

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE 'REAL'

Sculpture and Environmental Art (SEA) Student Placements in Criminal Justice Settings

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HISTORICALLY, SEA has developed its programme around the thinking of the Artist Placement Group, that context is half the work (APG, 1980). In recent years this ethos has grown, and perhaps is as much, if not more, about “bumping into the real world” (Fernández Pan, 2012), in particular through ‘live’ public art projects in a wide range of contexts. The collaboration with New College Lanarkshire (NCL), supported by ArtWorks Scotland (AWS) is an example of how partnership enabled a ‘mass’ placement activity of 15 SEA students in seven Scottish Prisons in all of NCL’s learning centres, not selective of students or learners and not exclusive to one prison setting or another.

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Motivation for the placements might align with, but was not designed to be part of a social justice agenda; it was not a desire solely for training or employability (Pegg et al, 2012) or creating pedagogic projects as works of art (Bishop, 2012); nor was it showing the artist as problem ‘finder’ or ‘problem makers’, even through they are (Cosgrove et al, 2010). A big part of what our students do is ask questions right from the outset about what art is, what does it do, who is it for and why; rigorously testing their learning and knowledge against processes, situations and contexts. Prisons offered a particular challenge for students in how and where these questions might be asked: the social/political context was heightened through the ‘real’; in this setting there was no sidestepping or bypassing of regulations or rules and no avoidance of responsibility or emotion.

The collaboration was “not centred in the physical condition of a single object or in the imaginative capacity of an individual viewer”; it was “an ensemble of effects, operating at numerous points of discursive interaction” (Kester, 2004: 189). For example, in HMP Cornton Vale, the use of more familiar domestic/culinary skills allowed sharing of knowledge, and culminated in a shared and social event. In HMP Glenochil, collaboration involved learners with students from even wider areas of the Glasgow School of Art, communicating from a distance through a simple exchange of instructions for the making of work, then physically coming together as part of a



GSA Placement Student, HMP YOI Cornton Vale. (Above)
HMP YOI Cornton Vale. (Below)





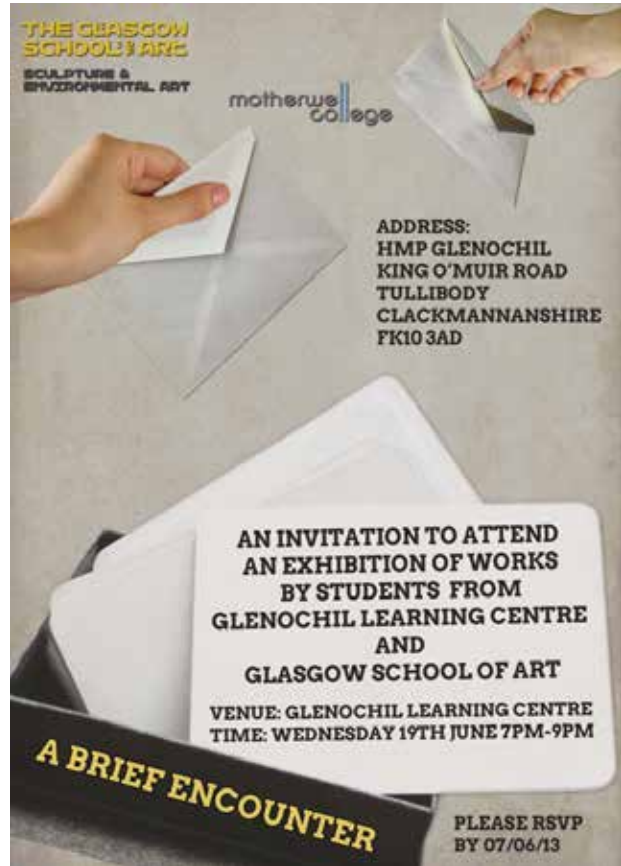
Participant, GSA project, HMP YOI Cornton Vale

shared exhibition. In how and what they did, whether drawing, making, installation, or exhibition and event, students' drew on their own experiences as learners, situating themselves in, as part of the group. This wasn't always straightforward; students, rightly, had to respond, modify and shape what they might have wanted to do in relation to learners' themselves. Research undertaken by AWS offers further insight into motivations for taking part and highlights, in particular the empathy and feelings of responsibility that ran between learners and students. The level of emotion students would feel in this experience hadn't been expected to be "such a massive thing"; planning and organisation, yes, but not the "drowning in thoughts" (Dean, 2013).

The Placement programme was not about students going in and practicing to be teachers or being 'trained' to work in such settings, but doing what they do and sharing the ways they learn in another context. The impact that this experience has had on their developing art practice is palpable. It was made possible through an exchange that was "created in collaboration" and realised through a "reciprocal process"; each feeling responsibility for the other, with not only the artist but all of us having our "preconceptions (about the community or specific social, cultural, and political issues) challenged and transformed" (Kester, *ibid*: 151).



Participant, GSA project, HMP Glenochil



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