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Creative regions: Collaborations and partnerships outside the institutional walls

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There are significant pressures on the university art school.

Much, of course has been written and discussed in recent years about the relationship between 21st Century contemporary art and the academy. There are many forms of the academy but at least in this country in a post-Dawkins, post-secondary education era, the art school in the university is now the norm, and will be the context for this paper. The university is now the factory of ideas, laboratories, objects, practices and pedagogies that are essential to today's art school.

The pressures facing the university art school, I'm sure, are obvious to all here today: creative practice as research, erased boundaries between disciplines or inter-disciplinarity and hybridity, the dilemma of the studio in post-studio practice, the balance between theory and practice, the exhibition and the thesis, the PhD itself, the virtual, the social, the new technological media and how it can be best utilised, student centred learning, maverick individualism and the collective that pre-determine minimum student cohort size , experimentation amid the swelling bureaucracies and fiscal competition of the marketplace...one can go on and on and on...

Preparing the artists of the future is akin to what Steven Henry Madoff (2009, p.74) describes as the ability to 'live in a landscape of infinitely elastic production'. This elasticity however, is increasingly important for the art school. The contemporary art school should always provide an environment of enquiry, of collaborative knowledge production beyond the acquisition of any specific skill or canon, but also be flexible to the changing environment of the new globalisation and its impact.

A group of media practitioners from New Delhi that collaborate under the title of Raqs Media Collective wrote recently about *what constituted an art school*. They wrote, 'is the school a place, an institution, a set of facilities, a situation, a circumstance, an attitude, or a constellation of relationships of the transfer of acquired, invented, and accumulated knowledge, experience, and insight from one generation to another? Perhaps a school or the idea of a school as a condition of learning, of being open to discourse and discovery, can also be seen as something that we might carry with us wherever we go, whatever we do' (Raqs Media Collective 2009, p.74). They suggest the need for a new mobility, centred more on the user.

But now, increasingly the art school operates across a range of formal and informal contexts that include the real, the virtual, and significantly, an evolving number of what I will call nomadic spaces. These nomadic spaces often 'stand at the threshold of multidisciplinary art research and intra-disciplinary art production' (Madoff 2009, p.3).

Before I discuss how my institution, La Trobe University embraced this notion of *nomadic spaces*, I want to outline an additional imperative for developing a new flexibility in curriculum development and implementation. Consistent with the previously mentioned philosophy of the inter-disciplinarity which precipitated a major re-write of our university's undergraduate curriculum, we also recognised a change in our student demographic and what their needs were.

In this uploading and downloading culture, students increasingly value connectivity (both real and virtual) and juxtaposition, collaboration and participatory/engaged modes of study.

As demonstration of this, Jay Coogan described the new contemporary art school as akin to a 'town square' (cited in Lowry 2010, p.215) where ideas come to meet and cross-pollinate; a type of social and information praxis. Its role is a gathering place that is 'sympathetic to the principles of (an) open source collaborative knowledge generation' (Lowry 2010, p.215). In an age of instant information, the pathway to new knowledge lies not in the accrument of information, but in learning how to use it. The old model of claiming a single canonical, specialised body of knowledge within this complex cultural landscape now seems somewhat intellectually irresponsible.

The other demographic that seemed to be shifting in this new environment was the students themselves. It appears that the 70's arts school that I attended, where you were largely left alone in the studio, like a romantic and mythical being to become an ARTIST no longer exists. Our raison d'être then was simple: affirm our individualism (which also had the bi-product of hermeticism), entrench ourselves in notions of superiority (which disconnected us to broader society), while believing that we could survive our idealism through private and public sector benefaction. I realise this is a rather a cynical profile.

However, education was free and the 'paint-stained academic studio, the macho foundry shop and the cave-like photo laboratory' (Pujol 2009, p.4) were sanctuaries that seemed to today's standards abundantly funded. Indulgently, our self-incubation in an art for art's sake world precluded any thought of life beyond this haven. But now, students want more. They pay relative fortunes for their art school education. They all take jobs to make ends meet and balance complex lives....and still end up with crippling bank or government loans. This has no doubt changed their expectations of Art School.

They want value, and they want outcomes. It may not necessarily be a specific vocational outcome, but they want the reinforcement of relevance and applicability, and connectivity to sector and industry opportunities.

In a regional community, the pressures on the art school are even more acute. The linkages, real or perceived to employability in industry are at best tenuous, and many students who once would have chosen to go to arts school in their home town will now be attracted to the big lights of the metropolis, or else join the queue's to vocational nursing or education degree streams. Hence, the sustainability of art and design niche courses with comparatively modest enrolments is perpetually under scrutiny. The viability of adequately servicing a diverse range of specialised studios and the capacity to employ academic and support staff in them is stretched to the very limits. In many regional schools whole discipline areas have been closed.

I commenced this paper with a statement about the significant pressures on the contemporary art school. The preceding synopsis I believe, confirms this challenging environment. Following a major external course review a few years back, La Trobe University in response to this shifting ground decided to establish the La Trobe Art Institute. The Institute would be for the university, the external broker for community and industry partnerships. In order to respond to these challenging trends, one had

to loosen the institutional structures of the institution. A more flexible framework was required to transform the bulkiness or weightiness of the institution in line with the quickening 'impatience for new ideas and new means' (Madoff 2009, p.xi).

One solution found was to embrace the concept of the *roaming faculty*. To develop a chain of interconnected offerings that nurtured the trans-cultural and trans-disciplinary positions, which sit outside the central core curriculum.

'Andre Malraux spoke in his 1947 book, *Le Musee imaginaire*, of the *museum without walls*. Now we need to think about the arts school without walls- or the arts school whose walls are pierced and opened because the trajectory of global culture is obviously toward the extraordinarily pervasive distribution of every kind of information and market influence, a market influence that hold more dominion than the sovereignty of national governments and flows through them, lifting some up and leaving others impoverished in its wake' (Madoff 2009, p.284).

It was not only this extension of Malraux's expansive thinking that influenced our decision to accommodate this larger purview. We above all, wanted an arts school that did roam, that was nomadic, and hybrid. A type of *pop-up* model of engagement.

In order to reflect a broader cultural and scholarly base, we went out and developed agreements and partnerships with metropolitan and regional galleries, museums, arts festivals and other artist/not-for-profit organisations. Under the aegis of these partners, we collaborated on offering a suite of niche accredited subjects, study abroad courses, lectures, residencies, internships, symposiums, colloquiums and curated exhibitions.

The focus was to offer to our existing students an expanded, more diverse and experiential learning, and more site-specific, site-responsive environments than was previously offered. To prepare them for *real-life* experiences in the professional field. To give them, what Edmund Husserl described as 'life-world' (Madoff 2009, p.278) or world-view experiences. The qualities of life and place, exceptions to the pre-givens of the arts school, part of a broader public and community discourse.

The other demographic lay outside our existing student cohort; to attract new cohorts from other disciplines, within that spirit of hybridity and porosity. The new suite of *sexy* partnership subjects, delivered in exotic galleries by impassioned curators and

conducted in busy festival spaces, attracted students of law and ethics, political science, cultural anthropology and archaeology, economics, media studies, behavioural psychology, urban sociology and environmental and ecological conservation. The old boxed up departments were opened up for a refreshing reciprocity of intellectual diversity. A key figure emerged: the contemporary *polymath*. The embodiment of mobility, the polymath's combinatory skills and knowledge opened up simultaneously the existence of cultural, epistemological, and methodological alternatives and new options.

Reciprocity also exists between the inside and outside of the institution. The galleries and festivals embraced this new energy. Where the art school may have historically dismissed the external art world under the guise of purity, it now became the conscience for the circulation and distribution of new *ideas*. As British philosopher Elizabeth Schellekens stated, 'artists instantiate an idea by turning a theoretical proposition into something experiential... (or to put it another way, it is about experiencing the idea' (cited in Lowry 2010, p.215).

I want to discuss in more detail some case studies that demonstrate this approach. The first is an outcome of an ongoing partnership with the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne's premier public gallery. Now in its third year, this partnership is part of a broader sponsorship agreement between the two organisations. It gives our university learning partner status for their summer contemporary arts exhibition program. This basically means that we and our students and academic staff have access and engagement with their full suite of exhibitions, artists, directors, curators, collaborative marketing initiatives, and educational services over the summer period.

One such outcome of this partnership is that we collaborate on the delivery of a purposely designed summer school subject that is offered over an intense two week period in early February every year. This is a stand-alone subject that is offered prior to the commencement of semester one of each academic year. Now generically titled, *Art Now* it evolved out of the 2013/14 blockbuster exhibition *Melbourne Now*. *Art Now* has become the generic course shell that is filled with specific *instance* content every year the subject is offered.

For example, in 2013/14 with *Melbourne Now*, the subject explored the idea that a city is significantly shaped by the artists, designers and architects who live and work

within its midst, and how artists have profoundly contributed to creating a culture and a place that is unique.

This showcase of contemporary practice across a broad range of media and art forms, which included design, architecture and dance, recognised these forms as integral parts of the city's creative mix and legitimate participants in a contemporary gallery. The exhibition assembled over 300 commissioned, acquired, loaned works and installations, that were immersive, inclusive and participatory exhibition experiences.

In this course, students were not only introduced to the dominant and diverse practices of contemporary artists, designers and practitioners in the contemporary creative industries, but were often taught by the very people on exhibition. This was supported by a lecture program provided by the various curators, education officers and our specialist academic staff. The whole subject was delivered in the gallery, adding to the experiential value.

In 2014/15 under this same partnership, *Art Now #2*, students were exposed to *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier*, the existential dystopia of renowned Glasgow artist David Shrigley, the photographic/cinematic works of US based Alex Prager, the psychological public works of Carsten Höller and Australian artists Robert Jacks, Emily Floyd and Mambo.

Through these diverse artists, themes and concepts of identity, gender, sexuality, popular culture, and transgression, the absurd, humanism, existentialism and notions of public/private were explored.

Overarching lectures were conducted by NGV Director Tony Ellwood and Senior Curator, Max Delaney on the role of the 21st Century Museum and the changing demands of curatorship. Students had access to *behind the scene events* with visits to the conservation departments and the collection archive.

I will now discuss two other partnerships that have also been pivotal within this niche, nomadic subject delivery model. Like the National Gallery of Victoria partnership, La Trobe University has a five (5) year formal arrangement with the Bendigo Art Gallery to collaborate on two exhibitions per year. The nature of the collaboration changes in each circumstance; it could be a conference, but often it is

the development of an accredited subject. This year those agreed exhibitions were *Imagining Ned: The story of Ned Kelly and the art he inspires* and then later this year, *Ink Remix: Contemporary art from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*.

A fully accredited, immersive, gallery-based subject has been developed related to both these exhibitions in collaboration with the host organisation. This subject has the generic title, *exhibiting culture* which changes its instance descriptor based on the exhibition content. La Trobe University undergraduate students and members of the broader public (audit enrolments) take this up as *single subject elective* enrolment.

Exhibiting Culture: Imagining Ned had subject contributions from Cinema Studies looking at the historical film archive, the marketing department's analysis of Kelly's Cultural Heritage Tourism impact, archaeologists, heritage consultants and medico's assessing his documented remains, art history inputs into the visual art contributions, the law school and its focus on colonial crime and punishment, English Literature with the Carey novel and the notion of myth making, and the history department's broader context of life in Victoria and southern New South Wales in the 1870's.

The course challenged the existing history and legend surrounding the Kelly gang through access to original artefacts such as Kelly's famous death mask, the Jerilderie letter, weaponry, associated ephemera, and important works of art both historical and contemporary. Students had formal assessment requirements, plus creative options and social media posts across blog, Facebook and Twitters platforms.

Planning is now in progress for the delivery of another subject in conjunction with Bendigo Art Gallery in December this year. *Ink-Remix: Contemporary art from China, Taiwan & Hong Kong* is a touring exhibition curated and organised by the Canberra Museum and Gallery on loan to Bendigo.

An exhibition of contemporary artists working across inter-disciplinary media, all drawing from the traditions of Chinese ink literati painting and calligraphy. The subject links not only these works, but the themes related to history, the effects of modernisation and globalisation on society, the natural and urban environment, and concepts of culture, food, dance and identity. The regional perspective of Bendigo's rich Chinese heritage commenced during the 1870's gold rush, is included. An artist

residency involving a visiting contemporary Chinese artist will also be embedded into the course. This artist in residence will lecture, give workshops and host studio engagement sessions to provide rich insight into the process; an orientation into the privileged, immanent space of the artist's studio.

One of the central platforms for the vision of the La Trobe Art Institute is to engage with communities across regional Victoria covered by our geographic footprint. This encompasses the north and north-west of the state from Bendigo, Mildura, Shepparton and Albury-Wodonga. With campuses in all of these regional cities, the university has established ongoing formal relationships with arts organisations located in these centres: arts Mildura, Mildura Arts Centre, Shepparton Arts Festival, MAMA, Castlemaine State Festival, the Nathalia G.R.A.I.N Store are but a few. Many of these organisations are anchored in struggling economic and ecological communities where cultural infrastructure is thinly sustainable.

These *pop-up* subjects add substance to the cultural audiences in these communities and to the pedagogical experiences gained away from the critical and commercial tastes dictated by the urban centres. In these circumstances the art school not only acts as site-specific entities, but as sites for social change, the ethics of collaboration and the consolidation of new materials outside the centre. Community-based art often 'places its emphasis on issues, on problem solving through culture, rather than on the purity of mediums' (Pujol 2009, p.12). Ernesto Pujol (2009, p.13) goes on to say that, 'recognising a social context helps to liberate young artists from the modernist anxiety concerning originality, which is turned into spectacle by celebrity culture.' Hence, working or studying in the regional context can be an important factor in the formation of the visual scholar or practitioner.

As is evident in these case studies, this mobile and nomadic stage is predicated on flexible, student centred learning structures. So-called silo mentalities, top-down pedagogical and prescriptive models no longer work. In our suite of niche courses, academic semesters are collapsed and the established norms of term lengths are only indicative. Subjects are delivered in blocks, during vacation breaks, in summer schools, and are offered to students to fast track degrees, to compensate for a failed subject, or for cultural enhancement or personal growth.

Components may be offered online and across blended methodologies, but the focus is always on the student experience. The subjects are delivered extensively *in*

the field, out of the classroom, where the real world intersects directly with experience.

The final case study can be provided by the long standing *Edge of the Outback (EOTO)* course. The EOTO course, an international study abroad program, aligns with our aspiration of global and local connectivity to our regions. Nearly 450 students, primarily from the USA and Canada, have experienced a unique opportunity to become closely acquainted with the Australian outback landscape and indigenous culture while studying an accredited course. These international students experience the ancient landscape and culture in our own backyard, from the world heritage sites of Mungo and Mutawintji national parks, and the Flinders Ranges, to the quiet beauty of journeyed sights, in between.

This experience is achieved through the medium of photography. Students not only learn the skills of photography, but they learn the skills of engagement. The course is a travelogue where deep understandings of the sociology and geography of place are explored. More importantly, the self, is laid bare and the generic and superficial tourist experience, questioned.

As Wim Wenders wrote in *Written in the West, Revisited*, 'photography makes it possible to comprehend a place right away....Both the familiar and the unfamiliar are, for me, excluded by photography: it's an instrument of exploration, it belongs essentially to travel, practically like a car or a plane. The photo camera makes arrival in a place possible' (Wenders 2000, p.8).

Students have a 24 day intensive program of lectures, workshops and field trips. They are required to journal their experiences, produce a portfolio of prints, create a blog and exhibit at the end. An indigenous guide accompanies them through their journey, providing the entre into and across aboriginal country and tribal boundaries. The students are supported by specialised photography tutors who have established their practice in this genre, and are prepared for the rigours of no sleep and red dust in the lungs.

The program is now in its 12th year of continuous delivery, supported by US based recruiting agents who liaise with public and private universities and colleges across North America. Within the growing importance of intercultural capabilities in employment and increased international competition for students, this program

deepens and broadens our global engagement, enrichment and reciprocal opportunities for our domestic students. Above all, these experiences change lives. They come to the other end of the world, are immersed and discover they are different when they return. As Professor John K. Hudzik (cited in La Trobe University 2015, p.11) said in 2011, 'internationalisation.....in short, is not an end but a means to many ends'.

In conclusion, given the fluid and experimental nature of contemporary art, its structure and pedagogy should balance the breadth and depth of its diversity. The educational experience should be transportable to other contexts, allowing for active agency which will allow the art and the artist to transform in line with outside pluralist cultural functions. This then nourishes the artist/student to 'participate in the many ways in which art portends, creates, critiques and mobilises new cultural formations' (Lowry 2010, p.216).

This of course does not de-value the importance of the activities and innovations that occurs inside the walls of the arts school, but instead value adds these experiences so that the students can negotiate the broader immersive, cultural landscape. The large bureaucracy of a university and its *cloistered* academic structures can sometimes impinge on autonomous, nomadic structures. As Buckley and Conomos (2009, p.7) question, are our art schools 'flexible enough, given their power structures and values, to accommodate ideas and knowledge that problematize the institutional boundaries?'

In this *borderless* world, I hope my institution can be flexible enough to resist the conformity and hence, be positioned to embrace the new opportunities.

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