

Networks, Space and the Artist-Citizen

As leader of a Foundation Art & Design course, I have been part of the journey into art school, introducing what is characterized as the time and place to play, experiment and speculate, and to grow towards possible futures. But now, as UCAS pops up in the middle of the Foundation year, it abruptly reveals the concerns of students facing debt, questions about the value and quality of an expensive education and concerns in our 'current economic climate' about how they are going to earn a living.

Then this year, due to changes in funding – as FE money can no longer be routed through HE organisations – we had to rewrite our Foundation course as a Certificate of Higher Education, a Level 4, full-fee-paying course – and we have done this as we prepare to move into a smaller studio. These and other things, accumulating over the past years, cause us to ask questions about what we are actually doing now and what art education could and should be... and who is the student we are sending out into the world and how are we equipping them?

Space is both a tool and a metaphor in all aspects of my work, and Stewart Brand, in his evergreen book *How Buildings Learn* (1994) considers the horizontal and vertical axes within the spaces in which we teach and learn, quoting Professor Sim Van der Ryn:

I prefer a one-storey responsive wood building to a ten storey extremely inflexible concrete one. When you go from a horizontal plan to a vertical one, immediately you develop a hierarchy, and there's less communication.

(Van der Ryn in Brand 1994:69)

By clearing learning areas of the burdens of all sorts of hierarchies, we can make *bubbles* for the creation and exchange of knowledge - in the studio, the gallery and the wider city. *Social condensers*, an idea from 1920s Russian housing design, are described in this way:

...a space or volume that causes the overlap and intersection of different programs and agendas, bringing people together for an eventual shared purpose by which they are united by way of 'social collision', or social interaction within the volume.

(Studio 8 2009)

These are some of the ideas feed the management of the Foundation studio, staff team and student cohort as we work towards greater flexibility in the use of space and a flatter gradient within the staff group and between staff and students; and as we have grown an evolving network within and beyond the Foundation studio - an expanded social condenser - through our relationships with local galleries and museums - the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea Museum, the Glynn Vivian, Mission and Elysium Galleries, Swansea Festival, Bay Studios, schools, colleges and other organisations. We visit them and they visit us, connecting through student residencies, placements and exhibitions, walks, talks, workshops and classes.

Dr. John Kotter, of the Harvard Business School writes that:

...the successful organization of the future will have two organizational structures:
a Hierarchy, and a more teaming, egalitarian, and adaptive Network.

(Kotter 2011)

Online communication has accelerated many political situations into a network/hierarchy dynamic and the need to consider Kotter's model in the university-based art school may seem urgent when Claire Bishop notes in *Artificial Hells*

When I encountered artists speaking of education in creative and liberatory terms, it seemed perplexing, if not willfully misguided: for me, the university was one of the most bureaucratic and stiflingly uncreative environments I had ever encountered.

(Bishop 2012: 245)

In contrast, Bishop also writes of a participatory pedagogical project by the artist Tania Bruguera, that it was 'to train students not just to make art but to experience and formulate a civil society' (2012: 248).

There is a growing movement amongst art educators away from art schools located in universities. They look back to previous examples - the Bauhaus, the Free International Universities, Black Mountain College and Bretton Hall.

Matthew Darbyshire, a former tutor at the Slade who now advises Open School East, believes the alternative schools will have a positive influence:

"Hopefully they'll lead by example and up the standards. The problem is [university departments] continue to get worse as they lose sight of what an art school needs to be."

(David Batty, The Guardian, Monday 21 October 2013)

The Slade was the result of Felix Slade's vision of a school where fine art would be studied within a liberal arts university. The liberal arts are those subjects that, in classical antiquity, were considered essential for a citizen to know in order to participate in civic life.

We are trying to do good things – do the best for our students – for staff – and for the city, in the context of a university that is busy being a property developer - where studio space is measured, not by its actual use, but by formula, to populate new and gentrified buildings that must look good for the cameras and the visitors, and be inhabited, as if animated architects drawings, to look busy but not messy...

So the answer we have found to all these *reductions* has been to move out into the city.

And this has so many good and positive aspects that I hesitate to critique it.

Our partnerships in Swansea are the buds of a very real culture, grown in somewhat stony soil. If they are part of real exchanges, there may be no critique to be made.

But as we move forward, we must understand what we are doing.

Universities are relatively rich, but are not always in a hurry to share, while public funding for our cultural partners is dwindling.

Our network may be fragile.

The disaffected view is that the higher managements of universities and arts bodies are telling us all to tighten our belts and find solutions. So gallery directors on minimal salaries and lecturing staff with threatened job security – all with overwhelming admin – are finding good solutions – built on years of existing practice combined with recent innovation and ongoing energy and enthusiasm.

Q-Art asks: What and who is an undergraduate fine art education for?

It is to find the potential in all of us – staff and students - to be innovators and makers – to want to live and work in spaces we have built in every way – but not to be ground clearers for big business gentrifiers, not to be make do and menders for monetised universities and to facilitate their need to harvest students and use the income for compromised building schemes. Not to help city councils to brighten up failing streets and then be moved on when business moves in.

Swansea is decades behind in this process, as it has been seen in London and elsewhere –so in this moment when there is much good and some serious concerns, there is an opportunity to ask questions.

Charles Esche invokes the aims of CalArts (in *Include Me Out (Art School Propositions for the 21st Century)*, 'that art education should be directed at the whole human', and speaks of flattened hierarchies between artist-teacher and artist-student, 'within universities that function as models of democracy'.(Esche 2009:109).

When we collaborate with our students in their education - which is also our education – and we collaborate with the city and the community - and if all that we do is towards the quality of that education, and minimizes systems that disempower staff and students - then we may all be ready to become artist-citizens.

Bella Kerr, June 2016