your story can change. To all the students – do what you want to do, not because painting is back, but be yourself. Don't sell your identity. Don't make things for the market. The most important thing is that you are true to yourself. I made my first painting in oil when I was 12. I knew I just needed to do it. Over the last ten years, I've made many paintings about walking. I want to express the experience of walking in nature, observing the environment. I've been thinking about the taste, smell and physical act of walking. I observe with all my senses. My work is about how I see this environment. I'm not conceptual. I don't know what the painting will end up as – it's an adventure. As John Berger said, a painting is more erotic than a sculpture. A painting should speak for itself. I read a lot, and a lot can be read in the paintings. This is the context.

Andrew Stahl

I have enjoyed listening to **all** these viewpoints today. I agree with everything. My work is about journeys through cities, and the flow of thoughts. Artists fear being stupid. This is a very exciting medium. If all the electricity fails, we can still paint.

Kate Hopkins

Painting is a joyful obsession. From a personal point of view, I work in a formal way. I journey through this experience, trying to make something hold together – like a metaphor for the experience. People say that when you work from observation, you are like a musician reading music. I disagree. There's more of a distance. The materiality of the paint is so important. The love of the material is very thrilling. It is a sensory experience. The desire to do it is like an unbidden desire. Also, you never know what the outcome will be – it unfolds. For instance, there were the artists who decided with the throw

of a dice. All these things have been looked at through the years. A painting is a physical object. You can only understand it by being in front of it. You can't appreciate it from an image online.

Jan-Philipp Fruehsorge

I am still thrilled that painting exists and connects us to the beginning of art. Standing in front of a painting is an incredible experience. We still have the same kind of language as early man, even though painting has evolved and become more complex. We feel a connection with those artists through the years. We can get so close to the creation process. It is a very intimate process. This then sparks ideas in myself.

Selma Parlour

I am finding my way through the traditions we have inherited. I am engaging with visual signals. Institutions could help us be more understood. For instance, at the recent Impressionism show, I don't understand why they didn't explain that artists were working *en plein air* for the simple reason that they could finally buy paint in tubes. When I was at Goldsmiths doing my PhD, it was very unusual to be a maker because most of the PhD students were writing. It's important to make lots!

Richard Davey

At the celebration of 250 years of the RA Summer Exhibition, I was asked to give a talk to a room full of art historians. I explained that I talk to artists to understand art. Their response was 'you mean you actually talk to artists?'. My conversations with artists have changed the way I see the world, especially the conversations about colour as I look at their work. So now, when I look at trees in the real world, I see a gash in the sky, for instance. Or, when I look at a sunset, it reminds me of a painting of the crucifixion that I own. I now look at the world through paintings. Paintings have shown me the world. There is so much more that we need to talk about. Painting has this huge knowledge of the world. I feel excited because it reflects the way I write. Writing is a very similar process to painting. I assemble words to get the right meaning, like trying to explain the complexities of a smell. I can just change two words and it's done. I am wrestling with something and then I find the right words and the whole thing opens through one little change. This demonstrates the importance of process.

Patrick Verlaak

I went to Aix-en-Provence where Cezanne worked. I saw the landscape very differently as a result of Cezanne's work. Paintings change the way we look at nature.

Gary Topp

Thanks to all of you for giving up the time to talk today.

With thanks to Tessa Webb, Associate Lecturer, University of the West of England, for taking these notes.