School Desk Confidential

LUCY WRIGHT

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LUCY WHAT?!

I NEVER REALLY KNEW HOW TO INTERACT
WITH OTHERS. I FELL AWAY INTO A
SHELL OF MY OWN, IN SILENCE. I
ALWAYS FELT OUT OF PLACE.

I STILL FEEL PRETTY INVISIBLE
THE WAY I AM AS AN ADULT.

INVISIBLE
I was felt slightly
with my tears, like there
missing in me that meant I was
still feel pretty much
he same way as an adult.

INVISIBLE

It felt safer I
had in

my friend
said I had a
may hill

said about my
School Desk Confidential is a series of drawings and writings made on wooden school desks, exploring experiences of alienation and difference in educational settings. The project takes as its starting point personal experiences of feeling like ‘matter out-of-place’ in education (Douglas 35) and a memory of school desks that functioned as confessional spaces; vivid, mutable graffiti artworks produced collaboratively by generations of students, expressing some of their feelings and experiences on the precipice of adulthood.

As an artist and a researcher with an interest in folk arts and other informal and everyday creativities, I’m often drawn to the moments and spaces in which those who do not primarily self-identify as artists engage in creative practices that they devise and negotiate for themselves. My previous work has attempted to identify and (re-)frame the folk arts of the twenty-first century, exploring ‘hand-blinging’, ‘harestailing’ and carnival morris dancing as self-
organised, creative practices (e.g. Wright, ‘Girls’ Morris and Folk’; Wright, ‘Making Traditions’). School Desk Confidential follows this trajectory by locating graffiti—particularly graffiti on school desks—as a folk practice belonging specifically to young people, which demonstrates the presence of alternative and ‘hidden’ narratives in an education system that typically prizes conformity.

Highly codeified and regulated spaces, like schools, commonly act as forms of ‘enabling constraint’ for creative (self-)expression. The ‘uninstitutionalised’ practices addressed in my work do not deny the role or implicated status of institutions of all kinds, nor the ways in which individuals and communities engage with, are complicit with and seek to reject them. However, in contrast to more straightforwardly institutionalised practices—those which can be easily named, circumscribed, packaged and marketed as aspects of arts and culture—uninstitutionalised arts do not rely on official sanction or validation, but rather are incidental to, or even act in opposition to dominant systems of culture. In this way my use of the term is akin to Holden’s conception of ‘home-made culture’ or Gauntlett’s theories of ‘everyday making’, with my personal definition of ‘folk art’ underpinned by the conviction that not only can anyone be creative, regardless of training or resources, but importantly, everybody already is.

Anonymous authorship and collective production are often wrongly assumed to be prerequisites of folkloric productions. However, in this instance it is the potential of school desk graffiti to permit the expression and communication of difficult or concealed thoughts and experiences that provides the locus of this work. A recent study by Young Minds (2016) suggested that three children in every classroom will have diagnosed mental health issues, and the consequences of feeling alienated and unwelcome at school can be significant and far reaching. The artworks produced as part of School Desk Confidential expose issues of alterity and transgression that might be considered unacceptable in direct conversation with peers, while the use of graffiti, viewed variously as creative art form and act of defacement, suggests a form of quiet resistance, even solidarity, as the desks become unofficial repositories of collective memory, re-worked and re-contextualised by multiple authors over time.

Reflecting on my own experiences of alienation in education also draws parallels with my current position as a (precariously employed) interdisciplinary researcher. The artist and anthropologist Amanda Ravetz uses the term ‘oddkin’ to describe epistemologies and approaches which—consciously or otherwise—fall between or outside of conventional academic territories (Ravetz and Gregory 368), for example the use of arts practice as research. As one of the outcomes of an artistic research process, School Desk Confidential holds an uneasy status in academia, posing questions around rigour, subjectivity and empiricism. How might the improvised and intuitive products of artistic research be interpreted, valued and judged? What does it mean to supplant artistic practice within a framework historically more accustomed to replicability and readily quantifiable measures.

That I possess a hybrid identity as both a researcher and an artist is not to say that I perceive a significant disconnect between these two roles, which at their most elemental levels, represent parallel modes of knowledge production and dissemination, concerned with the circumscription and transformation of human social life. Ever the ‘oddkin’ in the education system, I strive to remain both—and to make work which does not merely illustrate theory, but generates it too.

As a development of the work, I have begun to solicit the views of others who remember feeling out of place in the education system, including friends and family members. By producing new desks representing their stories, the project moves away from a form of autoethnography, towards a more reflexive process of social art and / as research.

WORKS CITED


