

# Editor's introduction [Special issue: The Art School; questioning the studio]

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## Editor's Introduction

This special edition of JVAP grew out of discussions that occurred both in the planning of, and at, the 2014 National Association for Fine Art Education (NAFAE) annual symposium '*45 Years of Fine Art Education: drawing the line?*' The one-day event offered a forum in which to discuss current issues in fine art education, and to reflect upon how it has altered since the introduction of the BA Honours Fine Art award over 40 years ago. The call for papers covered the following themes;

What and where is the studio – where are students making their work?

How are the changing spaces of fine art education affecting our students and the staff who teach them?

The artist/ educator and the artist/researcher as inter-woven roles – what are our experiences telling us about these?

The academy past and present – how well does fine art sit in the university system? What have we gained and what if anything, might we have lost?

The proposals that we received for the symposium clustered around the two key themes of the studio and the place of fine art within the academy past and present.

The purpose and use of studios within art and design education was the topic of the Group for Learning in Art & Design Conference, '*The Studio: Where We Learn? Where We Teach*' held at Sheffield Hallam University in February 2014. Paul Haywood the current chair of NAFAE opened that conference with the following extract from an email he had sent to a university space manager for estates and facilities:

'Certain programmes require open studio space to support independent learning and enquiry. Students use these spaces flexibly; they store ideas and resources there, they use them for speculative enquiry, they rely on them for very flexible

access and they learn to work with them to form a culture of individual responsibility relevant to their creative making. Even though a 'body' may not be there the room remains a resource that supports their learning. These are not spaces we can timetable and they are part of what students expect from their registration with the University.'

Haywood argued that we should, and do defend the studio requirement, as it is an essential condition that often takes the form of a physical space. However, he went on to ask if are we defending it for the right reasons and whether the studio is really where all contemporary practice must take shape or is this notion a limiting pre-determinant that effectively mirrors the prejudices and privileges of a professionalised and conservative cultural sector.

There have recently been several high profile new build projects in the UK art and design sector but the majority seem to have resulted in a smaller footprint per course or student, albeit in the guise of offering a far better quality of space, or a more efficiently designed space, thus resulting in higher numbers of fine art students occupying less but better space, which is a continuing trend over the past forty years. Commonly imposed space charging and taxation mechanisms using space norms and sector benchmarks, seek to improve efficiency of resource use but are in fact disconnected from the purposes and needs of specific courses.

Our students are constantly evolving new patterns of attendance, due in part to the need to 'earn and learn', but also due to time spent in the virtual world. The professional art market offers its own models for success, and does not always endorse the idea of an actual physical space called a studio. The shift away from the provision of making spaces available for fine art in universities may have many causes, but without sufficient space to meet, and make, and network it may be difficult to build the communities of practice which have underpinned the transmission of knowledge from artist to aspiring artist.

However, in order to respond to student feedback through National Student Survey scores, some fine art staff teams have decided to reconnect with students by moving out of their offices and back into the studios. This takes a variety of forms, including scheduling all contact events in studio spaces, whatever the activity that is being undertaken, or by saying that all course staff are available for certain hours on so many days of the week in specified studios, or by simply relocating staff offices into studios. Mobile and portable computing platforms have also decoupled the lecturer from their office and fixed computer, allowing them greater flexibility in terms of location. As well as building a closer relationship with students through a higher degree of visibility, this approach has other benefits. It goes a little way towards mitigating the increasingly hierarchical power relationships between staff and students, moving us closer to our communities of practice model and further away from the dynamics of teacher and assessor, versus student and consumer, a model which does not enable the type of open dialogue that is the basis of what we seek to do within fine art education. These shifts have also helped some fine art staff rebuild the course team ethos that has been eroded by modularity. Whilst modules are still the common building blocks of curricula, many institutions offering fine art have moved towards the use of large blocks of studio-based learning. It may be that moving closer to the studio and the physical spaces of our discipline could have benefits, but is this a temporary refuge or one that we are working to secure?

In looking back over the last 45 years of undergraduate degree fine art education in the UK it is useful to acknowledge the scale of growth in student numbers during that period. In 1969-70 there were 22 providers and c. 700 students. By 1984-85 this had grown to 37 providers and just under 3000 students. More recent figures show that in 2012-13 fine art courses were offered by 124 institutions, and that there were just under 5000 students. However, the growth in design numbers has far exceeded this and the place of the fine art course within art schools now is very different to the position which the subject held in the early 1970's.

In his presentation at the 2014 NFAE symposium Tim Dunbar gave a presentation entitled '*Then and Now; from a greater distance 1967-2009*', in which he contrasted the following two quotes;

'A context of change that has led art and design from peripheral small scale activity catering to a separatist student community who would characterize themselves as outsiders or educational misfits which found the free flowing, largely anarchic culture of an art school environment with fine art at its centre a natural and supportive environment in which to grow; to a context of mass higher education of large, resource intensive, technologically sophisticated schools and university faculties of art and design, where a greatly expanded design provision now predominates and fine art is no longer at the apex of the pantheon.' (Lewis, 2008)

and

'... strange to say how little has changed. The voice of management and the equal and opposite choruses of the rational planners and the creative free spirits drone on undiminished. They say you should be wary of desire lest you are granted that which you wish for. The elevation of modular over linear teaching programmes, the educational incorporation of theory, the breakdown of modernist medium specificity, the critique of the (mostly male) expressive author, perhaps even a questioning of the authority of the Western canon were all songs in our radical repertoire. Yet in fact that these have come to pass and now count, if not as the norm, then as significant components of a contemporary education in art and design, has been in the end less significant than the fact that the underlying structure (and of course the wider structure-beyond-the -structure) has remained intact.' (Wood, 2008).

Dunbar was making the point that whilst it seems that everything has changed and that undergraduate art and design education has been transformed by the various events and challenges of the last 45 years, in fact very little may have changed.

In reviewing the literature of the past 45 years produced by fine art educators or fine art professional organisations such as NAFAE, I was struck by the similarity of the key themes and ongoing areas of contention or debate. A report, written by Stroud Cornock, of the proceedings of a one-day national seminar held at Leicester Polytechnic in September 1983, which laid the foundations for the creation of NAFAE in 1984, shows that papers were delivered on the following topics; Recruitment by Michael Yeomans, The Curriculum by Stroud Cornock, Staffing Issues by Tom Bromly, Graduate Careers by Peter Cresswell and a second paper from Stroud Cornock on Research. Concerns were expressed about the changing place and status of Fine Art within the polytechnics and Cornock observes in his editorial

‘Some many years ago many of the art schools were the elite bodies in an amalgamation with the old technical colleges; during the Seventies the latter have made the running, overtaking the art and design courses in the amount of attention and funding they have received, and creating a situation in which the art schools may find themselves trapped into justifying their educational function in terms more appropriate to scientific and technological subjects.’

Whilst the status of different subjects within individual institutions fluctuate, the primacy of STEM subjects tends to remain a central government priority, and the gains that the art and design sector seemed to have made as a result of the New Labour government’s recognition of cultural capital and the creative industries, may now be eroded by changes in the schools curriculum. The tension between the art school and the academy has been ongoing since the move of the independent art schools into the polytechnics in the early 1970s and it is arguable that this is particularly keenly felt in fine art. Certainly the place of fine art within UK institutions has shifted significantly since 1970, and fine art no longer sets agendas within art and design education in the way that it traditionally did, leading many to question its purpose. Opening up questions about the purpose of fine art leads to a consideration of the homogeneity of the provision nationally and also to the content of the curriculum, but here we

encounter what James Elkins so eloquently describes in his book 'Why Art cannot be Taught';

'Art teachers and students are in a bind. They do not teach or learn art, but they also cannot talk too much about the fact that they do not teach or learn art.'

It is this apparent absence of an articulated fine art curriculum that results in the need for justification, which Cornock described as a trap. However, the quote from Wood identifies the unspoken continuum of fine art education and points to the idea of a hidden or internalized curriculum, which Dunbar picked up in his presentation with reference to a paper given by Sylvia Wickes in 1993 where she raises the notion of an internal curriculum which is defined by subject communities with an external curriculum based on externally established professional competencies.

A reading of the history of fine art over the last 45 years reveals a series of ongoing intertwined tensions, which appear to remain unresolved. These include the supposed tension between practice and theory, the need for flexible physical spaces of making and institutional resource efficiencies, the particular nature of the artist educator, the nature of the professional and commercial worlds of fine art and the educational academy, the realities of life as an artist and our society's ideas of employment, and the push and pull of the relationship between fine art education and the institutions that house it. A superficial reading of this ongoing set of dialogues could be that fine art education is inherently unstable and perpetually in crisis. However, it is also possible to see these ongoing tensions as healthy and purposeful and part of a continuing debate about the nature and role of a fine art education. In order to achieve this perspective it is necessary to better understand the history of art and design education from 1830 to the present day so that we can more effectively learn from our past and avoid repeatedly reinventing elements of fine art education. The fact that there are signs that we are collectively beginning to do so is, I would argue, an indication of the health and maturity of fine art education.

The Essays:

The essays in this special edition of JVAP fall into two groupings, the first of which, looks at key historical moments in the histories of fine art education in England and the second set of essays which consider issues related to the studio and its place in art practice and art education. The opening essay by Malcolm Quinn, *'The Royal Academy, and the effects produced by it. Accounting for Art Education in 1835'*, sheds light upon the politics that surrounded the establishment of the state funded art schools in the 1830s and considers the questions raised by the utilitarian nature of those art schools and how that ethos has developed over the last 175 years. It offers a grounding and context for more specific considerations of what many fine art educators would recognize as the second most significant period in the development of the English art schools, that is the period of time between the first and second Coldstream Report in 1960 and 1970 respectively, and the move of many provincial art schools into Polytechnics. Mark Dennis' essay *'The Ascent from the Maelstrom: Art Students Observed and its descriptive resonance forty years on.'* revisits the well known study undertaken by Madge and Weinberger of art students at Coventry and Birmingham Colleges of Art which took place between 1967 and 1973, offering a critical context within which to place what has become a unique historical document.

The second group of essays are concerned with notions of the studio and the needs of contemporary artists and students. In *'I've not finished. Why studios are still a fundamental requirement in the study of fine art'*, Christopher McHugh argues for the continued relevance of the physical studio space for both artists and fine art students, relating the value of such spaces to phenomenological and pedagogic understandings of the experience of learning through doing and making, which he believes lies at the heart of a fine art education. By contrast in *'The Student Placement Scheme: Teaching and Learning Post – Studio Practice'* Matthew Cornford and Susan Diab present a case study of the Critical Practice course which sits within a suite of five courses which constitute the Fine Art undergraduate programme at the University of Brighton, which they argue,



challenges institutional orthodoxies of studio based art teaching within Higher Education. Andrea Hannon's essay '*The Studio in the Mind*' presents the research she has undertaken into the studio as a site of mental and physical inhabitation. Based on a series of interviews with artists Hannon asks questions about the studio in relation to how artists think about the spaces that they chose to make in, and contrasts this with what we already think that we know about the studio as a site of production. In '*Occupation Workplace*', Jane Ball offers a reflective consideration of a collaborative research project which she undertook with Brigid Mc Leer in which a group of academic staff and a small group of invited graduates and current students from the Fine Art course at Coventry School of Art & Design, took up residence in the exhibition 'Workplace' at the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, UK, in 2013. The project aimed to address frustration at the limits of the university system and its lack of fit with the need for students to learn to practice as artists within alternative contexts.

Jill Journeaux

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