

'Crossings'

Sustainability and Ethical Practice in Art

Who

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The Project Initiator.

- Practicing Artist and XD Pathway Leader for BA Fine Art CSM
- (Co-Author of Unit 5 'Logistics of Practice')

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The Project Researcher.

- Recent MA graduate of Kingston University with PGCert in Higher Teaching and Learning. An ex-student of CSM/ Byam Shaw, visiting practitioner and practising artist.

The Premise

'Crossings', introduced in Unit 6 Stage 2 BA Fine Art, is based on the idea of translating work from one medium to another and aims to test the role of a specific medium to expression and explore through practice the role of the individual vision in relation to the group. These ideas and processes have been investigated and applied to this Action Research Project considering the possibilities of Sustainability and Ethical Practice in Art.

In the autumn term Unit 5, 'Logistics of Practice', was completed by Stage 2 students; a new unit on a new curriculum for BA Fine Art. The intention of this Action Research paper is to collate student feedback on how this unit has had an impact and what the longer-term effects might be. The research took place in the Spring Term 2011.



Methodology

Initially I (Lisa Muten) met with a core of 16 Stage 2 students individually to hear their feedback on Unit 5 and their responses to the ideas introduced around Sustainability and Ethics in art. I then widened the research to include findings from conversations with a number of Stage 2 XD students and email responses from students across the four pathways of CSM Fine Art.

The main methods used for obtaining student feedback was through email communications, an email questionnaire, as attached, one to one and small group discussions. There were a number of problems encountered in getting students to respond or arrange to meet. I found the best way to engage with students was if I approached them while they were in their studio spaces and already present at the

University. All the students I spoke with were very willing to have a conversation about their course of study, their art practice, the University and wider subjects for 20-30 minutes. I also received a number of responses by email.

The Questions

In addition to the feedback questionnaire circulated (appendix i) the main dialogue I had with students included discussions around the following questions: -

What are your reflections, thoughts on Unit 5 (logistics of practice)?

Do you think any of the issues discussed in this Unit have had or will have an impact on your art practice?

Has it changed the way you look at art? and if so how?

What do you understand a sustainable and ethical practice to be?

Do you think it is relevant?

Would you have liked to have seen anything else included in the unit or the curriculum that was overlooked?

Is there anything that you would like to see the University do to support these ideas?

The Response

Sustainability & Ethics in Art

Students generally have a good understanding of ethics of practice and sustainability and how it could be incorporated into an art practice. However there was some concern among students that considering sustainability and ethics could hinder creativity, lead to self censorship and being conscious of the difficult choices when using materials could stop making. Some students felt that there shouldn't be a limit to artists. It was acknowledged that information does however unconsciously limit students, for example it is usual for them not to want to harm colleagues through toxic materials.



A minority of students I spoke with felt that artists are inherently selfish; 'art starts at the self'; and so the sustainability and ethics would be secondary considerations.

There is awareness that if ethical issues are placed at the forefront of the work it would change the meaning of the work and that may not have been the original intention.

One student felt that artists have a duty to be ethical in their practice and at each stage of their practice; it is important to have a consciousness of the ethics behind what they are doing for it to have an impact and for viewers to take the ideas seriously.

Another student felt that it was enough at this stage in their art practice just to be conscious of the questions around sustainability and ethics. He is aware that there are no immediate solutions or answers to the questions being raised but to have a consciousness of these issues may be enough at this stage as these thoughts, ideas and questions will unconsciously feed into the work.

It was acknowledged that University does encourage creative ways of thinking and art students are inherently inventive and could work together to do some creative problem solving and find alternative solutions to problems. This is a good foundation for the curricula and the University.

Response to Unit 5

Initially after Unit 5 one student felt a paralysis of making as they felt too conscious of their choice of materials. Since Unit 5 their way of looking at art had also changed and they felt aware that a lot of art made seems pointless and only serves commercial gain. This student felt that Unit 5 had opened her awareness to some quite overwhelmingly huge subjects and has commented that they would have liked more support and discussion around why art is necessary and acceptable alongside the big issues presented and this may have helped them overcome their paralysis of creativity.

Another student reported that Unit 5 had changed the way they make work. They have since been looking at concepts of 're-making', particularly in reference to digital images and video work. This student felt that Unit 5 has been part of a series of influences that have been integral to developing a new approach to their practice. They have also begun to question to history and meanings of materials they are using - which they hadn't previously.



The crit format of Unit 5 was praised as being very positive and encouraging. It was found useful to be learning from fellow students in small groups. Although in the large

lectures of 150+ students it is difficult to generate a reasonable debate/ discussion among students.

It was suggested that Unit 5 could also include an experimentation workshop to offer students the opportunity to practically explore more environmentally friendly materials.

Wider Influences & Information

Students felt that they are low consumers, intrinsically resourceful as have low budgets, often re-using materials and in comparison their use of materials is minimal compared to large corporations. They are conscious that it doesn't always need to be a large piece of work or use a lot of materials in a work to convey the same impact.

Some students have a consciousness of their use of materials; they have a raised awareness of where the ingredients may be sourced or made and are mindful that they should be using less solvent based paints. One student requested more information around materials and suggested there could be improved ways of sharing information and resources. For example a directory could be set up on materials, resources and suppliers - including what materials are made of, where they come from, suppliers' green/ ethical credentials, how materials are used and how they should be disposed of. This student's awareness of the make up of paint had also been expanded by the knowledge she had gained on her internship at Winsor and Newton and she had been very encouraged to see that their research included sourcing more environmentally friendly ingredients and methods in the manufacturer of paint - this information could be shared in a central directory with students.

It was felt that artists have a responsibility to their audiences and community. Artists should be the ones to continually raise the questions. For example in the pace of life we live in, artist should be the one to say "stop" and ask "where are you going?" and "for what purpose?"

If however, they are wanting to provoke a reaction artists should be sensitive and understand what their audiences' reaction could be. However alongside this it was felt that art should not promise anything or come with any disclaimer; audiences should also take responsibility for their own reactions. It was acknowledged that art is there to help create a dialogue.

International Context

I would have liked to have received more feedback from international and Erasmus students to have a comparison as to how these issues are being addressed in other countries. I did speak with a Spanish Erasmus student who advised that they were encouraged in Spain to experiment with materials to understand the materials as much as to realise an idea. For example as part of this learning her whole cohort was required to experiment with Resin to understand its use.

In conversations with two students from Chicago I was informed that ideas around Sustainability and Ethical practice are at the forefront of discussions in Higher Education in Chicago. One student felt that this was partly due to the US having a

large environmental footprint and therefore should have a greater responsibility to create a solution to the consumption of resources. Although outside academia it was felt that consciousness of sustainability and ethics was low.

UAL Green Week

Few students I spoke with had engaged with Green Week, I asked a few why this was and the replies I received were that it hadn't been publicised well enough, it was badly timed with other assessment commitments, were unsure of its purpose and that it was too imposed on them by the University and not student led and therefore seemed forced and worthy; something they 'should' be interested in.

Communication

Generally students felt that communication in the University was good, although could be updated. It was suggested that for those students that are interested there could be more opportunities for students to meet and work with other departments, universities and institutions to cross-pollinate ideas and improve communication across networks. It was suggested for there to be twice termly events, seminars bringing together those that want to be involved. One student felt that "Blackboard is too faceless. We want to belong to a community of people, not computer screens."



Students got a lot of their information from the media but this information is often challenged or reaffirmed through conversations and discussions. It was proposed that there should be more discussion groups / forums to help students raise a critical awareness of information being presented through traditional media.

The electives for Unit 6 have been praised as offering a variety of choice to students in interesting, new and relevant projects. Students enjoyed the opportunity to work in new spaces and with external organisations and would like to see further similar opportunities. Although some students felt that too many off site activities meant that it was hard to juggle studio work and assessment requirements when working off site.

Comments & Observations

From the discussions I had with students in their studio spaces I observed that students respect their colleagues particularly in the negotiation of space and their use materials, solvents and paints. Many students are keen for further information on how to support and sustain their practice and raised consciousness regarding sustainability and ethical practice.

The longer term impact of the issues and ideas raised in Unit 5 will also start to be determined when completing the assessment of Unit 6 work in June. By then ideas and concepts will have had time to germinate and be applied to individual practice through the support of these modules.

When visiting Stage 2 students in their spaces I also had the opportunity to talk with a number of Stage 3 students with similar questions to generate discussions. I was interested to observe that the Stage 3 students I spoke with their ideas and understanding of ethics and sustainability were less defined by a common language around these issues than the Stage 2 students I had spoken with. There was also less of a sense of artists having a responsibility to respond these issues. This may have been the students I spoke with but it could also be that they have not had these subjects introduced to them in such depth in a specific unit. This would suggest that the introduction of Unit 5 is making a positive impact on student awareness.

While carrying out this Action Research I also had the opportunity to attend a one-day symposium and dialogue process with contributions from 3 leading figures in the field of arts and sustainability - Arran Stibbe, Hildegard Kurt and Peter Gingold - at Oxford Brookes University. The presentations were under the titles of: 'Ecological Citizenship and the Arts', 'What has sustainability got to do with an expanded understanding of art?' and 'Tipping Point: facilitating collaboration between artists and climate experts'.

Some of the questions that came out of this symposium are themes that have been and raised at CSM such as how do you present ideas of sustainability to students - what language is used and how the subject is framed is important.

The underlying principle of the day was that artists are the key to change and we need a new way of thinking to overcome the problems we are facing. It is not about expectations that we have to come to 'solutions' as this can hinder new perceptions to arise but rather a need to nurture imaginative spaces, to rethink and allow things come together in a living process. We should encourage abilities to see what is missing and the imagination has to be mobilised to overcome hindrances - we need to "scratch our imaginations" (Beuys)



Art is about a process of re-imagining rather than a product and there is a difference between illustrating and activating. Hildegard Kurt emphasised that the 'renewables' are within ourselves, such as empathy, a sense a justice and imagination, to fertilize ideas. These basics need to be mobilised to start the fine work of self transformation which will then have a wider impact on communities through artists practice, work made and discussions generated.

It was emphasised that every change is of equal value - there are many ways of working to have an ethical and sustainable practice and none should be perceived as being better or more important than the other. To support and allow students to realise this ethos will help overcome any creative paralysis that could occur when thinking about these large global issues.

Action Points

Based on the key points of this research I have listed below some key points that could be incorporated within the department and the University.

Implications for the Curricula

- To propose setting up a sustainability think tank and workshops with a small group of students tasked with discussing and finding alternative sustainable solutions to artistic problems.
- To set up experimental workshops within Unit 5 or Unit 6 to explore environmentally friendly materials and processes. These workshops could also work to support students through their negotiations and choices for maintaining an ethical and sustainable practice.
- To compile information in an accessible format regarding environmentally-friendly and ethically sourced processes and services. This could be for example through an online directory of materials and suppliers including information on ingredients, the environmental impact of materials, details of suppliers etc. I have found there is some information around this on the internet but it is fragmented and sporadic and hard to navigate.

Implications for the University

- To propose further opportunities for dialogues between departments and Universities. This could be in the form of discussion forums and cross course symposiums to encourage the sharing of ideas and information. The communication of knowledge and ideas will help support creative development across the University.
- To compile information in an accessible format regarding environmentally-friendly and ethically sourced processes services. This could be for example through an online directory of materials and suppliers which could include information on ingredients, the environmental impact of materials, details of suppliers etc. This directory should be available to all departments and could be developed into an innovation that could be shared across institutions and industry.

Appendix (i) – Copy of Questionnaire

Central St Martins - BA Fine Art - Level 2

Sustainability & Ethics in Art

Student Feedback Spring Term 2011

Please email replies to Lisa: lisamuten@hotmail.com

1. What do you think when you hear the word 'sustainability'. What does it mean to you in reference to art practice?

2. Reflecting on Unit 5 (If you didn't do Unit 5 please skip to 3.)

- a) Have any of the issues discussed in this module had an impact on your own art practice? If so how?
- b) Have any of the issues raised and discussed in Unit 5 changed the way you look at art?
- c) Do you see any benefits to your art practice for discussions around sustainability to be included in the curriculum? If so how, if not how?
- d) Have you any further feedback to Unit 5? Anything that you would have liked to have been included, anything that you would have preferred to have been omitted?

3. Wider Influences.

- a) What influences you most when making decisions on what materials to use to realise your ideas?
- b) Where do you obtain most of your information about ethical and environmental issues?
- c) Do artists have a responsibility to their audiences?
- d) Do artists have a responsibility to their local community?
- e) If you have experience of studying abroad or are at CSM on an exchange program please share some of your experience of how educational and art institutions abroad are including issues of sustainability and ethical practice in their programs, if at all.

4. Communication

- a) How do you think information between departments at the university could be shared?
- b) How do you think information between institutions could be shared?
- c) Would you be interested in more opportunities to do projects outside the university with other institutions and community groups as part of the curriculum? If so state area of interest.

5. Any other comments