

Cover Sheet

Title: Access = Value

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This paper examines *value* in the context of a contemporary art school, and presents an innovative model, *VCA Access*, that Dr Sequeira & Dr Daw have implemented over the past ten months at the School of Art, VCA/MCM, University of Melbourne. *VCA Access* engages students, staff (artists/academics), commercial galleries and philanthropists in a multi-layered, highly active and participatory way that has allowed for powerful and productive relationships to emerge and flourish, both inside and outside the institution. The concept of value is key to this model, as at its developmental heart is the question: how can we, as an art school/university community, make a meaningful and valuable contribution to the national art ecology?

“the role, the voice and the responsibility of the artist are more crucial than ever before within the framework of contemporary debates. It is in and through these individual initiatives that the world of tomorrow takes shape, which though surely uncertain, is often best intuited by artists than others”

Christine Macel, Chief Curator, 2017 Venice Biennale

This understanding of the value of the *voice* of the artist underpins our research in developing *VCA Access*. We are committed to the cultivation, mentorship and promotion of the artist’s voice, and the literal speaking and making public of their thoughts and actions into a broader cultural fabric as well as within our own art school/university environment.

This presentation explores and analyses this innovative model, presenting it to an audience that shares our challenges and expectations.

Dr David Sequeira is Director, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA. Much of Dr Sequeira's research has focused on the use of colour and geometry in the creation of contemplative experiences. Current research explores curatorship as art practice. Dr Sequeira has exhibited his work extensively throughout Australia and his work is held in important public collections including the National Gallery of Australia. Dr Sequeira held senior positions in engagement and audience development in a range of public cultural institutions including the National Gallery of Australia, National Portrait Gallery, Australian Parliament House and National Film and Sound Archive.

Dr Kate Daw's artwork explores issues of authorship, narrative and creative processes and moves between the domestic and the social, the everyday and the imagined. She has shown her work widely, both nationally and internationally and is represented by Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne. She has been Chair of the Creation Panel at Arts Victoria and a Board Member of the Australia Council Visual Arts Board and is currently a Board member of Gertrude Contemporary. She is currently Deputy Head of School and Head of Painting at the VCA.

Access = Value

Access = Value discusses an innovative model for engagement in art schools. Authored by two practising artists who have academics positions within an art school that is part of a university, *Access = Value* suggests that new models of connection are critical if an art school is to be valued within the broader community. The background of the authors is important in understanding the type of engagement (and value) exemplified through the case study of VCA Access. More specifically, the engagement discussed in this paper and the factors that lead to its emergence are directly connected to a profound appreciation of learning through making.

This paper seeks to articulate the ways in which innovative engagement based in a contemporary Art School (with the added demands and potential of being part of a university environment) creates authentic engagement opportunities. Designed in 2016 and implemented in 2017, VCA Access provides an example of the type of engagement required to establish and sustain the value of an art school. VCA Access, in its multi-layered, horizontal structure, allows for unique industry opportunities and valuable pedagogical experience for *all* its participants. It challenges conventional philanthropic models (that tend to be more vertical, hierarchical structures, with artists usually at the bottom of the food chain) and creates new relationships, opportunities and powerful encounters with contemporary visual art.

The identification of key stakeholders is an important aspect of any examination of the value and impact of an art school. Generating opportunities for the intersection of various groups associated with an art school encourages the sharing of ideas and the creation of pathways into the world of contemporary art and art practice. In the case of VCA Access, this takes place through a structured approach that connects students, academics, established artists, industry and VCA Access members. It is important to distinguish these groups clearly as it is our belief that the strength of the program lies not in individual groups, but rather, in the unique energy that arises through their interaction. Highlighting the example of VCA Access, this paper explores the possibilities of this interaction. What follows is an articulation of the various groups represented in VCA Access and an inquiry into the principles that underpin the program's success so far.

The student participants in VCA Access are all completing their Masters degree in 2017. The program revolves around the five selected students who are teamed with an established artist, who offers them mentoring for a year. The mentoring may include, but is not confined

to studio visits, gallery installation access, industry advice and support and other encounters. Students are introduced to and become engaged with VCA Access members – an immediate highly interested and engaged audience for their artwork.

All mentor artists are VCA alumni – this is an important aspect of this engagement model as it creates or strengthens post art school relationships with our successful alumni. Mentor artists are chosen for their critical, incisive work, as well as for their generous and hospitable nature. Through this program, the mentor artists have the opportunity to build networks and connect with a new audience (the VCA Access members) who visit their studios and attend their exhibitions.

VCA Access members gain special access into the lives of students, artists and galleries. They have ‘behind the scenes access’ to studios and informal conversations around the development of student art and the exhibitions of the mentor artists. The cost of membership \$500 (consistent with other arts organisations) is limited to a maximum of 70 people. Members are invited to the VCA’s schedule of artist talks, exhibition openings, studio visits and gallery visits as a group. This schedule is organised by the VCA Access committee (a team of 4 members) in consultation with academic staff.

Academic staff members and are involved in the programming of studio visits and other events and are critical in matching mentors with students. The VCA’s Margaret Lawrence Gallery has become an important conduit for members, students, mentor artists and industry. Industry includes the commercial galleries and curators connected with the mentor artists. These individuals and organisations have hosted talks that allow them to locate the mentor artist’s work within the context of other artists they represent. This aspect has enlivened and supported the local commercial gallery ecology.

It is our assertion that art school’s clarity around its values enables it to communicate them more freely. Like most art schools, the VCA is *‘committed to providing transformative learning experience in pursuit of artistic excellence, innovation and an absorbing education. Our learning environment has an atmosphere of critical confidence and creative risk taking, as well as high expectations in development of skill and facility.’*¹ The initiation of VCA Access is completely consistent with this commitment. Moreover, the values around the process of art making amongst VCA Access members are aligned with

¹ Vca.unimelb.edu.au, 2017

those of the VCA. In this light, VCA Access members represent an important extension of the VCA – out in the community.

To better understand why VCA Access may be a successful model that appears to be fulfilling the contemporary public desire for content and deeper engagement, we have identified three aspects of the model as being key to its *modus operandi*. These aspects are a) awareness of identity and place within the broader cultural landscape b) recognition of a shift in public needs in art galleries, institutions and museums and c) engagement with the changing University environment. What follows in this paper is an unpacking of each aspect and an articulation of its role affirming and generating the value of art schools.

Awareness of Identity and place within the broader cultural landscape

One way to explore the value of an art school is to examine its contribution to a broader cultural landscape. Awareness and appreciation of an art school's identity and role within the gamut of other visual art based institutions can lead to a rich understanding of its unique function. Along with the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), the VCA is located in the heart of Melbourne's Southbank Arts Precinct. Sandwiched between one of Australia's oldest and most significant public collections and Australia's only *kunsthalle*, the VCA is the only site in the precinct that is dedicated to the learning processes of artists. Engagement with studio practice within an art school is a natural fit within the context of a gallery-based arts precinct. More specifically – the facilitation of powerful encounters with artists' studio practice (particularly during formative periods of their careers) has the potential to create valuable long-lasting relationships for our students and faculty.

Whilst often taken for granted by students and faculty, art school studios are exciting and enticing. They are spaces that are deeply connected with imagination and pragmatism; problems and solutions, trial and error. As Anna Harding points out, *'...making art is a demanding process which involves fundamental questions, being concise and articulate, combining generative and critical thinking.'*² It is our belief that the spaces in which this type of activity takes place can facilitate a new mode of engagement with the work of an art school.

The impulse to initiate VCA Access came from a member of the VCA Foundation with this understanding of the art school studio in mind. Keen to explore new levels of connection with

² Harding, 2006

emerging artists, a small committee approached the Faculty with the idea of financially supporting a mentorship program through which new levels of engagement could be facilitated. At the heart of the proposal was an opportunity for members to be part of the lives of five emerging artists from the VCA Masters Program for a year. Many of the VCA Access members are involved in the visual arts, for example, several of them serve on gallery boards, they collect contemporary art and they are regular visitors to international biennale events. In addition, most of our members will normally attend openings at both ACCA and the NGV. They have a real and authentic interest in the process of making art and they are curious about how works of art are brought into the world. In this light, the VCA student studios represent a fertile site of experimentation and inquiry – a starting point for the development of ideas – inhabited by artists.

Recognition of a shift in public needs in art galleries, institutions and museums.

In addition to our respective studio practices and our educational role as academics, both of us have worked extensively in the design and implementation of learning experiences for diverse audiences within public galleries. These include artist talks, lectures, panel discussions, workshops, seminars, symposia, exhibition openings, tours, special viewings and curatorial walkthroughs. In each of these contexts we seek to privilege the value of thinking and speculating through making and doing as an artist.

The development of these experiences is largely a response to the question, how can we generate meaningful engagement with the ideas and issues surrounding contemporary art and art practice and by extension, broader issues related to the political and social dimensions of the world in which we live? The transference of this question from a museum context to that of an art school allows for an expansive exploration of how we can create rich and challenging pathways for our students that create a community around the VCA's core values. VCA Access members, for example, want to engage in the unique offerings of the VCA. They want to be part of the process of connecting an emerging artist with an often-complex art world. With this in mind, VCA Access events have only featured modest catering (our mantra has been 'content over canapés) and minimal lecture style engagement. Our offerings place emphasis on repeat studio and gallery visits which allow members to experience at first hand the physical and conceptual shifts in an emerging artists career over the period of a year. Experiences such as these serve to illustrate the value of an art school as a site of experimentation and growth – the dynamic process through which new cultural expression is generated.

Engagement with the changing University environment

A recent study of Engagement, articulated the following: *'Academics are smart, cynical and driven by their own core motivations and values. However, like all workers, they are also heavily influenced by incentives, penalties and rewards. In order to shift engagement activities to a core position in the institution, culture and misunderstandings need to be addressed. There will be cynicism (as we found) about a new policy for some, and a strong desire to retain old ways of doing things for others. However, there is a group who will be interested in this new focus and will feel it is a good fit for how they work, and that it aligns with their values. To meet the needs of all three groups will be a challenge, and will require consistent messages for staff, and systems and processes that confirm and support the message'*.³

VCA Access can be understood as a model that 'confirms and supports the message'. It has allowed academic staff to develop genuine engagement and new, professional relationships with industry stakeholders, gallerists, collectors, patrons and interested public, creating different types of pedagogical encounters and research possibilities. Further, this program appears to provide a forum for its participants. The program appears to be aligning the shared values of its participants – namely, a desire for an engagement with contemporary art (as a student, mentor artist, supporter, industry leader or academic) in a way that expands the value of an art school.

The mentoring aspect of VCA Access draws the institutional strengths and objectives of excellence and pedagogy into a framework that focuses on communicating to the participating students the importance of industry experience. In turn, the students become more enabled in communicating and working successfully in an industry that is reliant on networks, relationships, cultural traditions and institutional behaviour – an industry renowned for its unregulated and often unruly workplace behaviour.

Engagement has traditionally revolved around a faculty and its accomplishments. It is our assertion that in the current social and political climate, a more intimate style of engagement is fundamental to establishing and sustaining the value of an art school. The VCA Access model engages members with the development of an artist. Mentor artist Sean Peoples discusses the development of student artist Aya Hamamoto and its connection with engagement: *'we discussed many things; conversations around loss and trust, but also about creating conditions for other ways of being in the world and in relationship to others - questions that have certainly been part of my practice... From my perspective the strength of*

³ Daw, 2017

VCA Access has been its ability to support and provide the conditions for this engagement - bringing together a more personal connection between art and artists, and materialising relationships and experiences that wouldn't have existed otherwise.⁴



figure 1 Mentor artist Sean Peoples with student artist Aya Hamamoto

⁴ Peoples, 2017



figure 2 Mentor artist Sean Peoples discusses the work of student artist Aya Hamamoto in front of Year 11 art students.

Joseph Campbell's discussion of sacred spaces could easily be applied to student studios. *'They are spaces where students can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be.'*⁵ In this context student studios are arguably the most magical asset of any art school. Inviting VCA Access members to spend an evening in the studios of the students participating in this program has been one of the most moving and worthwhile events held in the pilot year. Observing the conversations take place was akin to witnessing a new type of cultural behaviour take its form. Members gathered in the small studios (three walls with floor space perhaps 2mx3m) and listened to the students (all from the first year of a Masters degree) discuss their aims, ideas and materials with the articulate and intellectual honesty that is to be found in post-graduate departments of art schools all around the world. There

⁵ Campbell, Moyers and Flowers, 2012

was opportunity after the student's presentation for questions and response. No alcohol or food was served, the emphasis of the evening was purely on the artistic dialogue, cultural exchange and engagement. The mentoring artists also attended this evening, and were able to add their insights to the conversation.

The members' experience of the studio visit was that of privilege and welcome. The mentor artists and students experienced the positive sense that they are conveying ideas about their work to an audience who will appreciate them and may support them in coming years. The apparent care and good will generated by this encounter has an obvious and immediate effect as the word among members spread that something special is happening in this program. Numbers and interest continue to build and grow.

*'In these challenging economic and political times, establishing the value of art and design and therefore the value of university education and research in those disciplines, is more urgent than ever.'*⁶ The example of VCA Access is a clear demonstration that engagement is powerful strategy for establishing the value of art school activity. An art school's awareness of its identity and place within the broader cultural landscape and a recognition of a shift in public needs regarding the visual arts allows for the fostering of meaningful relationships with its key stake holders. The potential of powerful engagement strategies can only be released by artists who are willing share the possibilities of art school studio practice. The benefits of this sharing are both short and long term. In the case of VCA Access, the art school has a small but influential community that advocate its value and can be turned to in time of need. Whilst still in its infancy at the School of Art, clearly the VCA Access model could bring similar benefits to the schools of music, theatre, dance and film/television at the VCA.

⁶ Acuads 2017

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