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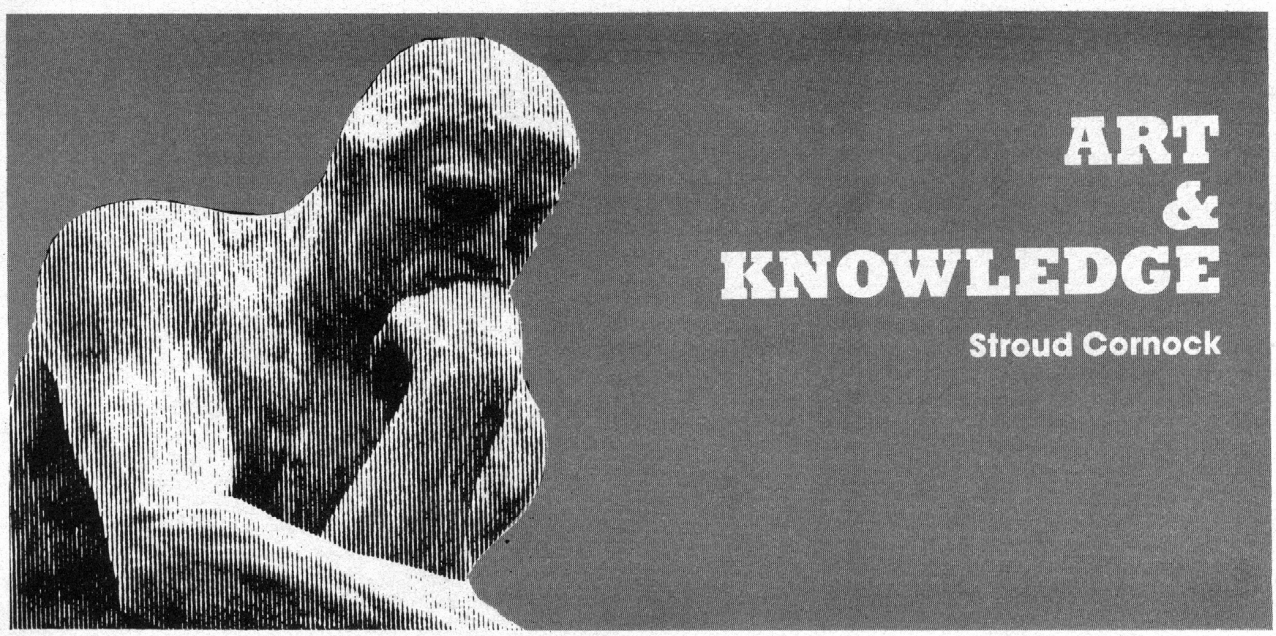


ART & KNOWLEDGE

Stroud Cornock

The Quest for Structure

T.S. Kuhn argued that knowledge does not grow simply by accretion but that, periodically, a 'paradigm shift' is called for and major restructuring takes place. While such paradigm shifts have taken place in art it is not clear that the structural changes in art *education* have reached below the level of college structure into the knowledge base. It is with this substrate that I am concerned here.

So this article, which is written at the climax of concern over art school cuts, is about something more serious: you can have more or less of something good, bad or indifferent; more basic is whether the quality of the surviving schools should be drastically changed. During this crucial period panels assembled first for the Leverhulme enquiry and then by the NAB,[1] have called for restructuring.

Restructuring is not, of course, new to art education. In the 17th century guildsmen contrasted what they saw as the idle and futile approach encouraged by the art academies on the one hand with the industry and usefulness of apprenticed artisans on the other. Even after the triumph of the academies the issue remained live as those in charge cast about for things to teach in place of the old apprenticeship. Evidence suggests that the batteries of rules devised by the leaders of the Academie were derived *not* from insights into or knowledge of drawing, painting and sculpture but were largely invented, deriving their absolute authority from the monarch. Fundamental disagreements erupted as neo-classicists clashed with romantics and, closer to our own time, radical new approaches to art and design education were thrown up in Russia and Germany; those integrative models have not, however, been widely followed.

Looking at the modern British system a characteristic which points back to the influence of William Morris is the material and technical orientation of the art schools. Departments, staffing and the curriculum have continued to be arranged around fabricating processes. They are of course necessary to, yet in no way sufficient for artistic practice and understanding. Welding, drawing, painting, carving and filming and all the other verbs describing what an art student **does** add up to a formidable list, yet leave a yawning gap; for practitioners may have little understanding of the principles of their action.

So the vulnerability of the workshop-centred art school lies in what its detractors see as a lack of intellectual rigour; again this is not new. During the renaissance painters and sculptors began the progress from craftsman status to that of courtier. Their strategy was to distance themselves from 'despicable toil' and seek association with the *arte liberales* and an essential mechanism was to enlist the help of contemporary writers. A quarter of a century ago Britain's art schools were steered into a similar strategy as historians and liberal arts scholars were drafted in to contribute an intellectual component essential to degree-equivalent status. Yet academics remained sceptical of all apparently practical studies and this scepticism has become deadly with growing competition for scarce resources.

Calls for reorientation and restructuring thus echo demands repeated across Europe and over centuries, suggesting that it is not easy to distinguish clearly between good art school practices and bad so as to make structural development progressive.

It seems that there is an unreasonable choice between the utter freedom to create art and the frozen grip of scholarly rules. Leonardo declared that *"The painter is to be taught knowledge more than skill."* In keeping with this dictum a current newspaper article urges the art schools to offer rigorous degrees with a substantial theoretical content. The case was spelled out more than a decade ago when Christopher Cornford declared the art schools to be so uncritical and spineless that, even following seven years of full-time tuition, graduates remained *". . . innocent of such relevant basics as colour theory, proportion theory, projection systems, morphology, perception psychology, communication theory and representational drawing."*[2] (note the repeated *theory* and *-ology.*) Today many of the topics on that shopping list appear in art school syllabuses up and down the country, together with others less theoretical and -ological. The critics have not been satisfied; indeed, it was never the intention to make such topics central to fine art, or even to shift its educational focus. For the fact is that we are not discussing here the greater or lesser effectiveness with which an agreed teaching job can be done, but the clash of irreconcilable ideas as to what the job is.

The knowledge-oriented view of art education was established through Mannerist influences on the academies of art: the Protestant seats of learning were elaborate and schematic, giving rise to the batteries of rules referred to earlier. An American university art school, descendent of that approach, is described below as an aggregation of bits of art knowledge: *"Our schools of art today are uniquely characterized . . . by their 'track', 'course-work', and 'subject-matter' orientations, and by that expanded and fragmented curriculum so typical of contemporary*

education. The institutional structure of our art schools conforms to that of the corporation. An examination of the catalogue of any professional art department will show a variety of programs offered under such headings as Painting . . . Under each heading will be listed perhaps ten or twenty separate courses, each of which offers the student one ***part*** *of the skills and theory connected with the general unit of study. Each student is tracked on a 'degree program' through a maze of these courses, some chosen from his 'major' subject and others from such areas of study as 'English' or 'Humanities'.*[3] So Leonardo's vision of painting as *scientia* becomes dull corporate reality.

But it is equally important to recognize that, back in Britain in the Coldstream era, dreams of creative freedom could and sometimes did devolve into self-indulgence and 'up-to-the-minute plagiarism'.

The fundamental problem confronting the art schools arises from their absorption into the increasingly formalized system of higher education. That theory-centred system looks askance at practical studies whilst the art schools themselves reciprocate by doubting theory. The problem as I want to present it here can be stated in this way: can the art schools structure their knowledge base **without** introducing some deadening set of rules prescribing what art is and how it shall be made; is it possible to envisage a synthesis of knowledge and skill, a reconciliation of artistic freedom and academic discipline?

An answer will be offered in the form of three tasks. First, looking to those vital aspects of fine art study which could never be defined or specified, we must not leave matters to chance or cloak them in mystery: there is a need to ensure that we have done all we can to make tacit knowledge *graspable.* Second, where explicit knowledge is to be taught it should not be imported as a supplementary diet from other fields but should, instead, be developed and taught for its *relevance* to the fine arts. The third and final task arises out of the first two and is to *integrate* the tacit and explicit areas of learning that constitute this field of study.

Grasping Tacit Knowledge

It is impossible to say how we recognize a face. It is true that a lot of words may be used in teaching someone to ride a bicycle, but the words themselves (as they would be printed out in a textbook) are wholly literal and convey nothing of the 'feel' essential to knowing how to ride the machine. Experiences of that kind interested a philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi, who concluded that *"We can know more than we can tell".* His aim was to attack excessive formalization, but critics seized on his contention that knowledge cannot be made wholly explicit as deliberate avoidance of rigorous thinking. However, Polanyi's central thesis is not that allowance must be made for special instances of tacit knowledge, but that there is a tacit dimension to **all** knowledge. Knowledge is not, he is insisting, a disembodied, neutral accumulation: instead it is personal and, what is more, can only be passed on to the extent that the learner grasps the affirmation of that knowing by a master.

Polanyi's target was the expansion of science teaching and research based on increasing use of textbook material and decreasing use of tutorial guidance by people engaged in scientific enquiry. *". . . any attempt to gain complete control of thought by explicit rules is self-contradictory, systematically misleading, and culturally destructive."*[4] But this philosophy of science has obvious relevance to the processes of art education.

The central core of fine art studies is practice in the studio. Polanyi speaks of a *"structural kinship between the arts of knowing and doing"* since what is required of the student is a commitment to the: *"process of unconscious trial and error by which we* ***feel our way*** *to success and may continue to improve on our success without specifically knowing how we do it — for we never meet the causes of our success as identifiable things . . .*[5] It is this commitment to enquiry through generative activity in the studio which makes undergraduate fine art study so like research in other fields. Here also we go beyond the apparent dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity. The appreciation of art is not mere preference; Polanyi observes that: *"Man can transcend his own subjectivity by striving passionately to fulfil his personal obligation to* ***universal*** *standards".* The authentic features of learning are best discerned when we are groping for a solution to a problem, which points back to the personal commitment (rather than mere subjectivity) central to learning in the arts, where there is no question of feeding the student a predigested portion of knowledge. The principle is that of construction: the student is **not told** what is meaningful; he **does not create** meaning out of nowhere; what he does is **to construct** a working process — images, forms and articulate ideas — which come to constitute what is, for him, meaningfulness, and in the appreciation of which he must engage others.

Studio activity is the vital core of fine art studies **because** it demands of the student this constructive 'research'. It is **not** because of some bloody-minded refusal to get down to the supposed task of 'track work', theory and -ology.

Relevance and Integration

An excellent art education will equip a graduate to earn a living in the international art market. A useful art education will also equip a graduate to support himself in a variety of other ways, since the absence of an organized artistic profession makes it improbable that more than a single-figure percentage of graduates will establish themselves as artists. (It is a matter of historical fact that, with the decline of patronage, independent artists became speculative producers and began to find ways of supplementing their incomes: Jan Steen by innkeeping, van Goyen by growing tulips and Hobbema in the wine trade.)

It is now widely agreed that an art education should offer the student some understanding of the conditions governing the existence of artists in society. An historical perspective on art is of immense value but should not be allowed to eclipse a range of other analyses. One which demands special consideration is criticism.

Fine art studies proceed in phases. Practical and tacit work in the studio is succeeded by critical discussion in or away from it. Both experience and formal research tell us that making takes logical priority over criticism since discussion follows and serves the manipulation of forms and images.[6] Verbal criticism neither specifies what shall be sought in visual form, nor determines our evaluation of what has been produced; in both physical and intellectual work it is our tacit grasp which evokes and guides our attempts at articulate expression.

Over time, conscious awareness of self and world is a synthesis or orchestration of verbal and tacit processes. In this field no less than any other the student should develop the ability to discriminate, using not only *"tacit consciousness"*[7] but also struggling with explicit ideas, for: *"Intuitive judgement has a role in science and ethics . . . conversely, analysis and deduction have a role in aesthetics . . ."*[8] Yet there is often insufficient effort on the part of the art student to describe and interpret what is being done, whether to himself or to others. Though criticism is a secondary phase it is nonetheless vital and some formal knowledge of the processes of critical analysis will be valuable, which implies one direction in which art school staff development programmes might incline.

The practical and critical phases of art mirror an interior dialogue. Arising out of the need to verbalize non-verbal aspects of art study is the difficulty of communicating tacit skills, perceptions and meanings through tutorial dialogue. This difficulty is represented **within** the individual, since he has to process information about the world using two thinking strategies: where one produces

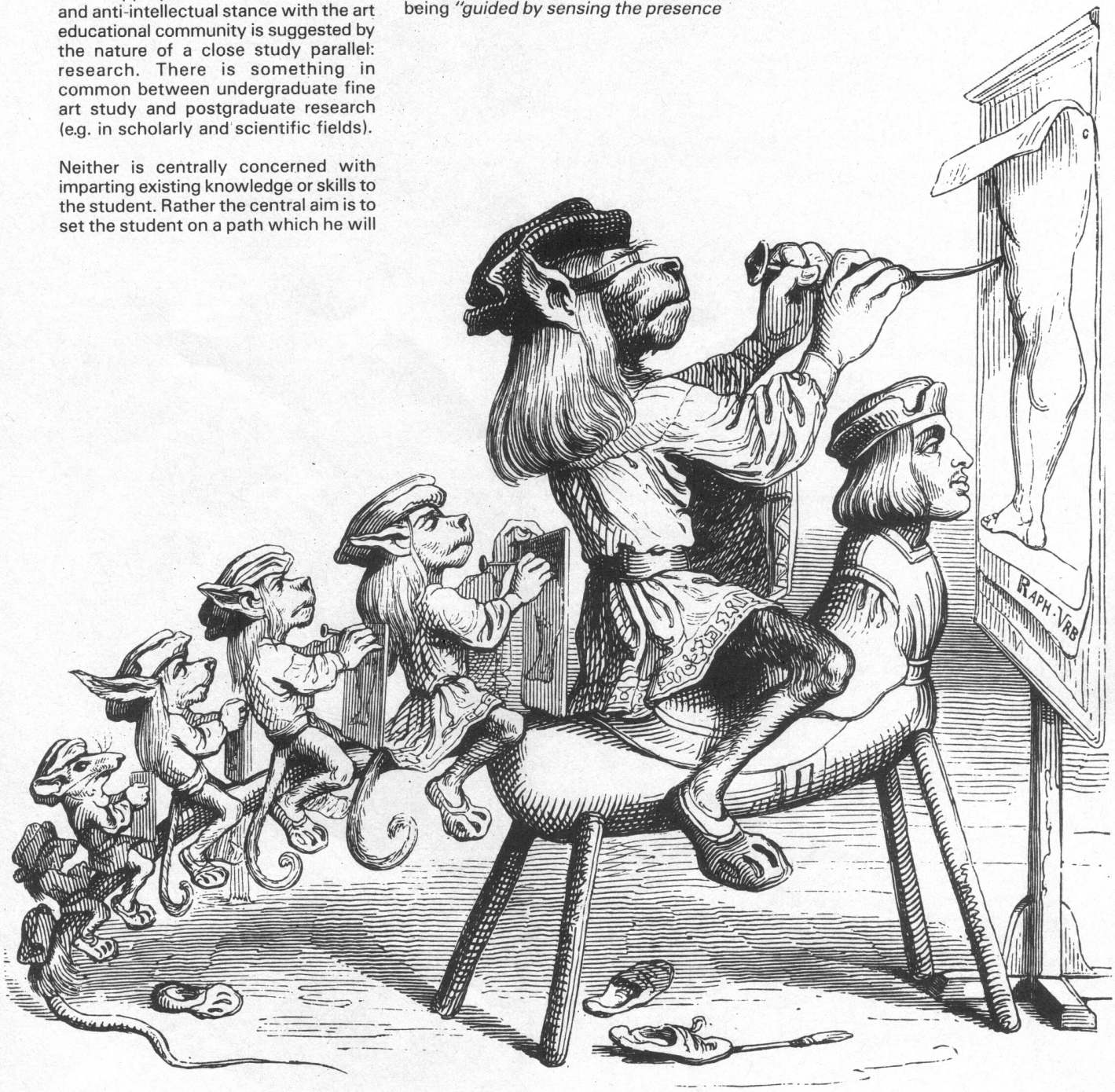
holistic perceptions the other seeks to produce rational explanations. Each part of the self has, from earliest infancy, the task of translating information from the other side and a continuous internal dialogue takes place which includes, according to one neuropsychologist, *"guessing, confabulation and self-deception"*. Activities such as drawing will produce 'translation' difficulties proportional to the subtlety and complexity of the thinking involved and the full significance of the products of thought will not be available either to the individual or to those with whom he communicates until some sort of internal dialogue has been effected.

The Research Parallel

The *in*appropriateness of a defensive and anti-intellectual stance with the art educational community is suggested by the nature of a close study parallel: research. There is something in common between undergraduate fine art study and postgraduate research (e.g. in scholarly and scientific fields).

Neither is centrally concerned with imparting existing knowledge or skills to the student. Rather the central aim is to set the student on a path which he will be able to open up further for himself *"The aim of the college, for the individual student, is to eliminate the need in his life for the college; the task is to help him become a self-educating man."*[9] The main requirement of 'personal development' is that the student be able to generate his own problems and organize the means with which to tackle them effectively. Again, although lecturers must expect to teach relevant knowledge and skills, their main responsibility is to act as exemplars of the *kinds* of practice which produce continuing development. Polanyi describes research in terms which echo our sense of the priorities in art education. It involves, he suggests, being able to experience *"an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars,"* and of being *"guided by sensing the presence of a hidden reality toward which our clues are pointing."* For students both of art and by research, discovery involves stretching, effort; knowledgeability and accomplishment are not enough: these students cannot know explicitly what a good problem is before it is found; nor yet a good solution; yet they must produce both — and know that they have done so.

There is a further point of similarity. Although some hundreds of textbooks



claim to provide the reader with instruction on fine art practice, none are taken very seriously at the tertiary level. Similarly, textbooks on research method have only limited value. What **is** essential to both forms of study is that they are pursued within the framework of a strong tradition, through which mastery, involving a high level of tacit consciousness, can be imparted: some form of apprenticeship; access to practical experience and the opportunity to learn by example. Both research and art studies call for a high degree of personal commitment on the part of the learner, since to learn in these fields is not to ingest facts so much as to pick up the rules of an 'art'. For both the researcher and the art tutor it is chastening to have to acknowledge that many of those rules are not explicitly known to the master himself.

What I have argued is that any 'restructuring' should have the effect of making the art schools more effective in developing the holistic capabilities of the student and that we should not be bullied into replacing it with an aggregate of theory and -ology. This means uncovering principles which will enable us to encourage effective learning strategies. I have also argued the need to provide a body of relevant knowledge and have stressed the role of critical studies. Finally, in drawing a parallel with research, I mean to emphasize the importance in this field of an integrated approach in which practical and theoretical elements of study contribute to the *"greater understanding and competence"* enshrined in CNAA Principle 3.3.

Notes

(1) National Advisory Board on Local Authority Higher Education in England and Wales.

(2) CORNFORD, Christopher (December 12 1975) *Art for society's sake,* **Times Higher Education Supplement,** p. 17.

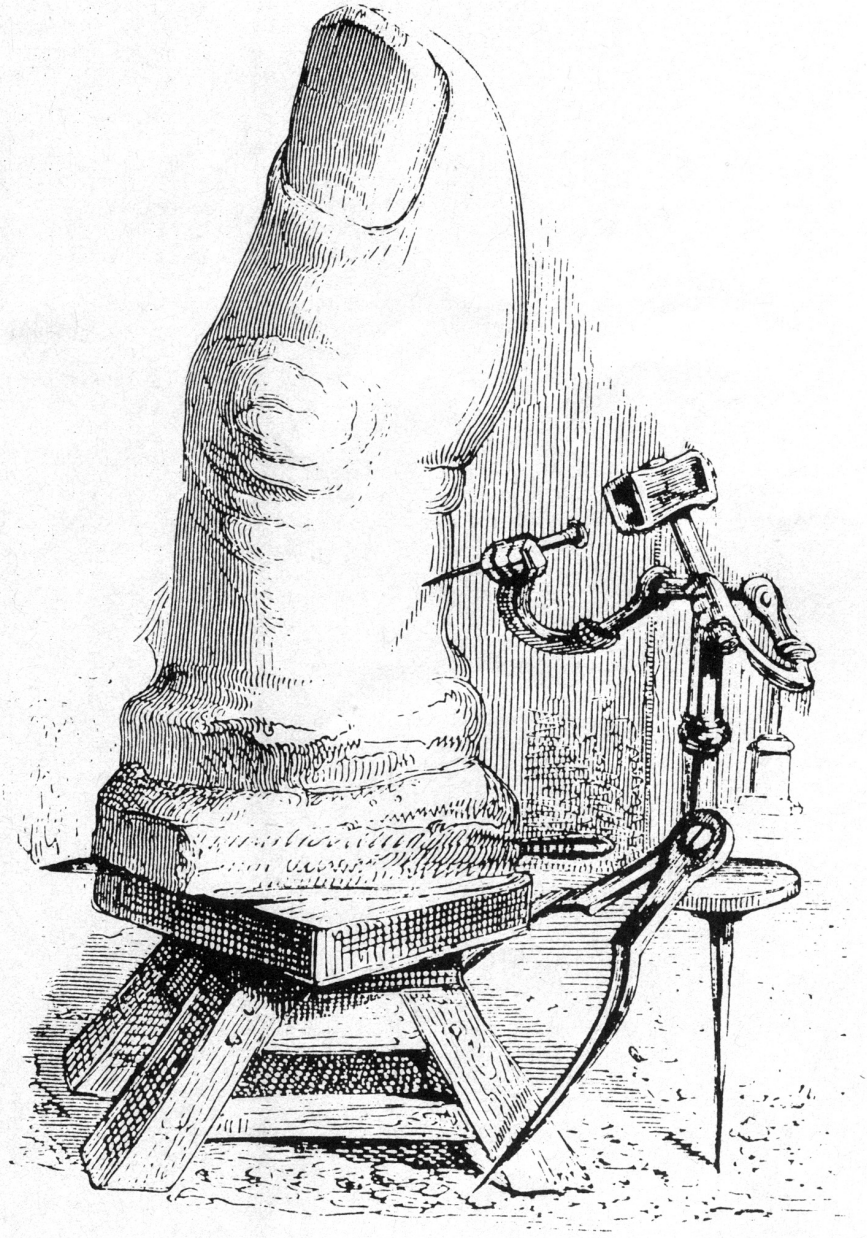
(3) LEEDS, Jo Alice (1974) *The Workshop and the Academy* (Dissertation, University of Oklahoma) pp. 155f.)

(4) POLANYI, Michael (1966) *The logic of tacit inference,* **Philosophy,** 41, pp. 369-386.

(5) POLANYI, Michael (1958) **Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy** (London: Routledge)

(6) The research referred to is discussed in CORNOCK, Stroud (1983) *Towards a methodology for students of fine art,* **Journal of Art and Design Education,** 2, 1, pp. 81-99; and in CORNOCK, Stroud (1984) *Learning strategies in the study of fine art,* **Journal of Art and Design Education,** 3, 2, pp. 141-159.

(7) This concept is introduced in CORNOCK, Stroud (1984) *Implications of lateralization of brain function for art education: a critical review,* **Educational Psychology,** 4, 2, pp. 139-153.

(8) VICKERS, Geoffrey (1976) *Artistry in Physical and Social Space* in **Aesthetics in Science,** Edited by Judith Wechsler (M.I.T. Press).

(9) MILLS, C. Wright (1964) *Mass Society and Liberal Education,* in **Power, Politics and People,** Edited I.L. Horowicz (New York: Oxford U.P.)