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Art Practice and the Community

2nd and 3rd year modules of the BA in Fine Art at Middlesex University, London UK
Lorraine Leeson and Alberto Duman

The Art Practice and the Community modules at Middlesex University are aimed at fostering dialogue, commoning and change in cultural process and production through experiential learning and social inquiry.

Context

For nearly 20 years Middlesex University has been offering pathways for students on its BA Fine Art to work with communities or groups external to the university. The early years of this provision mainly offered workshops in the wider community, rather like work experience. However since we took over this aspect of the course in 2012 students have been encouraged to see themselves as artists engaging with others to explore the potential for artistic and cultural practice to support social change.

The UK higher educational system requires students to attend for 3 years full-time, or 6 years part-time for a BA Honours degree. While courses are modular, they are also developmental, with learning building on experience gained in the previous year. At Middlesex first year undergraduates are introduced to ideas, materials and strategies of fine art practice and begin to develop independent work. During the second year, alongside self-directed studio practice and a theoretical essay, they choose an 'elective' year-long module in either Art and Sound, Video & Interactivity, Art and Philosophy, or Art Practice and the Community. In their third and final year, in addition to a critical/contextual dissertation, students' main body of practical work is realised either through one of these categories¹ or studio practice.

A new masters programme in Art and Social Practice is also commencing in 2017.

Description

The second year module Art Practice and the Community enables students to develop their learning through a project conducted with a community or group of their choosing. Drawing on experience gained in other areas of their lives, they further develop their skills and competencies required to negotiate and develop this work. This can be realized as an actual placement of a number of weeks in an institution such as a hospital, support group or school, or interpreted through a collective initiative with their peers, a virtual network, or collaboration with an action group. Third year students have the opportunity to develop an engagement project as their major practice for the year and to explore in more depth what each has to offer as an artist in terms of extending experience, understanding or change in the social sphere.

Since commencing teaching the Art Practice and the Community modules we have chosen to bring second and third year students together for seminars, external visits and trips. This horizontal orientation was adopted out of teaching observation and pedagogic principles, since students working between art and social practice bring a variety of different life experiences and skills to their work, so that sharing issues and strategies amongst peers can be highly productive at whatever level each is studying. Seminars or visits take place bi-weekly, alternating with one-to-one tutorials, with each student receiving at least twelve opportunities to

¹ As of 2017 a revised curriculum will mean that that students will graduate with a BA in Fine Art, Fine Art Critical Practice, Fine Art Multimedia Practice or Fine Art Social Practice, choosing their specialism at the end of the second year.

participate in a shared activity over the academic year interspersed with personal input to help with the engagement strategies required for their particular outreach project.

Some years we have had the opportunity to hold a virtual symposium on [Art and Social Practice](#) an event initiated by artist Roxane Permar at Shetland College UHI. Video conferencing has been used to bring together students from different parts of the country, each event taking place over a whole day with students giving short visual presentations of projects in progress to share experience. Live keynote have to date been delivered by Greg Sholette, Pablo Helguera, Jane Trowell of *Platform* and Hilary Nicoll of Artworks Scotland, with case studies by Sarah Corbett of the *Craftivist Collective*, artist Gregory Sale (video), ASU Art Museum Glasgow, and Catrin Jeans, a Cultural Health Visitor for *Deveron Arts*, Aberdeenshire. Participating courses have included the networked Art and Social Practice modules at Shetland College UHI led by artist Roxane Permar, the MA in Art and Politics at Goldsmiths run by John Reardon, the MA option modules in Social Practice led by Françoise Dupré at Birmingham City University, an engagement module on the BA Graphics at University of East London led by John Cockram and the BA Fine Art Critical Practice at University of Brighton led by Susan Diab and facilitated by Naomi Salaman.

Seminars, visits and trips

These group events take place fortnightly and include a series of visits to experience different situations relating to cultural engagement in London. There are also roundtable discussions reflecting on the experience, and at least one trip a year to a significant location in which the interaction between art/cultural activities and social development offers opportunity for new insight.

Example programme taken from the academic year 2016/17:

Autumn Term

Thursday 6th October

Module introduction

Thursday 20th October

Visit to [E.A.T. Experiments in Art and Technology](#) exhibition at Arts Catalyst.

Thursday 3rd November

Visit to [PROTEST exhibition at Victoria Miro](#), a private gallery showing activist art, followed by a visit to the [CAMESQUAT](#), the occupation of the offices of Camelot, the company that started property guardianship in UK and has come under criticism for their role in the housing crisis in London and its exploitative practices, most often at the expense of art/creative practice students.

Thursday 17th November

Seminar: *Protest and Protest*

Artist and research fellow Valeria Graziano helps student think through the politics of activism, as encountered on the previous visit.

Thursday 1st December

Seminar: *On Becoming a Verb: Commoning as Art practice*

Artist and course alumnus Kerri Jefferis, who is currently working as an engagement officer at the university introduces her practice and ongoing residency at [Lewisham Arthouse](#) with collaborator Sophie Chapman.

Thursday 15th December

Visit: *The Day of the Cooperatives!*

We trail the idea of artists cooperatives as embodied by two examples in South London, separated by 25 years of their institution: [Lewisham Arthouse](#) (introduced the previous week) and [Ceramics Studio Co-op](#), to hear how artists have organized themselves in the capital for survival in different economic, political and social climates.

Spring Term

12th and 17th January

Mid-Year Reviews. Students present work in progress on their practical projects and receive verbal and written feedback.

Thursday 2nd February

Visit to [Autograph ABP](#) – a photography gallery which runs a programme of talks and educational activities. It also works internationally promoting exhibitions, events and publications concerned with photography, cultural identity, race, representation and human rights. We meet with Ali Elsa to discuss the recent exhibition commemorating 40 years of Rock Against Racism.

Thursday 16th February

Fine Art Events Day at Middlesex University School of Arts and Creative Industries.

We stage a MOCK AWARD EVENT: *'How do you rate the awards for best practice in the fields of art and social practice? Become the judge yourself and see if your choice matches the judges'* In this yearly exercise we take one major award in our working field and put it to the test with our students. This time we're testing the [Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics](#). The event is open to all students.

Thursday 2nd March

Visit to [The White House](#) in Barking, London.

The beginning of a journey to the East of London and beyond, following the migration pattern of artists priced out of London, settling in specific 'colonies' either independent or specifically designed. After Shoreditch (where it all began in the 90s) our second stop is Barking, and a new building set up by [CREATE](#).

Thursday 16th March

Seminar – an exercise in 'active listening' for second year students, while third years have a crit at the [Beaconsfield Gallery](#) in Vauxhall, where they have been exhibiting work in progress.

Thursday 30th March

Visit to Margate, for *Culture-led regeneration and its discontents*. Our third and final stop in the 'way out East' is Margate on the south east coast, home of the Tate's Turner collection and a swell of creative enterprise initiatives to promote the culture-led regeneration practices of local and central government realized through subsidies and incentives. We meet and hear testimonials from those who have been long- or short-term residents in this climate to understand more about the tendencies that are pushing art out of London and into coastal locations.

Thursday 4th May

2nd year module assessment presentations.

w/b 22nd May

3rd year degree shows.

Reading Group

Our third year students have one further layer in their learning, which we call the *Thursday Think Tank*. Every other week, after the individual tutorials have taken place, we meet as a group and discuss a reading set two weeks before. It is a one-hour informal session with

occasional tangential departures. Most recently the focus has been on Tania Bruguera and we read as a group her 2012 [*Manifesto on Artists' Rights*](#).

Practical projects

Each student has one academic year to realise a practical project in a social context through engagement with their chosen community. Second year students follow a 30 credit module while for third years it is 60 credits and constitutes their main practice. The variety of approaches this year on the second year module include working as a street artist with homeless people, liaising with a school charity project in Iran, developing workshop techniques with refugee children in Tottenham, work with seniors in a residents association and a project with a disability day centre. In the third year one student is making a film with the members of the Armenian Syrian community in London, another film is being produced with a long standing activist group that documents the last year of life of a housing estate doomed for demolition. One student is working with her ethnically diverse student cohort to produce a series of photographic portraits, and another is connecting the life of shanti towns in her family village in India with the present reality of her life in London.

Discussion/reflection/evaluation process

All students participate in Mid-Year Reviews via a ten-minute presentation, following which they receive verbal and written feedback. Final assessment for second years is also by presentation since much of the work is produced off-site and this format proves the most efficient way of communicating the process. It is expected to cover the development of the project, the way the engagement has been negotiated and difficulties addressed, together with influences and references. Throughout their work on the modules students keep journals in the form of an expanded sketchbook, which documents their ideas and process, and the depth of thought and engagement indicated through these journals is taken into account in the assessment process.

Since these modules form part of the BA Fine Art, assessment of the practical work of final year students has to be in line with the whole Fine Art cohort, and therefore exhibited as part of the degree shows. While in some ways this may not be ideal for social practice, it is also the case that work of this nature is often disseminated through the gallery system and this therefore provides an opportunity to consider how best to represent process-based creative work in an interesting exhibitable form. Grading is conducted independently by three members of staff and correlated with specific input from their specialist tutor. The work, or rather its documentation, therefore needs to hold its own aesthetically in relation to practices that have been designed for the gallery wall. We find that these students nevertheless tend to do particularly well in the BA grading, perhaps in some way to do with the imaginative leap necessary for the translation of process into visible outcome, or the layers of meaning and action that underpin what is finally shown.

Images

Workshop by *The Common*. Photo © Kerri Jefferis.

An interactive project by Husna Lohiya.

From an installation by Rosie Fowler in collaboration with *Moving: An Oral History of the Haggerston Estate*.

Virtual Symposium on Art and Social Practice 2014. Photo © Kerri Jefferis.