

Red Ball and Raising the Bar

Red Ball is the project I have used for Raising the Bar over the last two years – and a personal project that stretches across the areas of my practice as an artist and teacher – linking rather than dividing what can often be conflicting activities, each begging for time and attention. It also blurs the lines between disciplines – lines that are now perhaps too heavily drawn in education. It is at its heart a part of my fine art practice and introduces students to the idea of participatory work – but it is mainly manifested through craft and design skills – so that it can, for example, be used to introduce a range of textiles processes, paper manipulation, CAD or casting.

Red Ball started in a hurry – I was offered the project space at Studio Supersaurus in Swansea at very short notice. Studio Supersaurus was set up by four former Swansea Foundation students as a working space for themselves and a space in which they could host events and residencies. Here was I given a very real example of the many exchanges that come from teaching. The reversal of roles suggested by ex-students offering me an opportunity perhaps made me think that I would become the learner.

I had had in my mind, for a long time the idea of an installation involving lots of red spheres – that I would be the maker and guardian of these objects. I had made some drawings and experimented with methods for making the balls – but it all seemed a little unclear and I couldn't get it moving.

So we posted this on the Supersaurus blog:

Visual Knowledge: How Do We Make the Things We Make?

Recipes for a Red Ball

How would you approach the problem of constructing a spherical form? What are the issues of cost, durability, feasibility – will the method suggest a scale itself? Is colour intrinsic to the material, or will it be added after construction?

The sphere might be a complex textile project, or a simple hand-molded form. Any material may be used, and a 3D form might even be replaced by a 2D image.

The sphere is a universal form, both functional and non-functional. Our response to the object is physical and active – it is something to hold, throw or keep. The way it is made may often be a response to the use for which it is intended – weight, texture, aesthetic, solid or hollow.

Explaining the making process provides an opportunity for discussion, the sharing of skills – either traditional or unique – and consideration of the object.

Here was an opportunity to gather technical know how about how to make the objects I could only imagine - in a way that extended the relationships found in teaching - rebalanced so that expertise and information would be brought to me – as knowledge manifest in an object and the information that came with it.

I got lots of red balls - from 'friends' of the studio, strangers and groups of students – and I have continued the project since with Foundation and MA students and now Raising the Bar students, in a variety of ways.

For Raising the Bar we devised a one day class - students started by making a red ball – experimenting with a range of materials – using ideas and processes to shape the structures, and drawing to explore these thoughts, before during and after making. We encouraged drawing in ways that mirrored the actions of making. The drawings were then used to make screens for printing and prints were made on paper and eventually t-shirts.

Throughout all the manifestations of the Red Ball project, I have been bombarded with information – with knowledge – practical, personal, technical. Making is a complex process and what we do with our hands and what is going on in our heads while we do it is an interesting matrix.

Red Ball has created the opportunity for students and others to examine and understand with me how ideas – some abstract - some about making or particular issues – are carried by objects. How the work, the red balls, and the discussion around them tells us about materials and processes; their histories, general and personal and how the stories we add to objects, the things we make, expand their meanings - and how colour, form, texture and scale speak to us.

The Red Ball project can open up discussion and teaching around technique – how technique can be taught or how the maker can subvert an existing method or create a technology of their own.

The project can allow the focus to shift to the knowledge that the maker/student brings, underlining the idea that teaching is an exchange, informing both teacher and student.

The narrow brief pushes inventiveness, so that known methods and current interests may make a 'turn' or require a new start to be made, sparking new approaches or directions.

Those who teach will be familiar with the difference between an 'open' project, where there is no limit to the response that may be made - and the more prescriptive brief that can be written and delivered so that a certain quality of work or work with certain qualities will be the result.

Red Ball is a prescriptive project in one way – and yet requires technical and conceptual diversity and invention.

It asks questions about the ownership of work – your idea/my idea – your red ball or mine? – collaboration, craft, design and function. It is an incremental, modular, ongoing participatory, 'conceptual art' project – a technical workshop and a learning process for all involved.

Drawing and printing for Raising the Bar extended the skills learning beyond the initial sphere making processes – felt-making, knitting, knotting, sewing, tying, winding, binding, moulding, shaping, stuffing, twisting, folding - and offers a 'mini-method'. Draw as you make, make as you draw – extend the drawing into another process – to produce another object – the print or the t-shirt.

As the print image (invitation card) shows, students in one group started to draw hands – their own hands making and manipulating the red balls. I am constantly surprised by the arrival of new ideas in the project – this year saw movement, performance, the presence of the maker depicted in the drawings. Previous red balls have examined family ties, lack of money, a ball built from the vandalized Perspex from a bus shelter fashioned into a geodesic sphere, what to do with left over porridge, tails, childhood memories, pattern, mass-production, chaos and order, narrative and more. Many have come with a story, several with extended written accompaniment, some boxed, bagged, wrapped or posted.

Working with Raising the Bar students has taught me much – connecting with the students who may be coming to Foundation and those who will be going off to study all sorts of subjects is very important for the Foundation course. Our need to engage with education from school to post-graduate is becoming ever more evident. The Foundation course is a crossroads for students of all ages and at all stages of education and insights into their journeys so far are important. So as ever the learning is mutual, shared and ongoing.