

Courting Resistance

Professor Juan Cruz
Dean of the School of Arts & Humanities, Royal College of Art

Dr Chantal Faust
Senior Tutor, Critical & Historical Studies and Research, Royal College of Art

I live yet do not live in me,
Am waiting as my life goes by,
And die because I do not die

- San Juan de la Cruz

FAUST.
What is your name?

MEPHISTOPHELES.
The question is absurd,
Surely, in one who seeks to know
The inmost essence, not the outward show,
And has such deep contempt for the mere word

FAUST.
Ah, with such a gentleman as you
The name often conveys the essence too,
Clearly enough, we say Lord of the Flies
Destroyer, Liar - each most fittingly applies.
Well then, who are you?

- Goethe

This co-authored paper addresses the forms of personal and even absurd resistance with which those working in fine art education might engage in order, not so much to make sense of the current climate, but to work through and fruitfully survive it. Key to this is an understanding and elaboration of resistance as a visceral and almost erotic quality, sublimated within a sometimes necessary acquiescence or strategic restraint.

Courting Resistance draws on the artistic method of autobiographical over-identification as a drive that seeks to find meaning in the circumstantial. The poetry of San Juan de la Cruz and the story of Faust, as the specific namesakes of the authors, both artists and writers working in fine art education, is discussed in relation to the lure of identification, the desire for the Other, the attempt to become oneself, and the impossibility of achieving formal recognition for who we think we are, and who we think we ought to be. Resistance here takes the form of personal protest, as a battle of internal forces that both shape and are shaped by learning, identification and the acquisition and integration of knowledge.

In the poem *I Live yet do no Live in Me*, St John, San Juan, speaks repeatedly and passionately about wanting to be closer to god, about wanting to achieve an ecstatic and otherworldly communion with god, which he knows he can only achieve by surrendering his relationship with the world he inhabits, the very world his god has given him and the life that his god sacrificed his own son to save. St John/San Juan knows this awful contradiction and feels the paradox painfully, making numerous allusions to the impossibility of a life lived simply in order to die.

In one of the verses he speaks of the relief that he identifies must be enjoyed by a fish that leaves the water, and wonders what he might have to compare to that relief. In fact, he feels in the weird stasis of being a fish out of water which remains very much in the water, out of its habitat and still within it.

Neither is this just a question of St John's/San Juan's imagination, or the subject of a tedious and extended metaphor. In the throes of the mystic experience described by St John/San Juan, the categories of life and death become most real and textured entities. St John/San Juan looks forward to the day when he can simply say that he lives because he doesn't die, but the crisis of the poem is the moment when this equilibrium has not yet been achieved, and where living feels to St John/San Juan as living death.

'I live without living in me
and so I wait
Dying because I don't die'

This is my translation of the first verse of the poem, a translation I undertook because of my interest in and engagement with the poem, and with the figure of St John of the Cross, who is loosely my namesake and on whose saint's day I was born. I was not however named after St John or San Juan - many children in my family are named Juan and then identified by their second name; Sebastian in my case, another martyr, but that's another story, perhaps.

I've often striven to identify with things in my work and in my life, attempted to grasp at things with which I might be able to claim some intrinsic connection. Spanish culture and literature for example, and Catholicism, things that I might have a chance to claim as birth rights or obligations. This poem gives me a sense not of the reasons for this desire somehow to sublimate experience, but of the state in which this might leave one.

At what point do we become our own names? And at what point do we come to represent the academic institution? Is it a matter of time, of wearing in, of escalation within the faculty, of increasing spine points?

I was in a tutorial recently and a student mentioned that a song I had played in a lecture was now firmly inserted into his playlist. He said that it had filled a gap in his music collection. He also said that his friends were teasing him for getting his sound tips from a college lecture. It struck me then, that to this student, I represented the academy. To him, I *am* the institution. It was a little disappointing, as I'd always considered myself as an artist, an artist who happens to teach in an art school.

At what point do we transgress, digress, sign the pact that makes us *become* the institution? And once we are the institution, (with the full cognisance that the institution is simultaneously the sum of all its people and also that it is bigger than all of us, that it will continue without us, that we are all ultimately, replaceable), once we *are* the institution, what kind of action or resistance is possible?

Can the contemporary institution be a site of action or is it always on the conservative side, the side of the Law, bound to and inseparable from its own name?

Wanting and not wanting – desiring to be and not to be all at the same time. Seeking to identify and yet also to be different; recognising contingency and yet seeking meaning from it. As an artist one identifies with other artists, and yet one tends to be as different as possible from all of them – there’s no currency in being a normal artist. Maybe that’s because ‘artist’ is understood, tacitly perhaps, as an ontological category. If you call yourself a geographer, botanist, architect, doctor or most any other professional category, there is a sense that this is what you have trained to do, whereas artist has the feel of something different, that when you say you ‘are’ an artist, you really mean that with regard to a profound sense of being, that what you are is inseparable from who you are – the same could be said for being a mystic poet I think.

Being an artist is then akin to identifying as an artist, more of a species or a category than a choice; something mired in quasi-religious thinking and a state that hovers between belief and disbelief.

I learned the truth at seventeen. Incidentally, I also met Janis Ian at seventeen. She said that she liked my hair. Jewish curls, like hers. But the truth I learned at seventeen was that one’s name does not necessitate one’s fame. Also, that I am not a very good actor. I went to a girls’ school and was studying Drama, so it was not that unusual to be auditioning for the lead role in our college play for that year, which happened to be *Dr Faustus and the Seven Deadly Sins*. I had thought that the programme would look magnificent:

Dr Faustus, played by Chantal Faust.

The audition consisted of me emerging from a stretchy black cocoon and making gesticulations with my hands in a slow, twisty manner - perhaps you might call it interpretive dance, to the sounds of Enya’s *On Your Shore*.

I was given the role of Sloth and had to roll on the stage, bra-less and in a brown sack, groaning the words: *Hey Ho, I am Sloth*. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that I chose to complete a PhD. Eleven years post-Sloth, I became Dr Faust.

I live without living in me – the I here is the official sanctioned self, the self that identifies a lineage and a rationale, the me is the self of the present, the sentient desiring body and mind.

I translated the poem on a typewriter and turned the translation into a kind of drawing or impression by using carbon copy paper, so that the sheet from which I'm now reading has letters in a courier typeface that are fuzzy on the paper.

My translation is very literal, I think it has to be as even in Spanish the poem feels as if it has been badly translated. This is probably because of the strained semantics occasioned first by the binary of living and not living, which is then complicated by the nuances of dying and death. There are moments in the reading where the poem feels just like annoying word play, as if it were full of clumsy flourishes of language; a novice poem, almost a sense of someone adolescently realising for the first time that words might have more than one meaning. But there's more to it, and just as the reading of the poem leads to a consideration of what might lie between life and death, so does there have to be a consideration of language and meaning, and the extent to which we are on the verge of language collapsing into utterances – think of the mouthing mouth of the fish gasping out of the water – mouthing but not speaking, just.

It's a poor metaphor but the fuzz of the words is, I realise now, just that, a metaphor for the near dissolution of meaning in the poem.

Once we have become our names, how do we live up to them? How do we live up to our names and the names of our institutions? Or how do we deny them? Is it a fuzzy process of oscillating between these two states?

Faust is a romantic idealist in Goethe's version of the story, and the Devil is the ultimate cynic. What plays out throughout this poetic drama is a tale of idealism versus cynicism, of contemplation versus action and a desire to achieve a state of both things at once.

In the famous scene of the pact, Faust declares to Mephistopheles: 'if I am ever to lie down in sloth and base inaction, then let that moment be my end', and that:

If by your false cajolery
You lull me into self-sufficiency,
If any pleasure you can give
Deludes me, let me cease to live!
I offer you this wager!

Done!

[responds Mephistopheles, to which Faust replies]

And done again!
If ever to the moment I shall say:
Beautiful moment, do not pass away!
Then you may forge your chains to bind
me,
Then I will put my life behind me...

Many people know something about or at least know of the imprisonment of St John of the Cross/San Juan de la Cruz in a tiny cell for 8 months – this has been familiarised in the art world by Bill Viola’s work about St John/San Juan. What is perhaps less well known, and much less glamorous, is that the cause of his imprisonment was the development of institutional religious differences among the Carmelites. As a student in Salamanca he met Santa Teresa de Avila and worked with her to found new Carmelite orders. In brief, their orders returned to previous and more ascetic Carmelite traditions and became known as the ‘descalzas’, the un-shoed, as opposed to the ‘calzadas’ who had succumbed to the comfort of wearing shoes.

It was the growing conflict between the orders that led to St John being imprisoned, but we should remember that in advance of his imprisonment he had spent ten years with Santa Teresa, developing the infrastructure of the order and that following his eight months of imprisonment, he returned to undertake administrative as well as religious duties in the monastery until his death, 14 years later in 1591.

There are letters in which San Juan complains of all the admin he has to do, and how this gets in the way of his mysticism, and yet somehow he finds the time to continue writing, the poems increasingly becoming instructional documents to teach the nuns about the love of god and the transcendence of the holy spirit.

While St John’s poems identify the dilemma of the mystic, who wants to surrender that which he believes god has created, and which he believes god loves, in order to be closer to god, in his life St John arguably also straddles another paradox in fomenting the potential for an understanding of the transcendence of god in heaven through the establishment of administrative structures on earth.

Faust’s pact is based on a guarantee of avoiding stasis – the stasis of a prolonged satisfaction that quells the search for more, the pursuit of infinite knowledge, and the stasis of trying to hold onto a perfect moment in time. It is a wager based on action and if action is denied, the penalty is death and to serve the Devil in hell for eternity.

If we think of Mephistopheles as the institution to which Faust has wagered his name and his soul, the challenge here is to both use Mephistopheles (the institution) for the stage unto the world of contemplation the he (or it) represents but also, importantly, to resist idleness, to resist the temptation not to act. In its most successful union, the act of becoming one’s name, and of binding one’s name to the institution, avoids the standstill of satisfaction and works to stimulate active endeavor.

However, it is not stasis, but erotic desire that momentarily undoes Faust from his own name. Gazing at his beloved in her bed, unseen, he questions:

And I! What purpose brings me? What
Profound emotion stirs me! What did I
Come here to do? Why do I sigh?
Poor wretch! Am I now Faust or not?

And in dreams of love he melts away.

Ultimately, it is Faust’s continued action - that he strives on and lives to strive - that earns his redemption. Active endeavour eclipses the pact, paradoxically courting temptation and courting resistance in the one moment.