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**Title: *Know Thyself: Applying Gramsci's 'Inventory of Traces' as a Pedagogical Framework for BA (Hons) Fine Art Programs***

This paper was presented at the National Association of Fine Art Educators (NAFAE) Arts of Resistance Conference, University of the Arts, Canterbury in September 2024.

*'The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory' (Gramsci)*

## **Abstract**

This paper explores a pedagogical theory-in-method for a BA (Hons) Fine Art degree rooted in Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'inventory of traces'. This framework suggests that education should help students explore and critically analyse the social, cultural, and historical influences embedded in their lives, which shape their perspectives and practices. By encouraging students to create an 'inventory of traces' as part of their artistic development, educators can foster critical awareness, cultural literacy, and personal agency in the formation of individual artistic voices. This approach offers an adaptable structure for engaging students in Fine Art education, allowing them to navigate and reinterpret cultural narratives in ways that enhance both their critical and creative capacities.

## **Introduction**

Antonio Gramsci's theories on culture, hegemony, and education have significantly influenced contemporary critical pedagogy, particularly in the humanities and arts. His notion of the 'inventory of traces' in which biography serves as structured agency, underscores the importance of acknowledging and deconstructing the cultural and ideological imprints that inform our identities and worldviews. In a BA (Hons) Fine Art course, where self-exploration and societal critique are central to artistic practice, applying this concept as a pedagogical tool offers students a structured yet flexible method to investigate, critique, and reimagine their own ideological and cultural contexts. This paper proposes a pedagogical framework based on Gramsci's 'inventory of traces' to encourage students to engage deeply with the socio-historical influences that impact their creative processes and identities as artists.

## **Gramsci's 'Inventory of Traces' as Pedagogical Foundation**

Gramsci's 'inventory of traces' refers to the accumulation of social, cultural, and historical elements that individuals unconsciously inherit from their environment. These 'traces'—such as language, customs, religious beliefs, and social norms—shape an individual's worldview and behaviour, often without conscious acknowledgment. Gramsci advocated for a critical awareness of these influences, allowing individuals to recognise and potentially resist ideological conditioning imposed by dominant cultural narratives. This reflective inventory enables a form of intellectual and cultural autonomy, aligning with Gramsci's broader goal of fostering agency within the hegemonic structures of society.

In the context of Fine Art education, this concept translates into a process of critically examining the 'traces' that impact students' perspectives and artistic practices. By making these influences explicit, students can understand how their personal and creative identities are shaped by broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. This process not only enhances their ability to articulate their artistic intentions but also equips them with a critical framework for interrogating cultural narratives. In this way, Gramsci's 'inventory of traces', chiming with Paulo Freire's human-centered counter to the so-called 'Banking System' of education, becomes a tool for cultivating cultural literacy, self-awareness, and agency, all of which are essential components of an art education grounded in critical pedagogy.

### **Pedagogical Objectives of the 'Inventory of Traces' Framework**

The 'inventory of traces' framework aims to foster three key pedagogical objectives within a BA (Hons) Fine Art program:

1. **Critical Awareness and Cultural Literacy:** Encouraging students to recognise and analyse the socio-historical and ideological influences on their work.
2. **Personal Agency and Artistic Autonomy:** Empowering students to understand and shape their artistic identities through a process of critical self-reflection.
3. **Development of Reflective and Adaptive Artistic Practices:** Cultivating the ability to respond to and reinterpret cultural influences in innovative ways.

### **Pedagogical Methods for Implementing the 'Inventory of Traces'**

To operationalise this framework within the BA Hons Fine Art program at UoC, the '*Know Thyself*' project was introduced at Level 4 Semester 1. Utilising a range of teaching methods that emphasise self-reflection, cultural analysis, and critical engagement, this studio based project encourages students to think of 'self as found object'. In so doing, the student's studio practice is empowered by a stimulating exploration of both their lived experience and the lived histories of their communities. Below are some suggested methods aligned with each of the framework's pedagogical objectives:

#### **1. Tracing Personal and Cultural Influences through Reflective Journals**

Reflective journals offer a practical method for students to document and explore the 'traces' that shape their perspectives and artistic practices. By regularly writing about their experiences, influences, and reflections on socio-cultural issues, students can begin to identify recurring themes and assumptions in their work. This reflective practice encourages them to take stock of their personal history, cultural background, and the ideological forces that inform their art-making.

Educators can guide this journaling process by prompting students with questions such as:

- What cultural narratives or historical events do I feel connected to, and why?
- How do societal expectations around identity, class, or nationality influence my perspective?
- Are there recurring symbols, colours, or motifs in my work that reflect my cultural influences?

This exercise aligns with Gramsci's emphasis on making implicit influences explicit, allowing students to gain awareness of the socio-historical contexts embedded in their creative processes.

## **2. Critical Dialogues and Peer Review**

Engaging students in critical dialogues and peer reviews encourages them to articulate their artistic choices and contextual influences within a supportive and constructive environment. By discussing each other's work and exploring the different 'traces' that surface, students gain insights into diverse perspectives, building cultural literacy and broadening their understanding of the social forces that shape artistic expression.

Through structured discussions, educators can guide students in addressing questions such as:

- How do different cultural backgrounds influence artistic choices and interpretations?
- In what ways might my work reflect or challenge dominant cultural narratives?
- How can I consciously incorporate or subvert these influences in my art?

This method of peer engagement provides an opportunity for students to critically analyse and reflect on the collective and individual traces that inform artistic identities, fostering a deeper sense of agency in their practice. In addition, this theory-in-method approach maps directly to current UK Diversity legislation and to UN Sustainability targets.

### **Assessment and Reflection**

In a pedagogy based on Gramsci's 'inventory of traces', assessment should emphasise both the process and outcome of critical reflection. Evaluative criteria might include the depth of cultural analysis in reflective journals, the effectiveness of articulation in peer dialogues, and the creativity and cultural sensitivity demonstrated in thematic projects. Additionally, regular self-assessment opportunities can encourage students to reflect on their personal growth and critical development, fostering an ongoing commitment to self-awareness and cultural literacy.

### **Conclusion**

Applying Gramsci's 'inventory of traces' as a pedagogical framework in a BA (Hons) Fine Art program offers a structured approach to cultivating critical awareness, cultural literacy, and personal agency among students. By encouraging them to explore the socio-cultural influences embedded in their perspectives and practices, this framework aligns with the broader goals of critical pedagogy, equipping students with the skills to interrogate and reinterpret the cultural narratives that inform their work. Through reflective journaling, critical dialogues, and thematic projects, educators can foster an environment in which students become active agents in their artistic development, empowered to navigate and transform the socio-cultural landscape through their creative expression. This pedagogical approach not only enhances students' artistic autonomy but also instills a critical mindset that extends beyond the confines of the art studio, preparing them to contribute meaningfully to the broader cultural discourse.

Dr. Martin Fowler

October 2024

**(Note:** This paper was delivered at the annual NAFAE *Arts of Resistance Conference* at University of the Arts, Canterbury in September 2024.)