

The Long Lunch: interstitial spaces between creative practice, social learning and radical pedagogy

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Biographies

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Courtney Pedersen is the Head of Visual Arts and a Senior Lecturer in Art History / Theory at Queensland University of Technology, where she has been teaching since 2006. She completed her PhD, an exploration of feminism, genealogy and social history through public installation art, at QUT in 2005. She has been a practicing artist for over 20 years, having studied photography at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. She is currently a co-director of the LEVEL feminist art collective, a board member for Eyeline Publishing and Secretary for the Boxcopy Contemporary Art Space board.

Abstract

Pedagogical imperatives have been at the heart of social and participatory creative practice, and therefore an integral aspect of contemporary art. However, the increasingly standardised models of tertiary teaching required by the modern university often struggle to accommodate the radical potential of this creative practice. From our experience as creative practitioners, we recognise participatory art's ability to enable social engagement, the expression of diverse positions and at times contradictory perspectives, and the occupation of border spaces within and beyond institutional frameworks, making them rich models for art teaching.

In our work as members of the Australian feminist art collective LEVEL, collaborative, dialogic and participatory strategies have formed the basis of our projects in community and public spaces, as well as art galleries and museums. In the context of recently reimagining our teaching model at the Queensland University of Technology, we have taken the opportunity to apply what we have learned through these participatory creative projects to an artwork/teaching initiative called *The Long Lunch*. This paper will provide an overview of the project and discuss the implementation of our strategies of participatory creative practice in a

pedagogical setting. This project models the potential benefits of this approach by drawing out the interstitial spaces between creative practice, social learning and radical pedagogy.

Keywords: Social practice, participatory art, radical pedagogy, feminist art

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While pedagogical imperatives have been at the heart of social and participatory creative practice, and therefore an integral aspect of contemporary art, the increasingly standardised models of tertiary teaching required by the modern university often struggle to accommodate their radical potential. From our experience as creative practitioners, we recognise participatory art's ability to enable social engagement, the expression of diverse positions and contradictory perspectives, and the occupation of border spaces within and beyond institutional frameworks as rich models for art teaching. In the context of recently re-imagining our teaching model, we have taken the opportunity to apply what we have learned to an artwork/teaching initiative called *The Long Lunch*. This paper will provide an overview of the project from the perspective of the artist-teacher, discussing the implementation of our strategies of participatory creative practice in a pedagogical setting. By modelling tacit behaviours and insights, encouraging diversity and student-directed learning, this project endeavours to expand the boundaries of pedagogical activity in the contemporary university.

Participation and Pedagogy: Feminist Approaches

As members of the Australian feminist art collective, LEVEL, operating since 2010, collaborative, dialogic and participatory strategies have formed the basis of our projects in community and public spaces, including art galleries and museums. For example, the ongoing project *We Need to Talk* (initiated in 2013), utilises contemporary feminist consciousness-raising strategies to discuss a range of social issues through the formats of public picnics and workshops. As Vivien Green Fryd describes, feminist consciousness raising is intended to:

raise awareness and understanding of women's lives and concerns, the group dynamics raised consciousness that the "personal is political" and that individual concerns were not unique but common among women (Green Fryd 2007, 36).

The 'educational turn' in contemporary art museums also forms a significant context for this project. Describing the use of educational formats and models within contemporary art practice, this turn is also reflected in approaches to curatorial and public programs within the

contemporary art museum (Wilson & O'Neill 2010). It is noteworthy that the workshops and picnics comprising *We need to talk* were accommodated by the art gallery as 'public projects and programs'. These collective projects with LEVEL have helped to inform our approach to implementing collaborative, dialogic and participatory processes in the design of *The Long Lunch* initiative. This project demonstrates the benefits of drawing practice research into teaching models and the interstitial spaces between creative practice, social learning and radical pedagogy.

The Long Lunch explores how feminist pedagogical methodologies can be enabled and supported in the context of the contemporary art school. Recent discussions in relation to feminist pedagogy within schools and tertiary institutions tend to focus on the integration of gender related content and issues. However, it is important to recognise that processes of social learning and the active acknowledgement of difference have been at the core of feminist approaches to pedagogy since the 1970s. Approaches to feminist pedagogy within art curriculum have included a focus on women artists as role models; an emphasis on expressing lived experiences; and a critique of the social constructions of gender roles (Keifer-Boyd 2007, 141). For example, in the circle-based studio art pedagogy described and operationalised by artist Judy Chicago, students draw on their personal life experiences as potential content for their work, and the teacher acts as both facilitator and participant in the conversation (Chicago 2014, 25-26). These models also draw on critical pedagogies outlined by Paulo Freire and bell hooks, which propose teachers and students as co-producers of knowledge through non-authoritarian collaboration (Bishop 2012, 266; hooks 1994, 14).

This project was designed within the context of the Visual Arts program at QUT, which combines the model of the open studio with complementary historical and theoretical studies in modern and contemporary art. This approach focuses on each student's development of a self-directed, independent art practice, contextualised in the field of contemporary art, which is facilitated by weekly individual and group critiques. The studio lecturer in this context, becomes a facilitator and guide by providing framing questions and drawing connections, modelling reflective and analytic thinking in relation to creative practice. *The Long Lunch* both responds to and contributes towards the building of an active studio culture, which relies in turn on establishing an environment based on support and trust, so that students feel comfortable to express their ideas and to engage in lively debate. Extending the dialogues that occur in formal learning contexts, *The Long Lunch* explores the borderlines between art, professional practices and everyday life. It also draws on feminist approaches to pedagogy by

seeking to break down the hierarchies of knowledge and persistent power relations that dominate within the academy.

Art & Food: The Long Lunch in Context

This project is inspired by the complex history of the meal as a context for the sharing and debating of ideas in art, including historical precedents such as Alison Knowles' *Identical Lunch*, the 1970s artist-run restaurant *FOOD*, and a range of other works such as those included in the 2012 exhibition, *Feast: radical hospitality in contemporary art* (2012) at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art, a historical survey of artists' food-based projects. It also seeks to harness the documented benefits of meal sharing as a pathway to deepening relationships within learning communities (Watland, Hallenbeck, and Kresse 2008, 176).

The integration of the serving and consumption of food into art practice has been a recurring motif in late 20th century and 21st century art. As Lucia Fabio has discussed, Alison Knowles was one of the first artists 'to incorporate the communal act of food consumption into her work while embodying fundamental aspects of Fluxus practice' (Fabio 2015, vi). Her work, *Identical Lunch* (1967) was predicated on the Fluxus principle of the 'score' - a structure designed for reenactment and reperformance. The recent institutional embrace of Knowles' works (particularly by the Museum of Modern Art in New York) has raised questions about the authenticity or completeness of the communal experience in the institutional setting (Fabio 2015, 42). The particular identification of long tables prohibiting free and intimate conversation has raised intriguing questions for us about the design of our own work. As we will explain, the use of long studio tables as a material readily to hand is fundamental to the design of *The Long Lunch*.

FOOD, established by Carol Goodden, Tina Girouard and Gordon Matta-Clark in New York in 1971, was an extension of earlier avant-garde experiments in creating meals and serving them as both commercial enterprise and artwork. Guest artists, such as John Cage, were invited to create menus and the restaurant operated as an artistic experiment and a site of social interaction. This social aspect of eating together has since been exploited by artists as diverse as Anne Graham, the Australian artist who set up temporary kitchens as part of her practice in the 1990s, Rirkrit Tiravanija's preparation of *pad thai* (1990) and Suzanne Lacey's *International Dinner Party* (1979-2012). Works such as these are discussed in the art history curriculum, but remain largely hypothetical unless students have had the benefit of seeing them in an exhibition setting. Encouraging students to engage experientially with the concept

of 'radical hospitality' provides the opportunity to bring that syllabus to life, while also potentially assisting them to acclimatise to the demands of life as a contemporary student.

The Long Lunch

The Long Lunch aims to bring together the usually segregated activities of art history/theory teaching, art making, and peer-to-peer learning within the framework of a project that authentically echoes the professional experiences and concerns that our students will encounter beyond graduation. Established initially as a series of three lunches, held a fortnight apart, the project brings together students and staff. Cognisant of the pressure on students to think of their art education as a series of transactional arrangements where intellectual labour is strictly performed for academic credit, and the discomfort increasingly experienced by some students in unfamiliar face-to-face situations, the lunches are scheduled as short, accessible, but potentially complex encounters.

In terms of their physical arrangement, they are designed to ease the transition of students into a new set of buildings and facilities. The experience of observing staff and students sharing a meal together daily in the K3 School at Malmö University and the productive relationships that this ritual engendered, combined with the project team's long-term commitment to social practice provided at least part of the impetus. Central to the work's protocol is that the furniture for the lunch is brought out of the studio by the project participants, the tables are set with tablecloths and the interstitial space of the breezeway is temporarily occupied by a convivial, casual conversation. Each lunch begins with a question or prompt, derived from key concerns expressed by both students and staff. These questions are: 'Art, what is it good for?'; 'What does your art dream look like?'; and 'What can art teach us?'. The hope of a horizontal and speculative conversation echoes some of the concerns articulated by The Pedagogy Group in their 2014 Open Engagement workshop in New York, where they posed four questions for consideration by educators: '1. How do we address the seemingly contradictory perspectives of inclusivity vs criticality, and broad experimental inquiry vs institutional restrictions and ethical concerns?'; '2. How do we encourage cooperation, collaboration, and collectivity within institutions that favor competition?'; '3. What challenges do we face when addressing issues of white supremacy, patriarchy, and class oppression? What skills are needed? Do our institutions support our efforts?'; '4. How do problematic educational issues such as the commercialization and privatization of knowledge, student debt, and university-corporate partnerships play out in our classrooms?' (Corris 2014, 89).

While the project was initially envisaged as a potluck arrangement, allowing students to bring the food of their preference, it quickly became clear that many students could not afford the commercial lunch options locally available. In subsequent lunches we have provided food and drink for participants. The experience of sitting down at a table and eating together with their lecturers and tutors has clearly been a daunting prospect for some participants. While social media has created the impression that communication between academic staff and students has become more casual, in face-to-face situations residual dynamics of power are revealed. A number of factors were considered to address these issues including the location of the project in the outside courtyard, which functions as a space 'inbetween' the regular teaching studios and seminar rooms. This project also provided an opportunity for the involvement of students from first year to honours, along with HDR students, sessional and academic staff. While closely aligned to studio-based discussion, which happens on a weekly basis, *The Long Lunch* facilitated a different kind of dialogue in an alternative setting - linking together diverse experiential knowledge and personal narratives within the open framework of the lunchtime conversation. The initial framing questions provided a structure for the conversation, which flowed in a number of distinct directions including discussion of the social and economic aspects of the art world, as well as personal ethics and motivations for making and engaging with art.

Food for Thought

While *The Long Lunch* has only been a short pilot program, it has provided us with the opportunity to test the potential of similar co-curricular activity to enrich the regulated learning environment, creating vertical channels of information sharing from first year students through to senior staff, while also building the personal communication skills and experience that have been identified as sought-after capabilities in graduates (Foundation for Young Australians 2016). Visual arts graduates have always faced demanding conditions in their professional lives and substantial research has established the necessity of resilience to their personal and professional well-being (Siddins, Ryan, and Johnstone 2016). In our experience, assisting our students to understand the power dynamics of their destination industries through critical thinking assists them to develop resilience. However, as Cridland-Hughes has observed, 'all liberatory pedagogy is built on a foundation of relationships' (2015,130) and the feminist pedagogical strategy of 'care' can be a strategic twin pillar of a critical teaching environment. *The Long Lunch* provides an opportunity to engage a strategy of care in the contemporary art school, to help build an active studio culture and to work towards non-authoritarian collaboration between staff and students. By envisioning *The Long Lunch* as a participatory artwork, we have been able to explore the developmental opportunities of the interstices between creative practice, social learning and radical pedagogy.

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