Practising the Humanities in the Art School Environment
Guy Julier

While marginality is a source of celebration for art schools, the placing of them within, let's call them, "Humanities Departments" is doubly peculiar. An oddity within oddness, the study of the Humanities in the art school is a precarious, almost oppositional affair.

Essay v. exhibition. Library v. workshop. Seminar room v. crit room. Lecture hall v. studio. Desk v. workstation. Chair v. stool. The material culture of the Humanities stands in stark opposition to the art school, as do many of their social practices: lecture v. talk; seminar discussion v. studio critique; looking to the past v. thinking about the future; and so on.

Historically, it is the art school that has been presented as that which deviates from teaching norms. It is in the art school that emphasis is laid on exploring shadowy knowledge, personality and performance are more important, and the qualifications to be there seem just a bit more obscure.[1]

And if that feeling of the art school as marginal to mainstream educational processes isn't apparent enough to you, then just tour their sites across the UK. Many of them occupy their original, creaky nineteenth century buildings, sometimes still attached to city museums. Others are to be found in wooded glades on the outskirts of town. Many, of late, have been corralled into office-blocks, as if they needed disciplining and bringing into line with the prevailing currents of education and industry.

The Humanities within the art school has gone by other names: complementary studies, art history, history and theory of art and design, cultural history, critical and contextual studies. Each of these monikers indicate attempts, or not, to make itself relevant and popular to a more studio-based ethos. The history of the Humanities in the art school is also a history of groups and individuals who have clung to a belief in the worth of their contribution to this other environment. They are often hybrids, with backgrounds in studio practice and library research. As the odd-ones-out, the Humanities departments of many art schools have frequently had to fight for their right to exist. In reconstituting art and design education, the 1960 Coldstream Report had established that "about 15% of the total course should be devoted to the history of art and complementary studies".[2] And so, the proverbial Thursday-afternoon-art-history-lecture was born, given by whomever was willing and available, and accompanied by black-and-white slides, often loaned from the V&A.

The result of this was a rapid garnering of odd-balls and misfits as lecturers. If this meant a certain amount of improvisation was involved, then this also created an element of invention not generally found within the halls of traditional universities. Remembering her time teaching 'art history' at the Brighton School of Art in the 1960s, Gillian Naylor wrote of how 'I managed to borrow a British Rail Design Manual to use in teaching graphic design students. Another member of staff who saw me with this was astounded that I should use such a thing. During the student revolution in 1968, students boycotted some lectures but asked still to go to mine'.[3]

There is something of a romance to being the renegade in the art school setting. But from the outside, these Humanities departments can be viewed as usefully conservative. As universities have been increasingly subject to funding cuts, so departments have progressively been determined as 'cost units'. This means that they have had to show that they can pay their way. With their lower fixed costs in terms of space and equipment, humanities departments sometimes come out rather better in this calculation than their art school colleagues. As a result, while this hasn't necessarily meant halcyon

1. Frith, Simon and Horne, Howard (1987) *Art into Pop*. London: Routledge.

2. 'First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education', London: HMSO, 1960: 3.
3. Naylor, Gillian (n.d.) 'Complementary studies: a history of design teachers' reminiscence' available via http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/

days, they have been looked upon more benignly by some Higher Education institutional managers. This has bought them some breathing space.

It is customary to think of the Humanities in the art school from a service perspective: what do they add to the art school experience; how are they relevant; how do they adapt and survive? But we might also think in terms of what the art school affords the Humanities that other university settings don't.

Within the current research requirements for 'impact' and 'relevance', the Humanities in art schools might be well placed. They may open up approaches that are not considered elsewhere. The verve for encouraging scholars to lean out of their ivory towers and to communicate with the wider world can produce new academic practices. This not only emboldens lecturers to blog and tweet, but to seek different publics and to create alternative research artefacts.

Impact is often confused with footfall – getting as many people to visit your website, to go to your exhibition, attend your symposium or read your magazine article as possible, regardless of what they take away from it. In a way, the Humanities department is already connected to another public that is the wider art school. It is used to a different kind of interaction than in the more traditional Humanities, and has a headstart in this process of connecting outwards.

If the art school ethos is driven by notions experimentation, discovery and novelty, so this can extend back into how the Humanities – and indeed the Social Sciences – might be practised. Its setting provides a prism through which Humanities may be refracted, thereby altering its operational methods in interesting ways. Sitting down to write books or articles is always a compelling activity for the academic, but we can do other things too.

Here are two examples of such activities. For several years, Nina Wakeford, of Goldsmiths University London, rented an artist's studio in which to work as a social scientist. Among her interests lay the question of how the studio could afford her other ways of working with her material. Partly funded by Intel, her Studio INCITE (Incubator for Critical Inquiry into Technology and Ethnography) produced websites, videos, performances, installations as well as the standard academic papers.[4] Cat Rossi, working out of Kingston University, curated an installation and created a supporting website for the 2014 Venice Biennale that explored Florence's Space Electronic discotheque, which was opened in 1969 in Florence by Gruppo 9999. The work documents and interprets an example of cultural production in ways that more traditional formats can't access. But the curation itself also includes productive collaborations with filmmakers, fabricators, designers and, indeed, individuals who were involved in the original discotheque.[5] It is not coincidental that Wakeford and Rossi are closely connected to art schools. At the same time as running Studio INCITE, Nina Wakeford was also putting herself through Foundation Studies at Leeds College of Art and Design, followed by a Fine Art degree at Goldsmiths. Cat Rossi did a Design History PhD at the Royal College of Art.

The art school background provides a different materiality and sense of practice for scholars. In this, it is free of the deadhand of the traditional university set up, of the breathless struggle for recognition through a high-rated, peer-reviewed journal or other such measures. Furthermore, it is in the art school that some significant Humanities disciplines have been established. For example, the emergence of design history is invariably assumed to have come from the New Art History in the late-1970s and early-1980s as a rejection of 'traditional' art history's objects.[6] This misses its consolidation, by people like Gillian Naylor, in art and design schools from the 1960s onwards. Equally, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that the establishment of Visual Culture studies is very much the product of UK art schools observing that it is 'something different from simply art history with a little bit of theory admixed'. Rather it represents the 'interface between all the disciplines dealing with the visuality of contemporary culture'.[7]

4. See www.studioincite.com
5. See http://spaceelectronic.wordpress.com/
6. e.g. Harris, Jonathan (2001) *The New Art History: a Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge.

I see my own work in Design Culture studies – a discipline that has very much come from the art school environment – as a messy and hybrid creative practice, rather than a pure form of the Humanities or Social Sciences. I have been known to write the odd book or two. But I see this as just one element of a wider constellation of activities. These include the curation of events such as the on-going V&A Design Culture Salons, or the 2009 Leeds Festival of Design Activism, or working with governmental bodies in the UK and elsewhere.[8] Equally, I encourage the PhD students who make up the Design Culture Research Group at the University of Brighton to see their research as part of a wider set of activities that go beyond just producing the dreaded thesis.

As universities increasingly find themselves in the sticky situation of trying to keep the cash flowing in, they sometimes enter into unholy alliances. The Humanities in the art school has invariably taken on the position of the conscience of the institution. Their adherents are often the ones who say, 'yes, but…' to questionable practices. However, they can say more than 'yes, but…' by pointing towards alternative possibilities for creative practitioners. By thinking of the Humanities as a creative field, we might even be able to generate some of these alternatives.

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7. Mirzoeff, Nicholas quoted in Dikovitskaya, Margaret (2006) *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.58 and p.225.
8. See http://designculturesalon.org, http://socialdesigntalks.org, http://mappingsocialdesign.org, http://designculturekolding.org, www.designculture.info

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Too Many Doctors?
Chantal Faust

What will be the long-term effect of the current push for universities to recruit increasing numbers of research students? The logic behind this drive to enlist more and more MPhil and PhD candidates is fairly simple to deduce: it's a good investment – cheap and with high yield. The students take up little if any physical space at the institution, and their basic requirements can be met with a handful of supervision meetings. In spite of this, the swelling fees for research degrees in the UK match those of their non-research based counterparts, who receive fully taught programmes and are often given a designated space in which to undertake their work.

With such meagre provisions, and such great expense, why is it that so many artists are choosing to undertake a practice-led PhD? The prestige of attaching the three-letter prefix to one's name surely does not outweigh the strain of coping with the terrifying level of debt accumulated over those three years, or more, of study. For many artists, the writing process can be daunting, and thereby consumes a great portion of their study. As such, it remains questionable as to whether time spent as a researcher-in-training actually has any benefit on the development of an artistic *practice*. The refinement of writing skills is no doubt personally rewarding, and yet if this was to be assessed against the work of a writer who has undertaken a similar degree, it would be likely to appear lacking due to its status as a part or a supplement, rather than as a whole.

It is not a matter of an inability to write, but that what an artist *does* is seen as deficient within this context. There are growing examples of artists who choose to do a PhD by Thesis, some pushing the form of writing in ways that are gradually becoming recognised as valuable and distinct contributions that advance understanding. For the practice-led PhD candidate, however, this writing is a mandatory adjunct to the art submitted for examination. Art alone is not