

SELF-ORGANISATION: DE-CENTRALISED BEHAVIOUR WITHOUT THE REWARDS

“..... the status of the single institution is no more than that of one hub among many that channel the discursive productivity generated by the field as a whole.”¹ Jan Verwoert

What’s happening outside of our arts institutions? This may seem like an opposing question to ask when discussing aspects of the curriculum within the context of fine art education today. However, it’s a question that presented itself during degree moderation at Glasgow School of Art in June 2015, and is one that I have sought to find answers to ever since.

What became apparent, during those two weeks of intense scrutiny, was a realisation that something had shifted in a number of our final year graduates behavior, which subsequently manifested itself in where they chose to locate, or site, their burgeoning and varied arts practices. This shift has no name as yet, and the term ‘professional practice’ isn’t sufficient enough to describe neither its reach nor its complexity, however, the self-organised nature of it, along with its de-centralised philosophy, generates an energy that is admirable and therefore should be made quantifiable and valued for its resourcefulness. However, through the course of moderation it became clear that, on both counts, our shared experience of it, and our ability to assess it appropriately, were wanting.

“Whatever exists at all exists in some amount.”² (Thorndike, 1918, p16)

As academic staff being observant is key, and our collective insights and experiences are fundamental elements that assist in the process of educating our students in order for them to evolve into artists. However, what is becoming apparent is that our faculties are not as sharp as they could be. I believe there are many reasons for this loss of focus: our roles as fine art educators and practitioners have become multifaceted, and therefore much more complex than ever before. Dare I go even further and suggest that, in terms of education today, it is, in fact, getting harder to teach! I raise this contentious issue purely because, on a daily basis, it is abundantly clear that our students arrive at our front doors with a whole host of new skills, ideas, attitudes and issues that subsequently take time to identify, temper, enable, develop and expand upon.

With growing student numbers, and a variety of fractional academic contracts, managing the complexity of this ultimately takes time, effort, care, flexibility, and attention. Consequently, the result of this development means that our remit and the role the fine art educator now includes professional skills that traditionally occupied a space out with, and beyond, the location of art school education. I reiterate, our careers have developed, and are now progressively multifarious and diverse. We understand this, but it does not diminish the fact that our powers of observation are being hindered and blunted via the very thing we believe in, and that is, the education of individuals who wish to be artist.

However, as educators, to place emphasis on what we attempt to achieve daily is of paramount importance as this process is what ultimately makes our arts institutions, and the education we provide, unique. In speaking with other academics from a variety of different fields, they often ask why this learning and teaching process is so important? And want to know why we continue to pay such close attention to it. The answer is quite simple, such

¹ Essay entitled, School’s Out!-? Arguments to challenge or defend the institutional boundaries of the academy, written by Jan Verwoert, from the book entitled, Notes for an Art School, p3. <http://manifesta.org/manifesta-6/>

² Book entitled, Educational Research – Contemporary issues and practical approaches, P6, written by Jerry Wellington.

responsiveness is a key component in the development of fine art student's particular and distinctive autonomy, and in our multitasking and demanding roles as educators, we cannot forget how important the evolution of 'the self' is for students who have chosen to occupy this expanded sphere of education.

Thankfully, Lane Relyea, the American critic, theorist, and Associate Professor of Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern University, understands the independence this process encourages, and this is evident in his 2015 paper and presentation entitled, *The Subjects of The Institution of Art*. His observations are further legitimized, or given *credo*, by his use of a variety of terms that identify certain aspects of this transformation. He firstly refers to art students as 'art subjects', and goes further to explain why they now choose the location, and the politics, of the 'low end', and that they also articulate this critical position via numerous forms of their own, and others, 'DIY agency'.

*"Today, along with art objects, art subjects are also externalized. That is, the concern of our new system is less about inward turn inspiration and contemplation than about outward turn participation and responsiveness. The individual goes from being a person with core and essence to being somebody who's performative, who's on demand and Just In Time. Who is in constant feedback with her, or his, specific context, from one moment to the next."*³ Lane Relyea

His argument is knowing, is very persuasive, and is further expanded upon in a variety of his critical texts including, *All Systems Blow* and, *Your Everyday Art World*. However, it is important to point out that his observations refer to graduates of Masters programmes, along with their postgraduate ambitions and activities.

His phrase, 'new system', has particular origins, and it is safe to say that some of the traits Relyea identifies have been influenced by a whole host of political, economic and social changes seen far beyond the confines of the art world, and the fluctuating art market. However, if we return to education, and trace these origins back, what has subsequently been played out across many well known postgraduate arts programmes is a response to, and a by produce of, the perceptive observations made by American author, Daniel H. Pink, which are best represented in the following quote from his 2005 book entitled, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-brainers will Rule the Future*.

*"A masters of fine art, an MFA, is now one of the hottest credentials.....the MFA is the new MBA."*⁴ Daniel H.Pink

Eleven years have indeed elapsed since the publication of this text and, in that space and time, postgraduate activities and outputs have evolved. In addition, the fruits of their professional labour are not only prolific they are inventive, ingenious, incredibly shrewd, and profoundly articulate. Furthermore, the evidence of their developed cultural capital is not located purely within the realms of the gallery context, or the contemporary art systems, it is instead easily accessible and can be experienced, understood and purchased through a variety of means and mechanisms that permeate every aspect of our public and private worlds. Suffice to say, 'art subjects', with their multidimensional creative acumen, are visible on the net, in publications, exhibitions, blogs, performances, collectives, galleries, symposiums and even prestigious (arts) award ceremonies. However, the consequence of their ideals and their proliferation are now infiltrating our undergraduate courses, and certain characteristics are being adopted, and appropriated, by a growing number of our undergraduate students. Moreover, this is creating a new mindset and, with it, we are seeing the emergence of a different set of skills and priorities. With our years of experience,

³ Paper entitled, 'The Subjects of The Institution of Art', written by Lane Relyea. This was presented at the THINKING THROUGH INSTITUTIONS International Symposium, curated by Megs Morley, Para Institution, Galway, 7th May 2015. <http://www.parainstitution.ie/thinkin...>

⁴ Book entitled, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-brainers will Rule the Future*, written by Daniel H.Pink, p54.

we are aware that trends come and go, but this accelerated 'new system' has strong traits that are highly influential, and are currently being passed down, mimicked, employed and deployed, even by our first year students.

When returning to the question presented at the very beginning of this text, and after attempting to find answers to this contrary question, looking outwards and taking time to read a variety of relevant texts made it quite clear where the origins of this undergraduate development came from, and helped clarify why, and how, we are witnessing this development in our institutions today. However, in order to better understand what lies at the heart of recent shifts in our undergraduate's behavior, concerns and arts practices, looking inwards and consulting those closest to the debate became the obvious next step.

*"Whatever exists at all exists in some amount. To know it thoroughly involves knowing its quantity as well as its quality. Education is concerned with changes in human beings; a change is a difference between two conditions; each of these conditions is known to us only by the products produced by it—things made, words spoken, acts performed, and the like. To measure any of these products means to define its amount in some way so that competent persons will know how large it is, better than they would without measurement. To measure a product well means so to define its amount that competent persons will know how large it is, with some precision, and that this knowledge may be conveniently recorded and used. This is the general credo of those who, in the last decade, have been busy trying to extend and improve measurements of educational products."*⁵ (Edward Thorndike, 1918, p 16)

In order to gain insight, and to find greater clarity, it therefore felt appropriate to negotiate this balancing position through the lens of a phenomenological study. This research activity would therefore be centered upon the 'lived experiences' of six recent fine art graduates; Lauren Davis, Albert Elm, Jessica Higgins, Lewis Prosser, Chitra Sangtani and Martha Simms. It was *their* degree show presentations that generated the spark for this enquiry, as their varied arts practices clearly took them far beyond the recognisable framework of the arts institution. In order to find a suitable language, one appropriate for the purpose of this study, I have therefore chosen to identify and refer to this phenomenon as 'self-organised' and, or, 'de-centralised behavior'. Essentially, I employ these terms in order to carefully formulate a vocabulary that is appropriate. However, I also use these particular words in order to define what lies at the very core of our recent graduates diverse arts practices and how this, in its entirety, was developed, and experienced, during their undergraduate studies. However, like any research investigation, which relies heavily on the help and support of others, acquiring information and feedback has its own risks and empirical flaws. After having individually contacted six recent graduates, and explained the purpose of this study, which would include and value their contribution, only three graduates took the time to participate; Lauren Davis (fine art photography), Jessica Higgins (sculpture and environmental art) and Lewis Prosser (paint and printmaking). Undeterred, our interactions, and the process of information gathering progressed and took the form of several emails, a number of telephone calls, various casual conversations one formal meetings and the following carefully considered questionnaire.

⁵ www.personality-project.org/r/book/Chapter1.pdf

SELF-ORGANISED QUESTIONNAIRE

NAME:

DEPARTMENT YOU STUDIED IN:

PLEASE GIVE A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR PRACTICE:

1. WHAT MOTIVATED YOUR SELF-ORGANISED PRACTICE/ACTIVITIES?
2. DID ACADEMIC STAFF UNDERSTAND YOUR EXTENDED PRACTICE?
3. WERE YOU ENCOURAGED TO DEVELOP YOUR SELF-ORGANISED CONCERNS?
YES/NO
(IF YES, HOW WAS THIS SUPPORTED?)
4. WERE YOUR COLLABORATIVE ENDEAVOURS ENCOURAGED?
YES/NO
(IF YES, HOW WAS THIS ENCOURAGED?)
5. WOULD YOU DEFINE YOUR SELF-ORGANISED ACTIVITIES/PRACTICE AS -
EXTRA-CURRICULAR?
6. DID YOU FEEL YOUR EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES/PRACTICE WERE/WAS EQUALLY
VALUED?
7. DID THE LIMITS OF MEDIUM SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES PLAY A PART IN YOUR
EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES/PRACTICE
YES/NO
(IF YES, WHY?)
8. DID ASSESSMENT PROCEEDURE SUPPORT YOUR SELF-ORGANISED
ACTIVITIES/PRACTICE
YES/NO
(IF YES, HOW WAS THIS SUPPORTED?)
9. DID YOU FEEL OUR ASSESSMENT CRITERIONS FITTED YOUR SELF-
ORGANISED ACTIVITIES/PRACTICE?
YES/NO
(IF NO, WHY DO YOU THINK THIS IS THE CASE?)

AND FINALLY!

10. DID YOU FEEL YOU DEGREE MARK REFELCTED YOUR EFFORTS?

Every aspect of this phenomenological study has allowed for 'essential themes', 'significant statements' and 'clusters of meanings' to occur, which have brought a clarity to this debate that I had not anticipated, nor envisaged. Furthermore, the quantity and the quality of the feedback provided by those three individuals is, without question, of the highest standard. It is comprehensive, academically astute, and critically aware; and categorically positions itself on an altogether different horizon, where institutional critique is an absolute necessity, and therefore of paramount importance. Like the 'low end' it encompasses the political, the philosophical, the aesthetic, the economic, the democratic, and the inclusive. However, these young makers do not refer to their practices as such. This term, much like the term 'professional practice', just isn't sufficient enough to encompass the intellectual depth of what they have disclosed in their answers, and what is evident in how they all operate and function as artists.

Being at the forefront and witnessing new epochs is nothing new within the context of fine art education. However, who previously led the way?

It is now abundantly clear that our recent graduates, along with our current students, occupy new terrain. In an attempt to define and categorise this new landscape, Alan Kirby coined the phrase 'Digimodernism', and this new axiom is expanded upon in his 2009 book entitled, *'Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle The Postmodern And Reconfigure Our Culture'*. It therefore follows that our agile and creative cohort, those who occupy spaces both inside and outside of the institution are, indeed, 'Digimodernists'.

*"My paraphrase (from Herbert Marcuse) polemic calling for a confident discourse, one that reflects the practice of a generation, where being positive, overt and obvious is reported by reference to wider political and cultural contexts and not derided for possessing the characteristics of revolution."*⁶ Sue Baker

The breadth of knowledge and experience that Lauren Davis, Jessica Higgins and Lewis Prosser provided, now gives us a real opportunity to feed this critique back into our fine art institutions, because their words speak volumes and, carry weight. Undeniably, some of what was written makes for uncomfortable reading. However, it is vitally important that we take heed and pay full attention. 'Student agency' is now common educational vernacular, and centrally locating students into the discourse of fine art education will undoubtedly enable and mobilise this debate. What has been discovered via their inclusion and participation, I hope, will ultimately move this discourse forwards, and far beyond where we are now. And, if taken seriously, this shared knowledge will allow for change to occur that is appropriate for this new era in fine art education.

*"The academy can, therefore, become a site for unsanctioned forms of production when it is activated as a local support structure for an international discourse between marginal cultural producers and intellectuals. In this spirit, the academy must be transformed into an open platform that offers a viable alternative to the museum and gallery system through the integration and redefinition of the function of art education, production, presentation, circulation and documentation."*⁷ Jan Verwoert

Furthermore,

*"It should take place in the name of a different future and be dedicated to the cause of making that future possible."*⁸ Jan Verwoert

⁶ Essay entitled, Art School 2.0: Art School in the Information Age or Reciprocal Relations and the Art of the Possible, p41, written by Sue Baker from the book entitled, Rethinking the Contemporary Art School – The Artist, The PhD and The Academy, edited by Bradley Buckley and John Conomos.

⁷ Essay entitled, School's Out!-? Arguments to challenge or defend the institutional boundaries of the academy, written by Jan Verwoert, from the book entitled, Notes for an Art School, p4. <http://manifesta.org/manifesta-6/>

⁸ Essay entitled, School's Out!-? Arguments to challenge or defend the institutional boundaries of the academy, written by Jan Verwoert, from the book entitled, Notes for an Art School, p6. <http://manifesta.org/manifesta-6/>

However, I bring this paper to a close with the following cautionary note.

*“...in the end, the question we will have to continue to discuss is whether you can dismantle the disciplinary power of the academy and put its potentials to a different use, or whether the power structures of the institution remain too inflexible to allow for such a process of transformation.”*⁹ Jan Verwoert

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⁹ Essay entitled, School's Out!-? Arguments to challenge or defend the institutional boundaries of the academy, written by Jan Verwoert, from the book entitled, Notes for an Art School, p6. <http://manifesta.org/manifesta-6/>