

Title

Artist-Run Initiatives as Collaborative Models for Studio Teaching

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Abstract

One of the key issues facing arts educators is graduate preparedness for successfully engaging with the professional and creative complexities of life as a visual artist. This research project addresses exhibition practice as a significant aspect of professional training in tertiary arts education. It draws models of praxis from artist-run activity in the visual arts. By examining these intersections of practice through a reflective methodology, this research proposes two key aspects to inform the teaching and learning of exhibition practice: first the role of self-determination and self-management; and secondly the importance of modelling collaboration and collectivity.

Biography

Dr Rachael Haynes is a contemporary artist and academic currently based in Brisbane, Australia. Rachael is a Lecturer in Visual Arts, in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, where she teaches in the Open Studio program. Her research investigates feminist ethics, care, archives and activism by examining the social and personal constructs of language and gender. Rachael completed a Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Arts (2009) with the support of an Australian Postgraduate Award for research at QUT. Rachael has been actively involved with independent and artist-run activity since 2010 and has served on the Board of Directors for the Institute of Modern Art (IMA), was a founding member of the feminist collective LEVEL (2010-2018) and the Gallery Director of Boxcopy Contemporary Art Space (2012-2018). She is a member of the Engagement Council for the University of Queensland Art Museum.

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Creative Graduates and Professional Training

In the Creative Industries, independent visual artists are faced with a challenging and transforming landscape. Artists emerge from tertiary studies into an increasingly competitive industry (Larsen 2015, 1). Described as a 'double life' juggling artistic and economic roles by Lahire (2010), as a life of 'piracy' by Critchley (2010) and as a 'cruel economy' by Abbing (2002), commentators highlight the economic precarity of this career choice (Bridgstock et al 2015; Lahire 2010; Gill 2014). As Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt observe, a career in the arts is marked by temporary work, long hours and poor pay (2008, 14). It is also characterised by informal and social work environments and is sustained largely by intrinsic motivation (Abbing 2002, 282), affective labour (Gill & Pratt 2008, 15) 'persistence and passion' and support from family and friends (Throsby & Petetskaya 2017, 45). Artists are a highly educated group, 65% hold tertiary qualifications and 42% have completed postgraduate study, yet they necessarily combine freelance creative work with a range of arts-related and non-arts work to provide sufficient financial income (Throsby & Zednik 2010, 8).

The kind of creative work independent visual artists are involved in can be characterised as 'portfolio working,' which requires engaging in multiple activities and pathways (Ashton 2015, 389). An artist's career management includes navigating exhibitions, prizes and awards, securing funding and scholarships, working with curators, and negotiating commercial representation and sales. Engagement in these activities is what *defines* a professional in the industry (Bain 2005, 31). Thus, the professional artist relies on peer recognition and gate-keepers in the informal 'reputational' economy of the art world (O'Neil & Wilson 2010, 188- 189; Larsen 2015, 1). In this professional context, 'Presence is equated with visibility and the possession of a reputation as an artist among those who have the power to impose artistic legitimacy and value (Bain 2005, 33-34). In this 'exceptional economy,' there are many informal barriers, which are 'ambiguous and invisible from a distance' (Abbing 2002, 282, 285). Complicating this already difficult field of relations, are issues of 'ethnic, gender and social underrepresentation', which bring to light the

exclusionary aspects of networking and gatekeeping practices in the arts industry (Ashton 2015, 394). As Angela McRobbie (2002) explains, this emphasis on social and network-based processes are significant barriers for creative graduates to engage in the professional art world. Therefore, one of the key ongoing issues facing visual arts education is graduate preparedness for successfully engaging in the professional practices of the industry (Frankham 2006, 4; Webb 2016).

How do we, as tertiary educators, better equip our students to navigate this changing and challenging landscape? How do we empower and enable artists to build strong and resilient, professional contemporary art practices? To address this issue, this research project draws models of praxis from artist-run activity in the visual arts. The long-term aim of the project is to enable and empower creative arts students and graduates to act with agency, self-determination and resilience through a collaborative approach, building professional relationships and facilitating artist networks and collectives.

Objectives of the Research

The central research question which this project considers, emerges from this intersection of contextual factors and the dearth of literature addressing the complexities of teaching and learning in relation to professional exhibition practices in higher arts education. This project's core concern is: "How can artist-run activity provide a collaborative model for teaching exhibition practice in the visual arts studio?"

The overall aim of this project is to establish a scholarly foundation and working principles for the teaching of visual arts exhibition practice in the tertiary context, by drawing on models of praxis from artist-run activity. Specifically, the objectives of this ongoing research project are to: draw together praxis from the field of artist-run activity with the scholarship of teaching exhibition practice; inform the teaching of student group exhibitions and the development of future curricula and co-curricular exhibition activity in the visual arts studio; and to examine collaboration in the context of the student group exhibition and its potential value for future graduates' outcomes.

Reflective Practice and the Art-Research-Teaching Nexus

Grounding this research project are the methodologies of practice-led research and reflective practice. This approach utilises reflective thinking, which involves critical evaluation of assumptions, values and practices (Dewey 1933; Jacob, 2013, 100)

and considers the meaningful integration of theory and practice to build new understandings (Schon, 1983; Gray & Malins 2004, 22). Reflection on professional practice is a central approach to developing effective teaching strategies and is also a key aspect of the creative research process (Burnard 2006, 3- 4; Prentice 1995, 19). This reflective activity involves both reflection on previous experience, and the act of reflecting *forward* to future possibilities (Burnard 2006, 4). This dynamic informs the approach to this research, which examines the intersections of three core components of practice – reflecting on studio teaching, exhibitions and artist-run practice.

Central to this methodology is a consideration of the role of the artist-teacher, that is a 'dual practice' involving both making and teaching art (Thornton 2005, 167). A number of commentators highlight the potentially fraught role of the artist-teacher and the perception that the activities of maintaining a professional art practice and educational role are in conflict (Stevens 2016; Bowman 2012; Rubinstein 2007), however the belief that artists should learn from other artists is still a dominant one (Elkins 2001, 9). Alan Thornton proposes a productive nexus of artist-teaching practice, and that active involvement in art making and exhibitions support and inform pedagogy (2005, 169). James Hall argues for artist-teachers to engage reflexively in their practice and for the 'need to develop skills of negotiation through which they can articulate and continuously reappraise their art practice and, at an appropriate stage, use that practice to inform their teaching' (2010, 109). Thornton also outlines the important role of reflective practice for the artist-teacher, drawing on Donald Schon's schema of spontaneous 'reflection *in action*' and retrospective 'reflecting *on action*' as two key aspects (2005, 172).

This research project utilises 'reflecting-on-action' as a principal method, drawing from tacit knowledge and professional practice as an artist-curator involved in artist-run activity for over a decade. Fundamental to this approach is the application of explicit and tacit knowledge emerging from artistic practice and how this 'can be systemized and constructed into models of learning or into structures that guide teaching approaches' (Bennett et al. 2010, 14). Budge describes this as 'embodied practice' – which she argues, is communicated in art education specifically through modeling knowledge, skills and practice (2016b, 441). Analysis of extant literature drawn from the field of scholarly research in regard to teaching exhibition practice was synthesized with practice reflections about artist-run activity, specifically addressing self-determination and collaboration. The comparative analysis of these

two areas, provided points of intersections and opportunities for new understandings of practice to emerge.

Approaches to Studio Teaching Practice

This research project is framed in the context of the Open Studio model. This approach to studio teaching is characterised as a, 'responsive, reflexive, emergent and most importantly, collaborative space for learning' (Webb 2014, 3). There is an emphasis on heuristic and dialogic models of learning in a supportive studio environment, where students are encouraged to 'rethink notions of what success and failure might mean when making art' (Webb 2014, 3). The open studio promotes a horizontal student-teacher relation, which is characterized as a 'collaborative exchange of ideas and understandings' (Mafe & Robb 2014, 5). The 'open' nature of the studio fosters cross-disciplinary, experimental and collaborative processes and also signals its social, porous nature (Mafe & Robb 2014, 1).

This sociality is a central aspect of learning in the studio generally – experienced through group critiques, exhibitions, workshops and direct artistic collaborations (Jacob 2013, 111). Using the example of the studio critique, Heidi May proposes a decentralized, collaborative approach to studio teaching, drawing on complexity theory in education, which emphasizes group dialogue and the concept of 'collectives elaborating emergent knowledge' (2011, 34). As Grant Stevens argues, this model of collective studio learning, with its emphasis on 'contextual research, critical reflection, discursive elaboration, and professional practice', corresponds to the shifting social contexts of learning available for today's art student (2016, 3). Therefore, key aspects of studio teaching include an emphasis on collaboration, process, critique and reflection where 'learning emerges through action' (Zehner et al. 2009, ii-iii).

Approaches to Exhibition Practice

The exhibition format provides the primary way that visual artists present and promote their creative practice in the professional art world, however, there is little scholarship around the teaching of professional exhibition practices for artists in higher education. Exhibition 'practice' designates the creative, practical and theoretical concerns involved in presenting exhibitions. In her 2016 study, Kylie Budge identifies 'exhibition practice' as one of the key skills modelled by university art teachers and emphasizes the importance of in-situ and hands-on learning based on the lecturer's own professional experience (2016a, 248-49).

The group exhibition in a tertiary context provides a playing field for students to develop tacit knowledge and apply the practical processes and critical negotiations involved in presenting an exhibition. As Jacob argues, in the art school context, 'exhibitions are a means to create and to understand, to practice and to experience ... a way to integrate existing types of knowledge and to generate new knowledge' (2013, 111). These group exhibitions comprise creative and collaborative aspects, as well as managerial and professional learning opportunities. For example, these processes may include; submitting an exhibition proposal, planning the logistics of the show in the gallery space, installing the artwork or presenting an artist talk. Budge argues that tacit knowledge is foundational for this modelling of practice by tertiary teachers, and that this provides students with important access to skills, knowledge and 'ways of being' in the professional art world (2016, 255-256).

Exhibitions present a model for the complex ways in which creative and professional practices intersect in the visual arts. Beyond simply presenting or displaying works, exhibitions 'mark a juncture in a complex field of interactions and exchanges between practices of production, presentation, reception, distribution and interpretation' (Bird 2007, 25). Successful navigation of the creative and cultural industries is more complex than just attaining employment in a market-driven economy, it also involves the sustaining of a creative practice (Webb 2016, 4). This is the current challenge for the artist-educators who teach in visual arts studio programs – to prepare students for the creative-professional nexus that they will need to navigate upon graduating. This future is uncertain and 'classrooms where artists lead artists are forums for ways of looking, thinking, playing, testing, questioning, performing and making that do not necessarily accord with prevailing doctrines or epistemologies' (Stevens 2016, 9). This view is echoed by Anton Vidokle, who conceives of the art school as a place for questioning established practices, where 'experimentation, scholarship, research, discussion, criticism, collaboration, friendship – contribute as a continuous process of seeking out and redefining the potential in practice and theory' (2010, 152). Thus, modeling reflective practice in this context aligns with Burnard's notion of 'reflecting forward' (2006, 4), anticipating future, as yet unrealised, possibilities.

Group exhibitions provide a valuable model to study collaborative learning in the visual arts. Mary Jane Jacob proposes that the exhibition in the context of the art school facilitates 'a shared set of inquiries, drawing from diverse ideas and backgrounds of those involved, valuing both their intuitive and factual knowledge, and enabling knowledge building to be carried out in the practice of individual and

collective work' (2013, 111). These exhibitions take place in the context of a shared visual arts studio, where students work and learn together. Mark Webb, in his discussion of the Open Studio approach, highlights the importance of this collaborative space for learning and its potential long-term impact on graduates. He argues that, in the open studio, 'collaborative activity encourages heuristic modes of learning ... enabling graduates to have a self-sufficient, nomadic approach to continuing professional practice, to collectively support one another, and generously mentor others in the emerging art community' (2014, 3, 7). Webb specifically highlights graduates' involvement in founding and operating locally based artist-run initiatives and galleries as both a marker of the studio program's success, and as a potential contributing factor to the students' professional careers.

Approaches to Artist-Run Practice

Artist-run spaces provide significant support for Australian artists to make and present new works at various stages of their careers (Campbell et al. 2017, 39; Eltham & Ryan 2019, 40). The cultural value of ARIs is evident, 'they incubate new styles and genres of visual creativity, forming a test-bed for artistic innovation ... constitute important environments for public debate about art ... and provide a social space for artists' (Eltham & Ryan 2019, 40). In 2015 there were over 50 artist-run initiatives (ARI) active in Australia, operating with various governance models, including projects, spaces, small arts organisations and artistic collectives (Murray 2015, 3). While some operate as long-term institutional spaces, for example *West Space* in Melbourne and *First Draft* in Sydney – others celebrate their contingent and responsive nature through temporary projects over a short life span. These initiatives provide diverse artistic programs including exhibitions, performances, events, public programs, publications and residencies.

As Zara Stanhope notes, ARIs emerged as a core element of the arts ecosystem because opportunities in other galleries and organisations were not serving artists' needs (2007, 2). Typically established by recent art graduates, artist-run initiatives function as a form of self-determination (Jones 2007, 18). This DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos is one of the defining aspects of artist-run activity, along with a shared sense of community (Dwyer & Palmer 2007, 12) and collaborative and flexible models of operation (Thelwell 2011, 6). ARIs provide connections for artists in a specific place and time (Miranda & Lacroix 2018, 11), linking communities of practitioners with art audiences, and other arts professionals including curators, critics and gallerists. These include national and international networks of small-medium arts

organisations, for example, the Australian network 'All Conference' and the UK based collective, 'Common Practice'.

For artists involved in the governance and management of artist-run initiatives there are a number of opportunities to gain professional experience including – business and strategic planning; building and understanding audiences; applying for and securing funding from government and other sources; undertaking qualitative and critical evaluation of programs; project and event management; curatorial programming and exhibition installation; marketing and public relations; design and publishing. Suzie Attiwil makes a wordplay on ARIs as a site of 'initiation', where 'emerging artists exhibit for the first time and go through the rites of passage' in order to take their place as professional artists (2007, 32). Reflecting on artist-run practice, this research project considers the potential applications of these activities in the preparation of undergraduate art students for their professional and creative life. However, it also examines the limits of applying models of artist-run initiatives within the framework of formalised higher education and the context of the tertiary institution.

Reflecting on Intersections of Practice

This project draws upon a reflective practice framework to propose ways in which models of collaboration, exemplified in artist-run activity, can inform pedagogical approaches to teaching group exhibitions in a studio context. Furthermore, the distinctive characteristics of artist-run initiatives and their role within the broader visual arts ecosystem suggest the potential benefits for graduating students. This research proposes two key aspects of artist-run practice that can inform the teaching of group exhibitions in a tertiary context – first, self-determination and self-management and secondly, models of collaboration and collectivity.

Self-management is a key aspect of professional practice for artists navigating the 'portfolio' work endemic in the art industry. As Alison Bain describes in her essay "Constructing an Artistic Identity" (2005), this includes the 'ability to initiate projects, to make crucial decisions, and to assume the necessary responsibility to carry them through to completion without supervision' (39). Therefore, the facilitation of self-management capabilities in undergraduate training is one key strategy to help better equip our creative graduates (Bridgstock et al. 2015, 340). One of the defining characteristics of artist-run activity is a DIY ethos. This is both an artistic and a practical response to the exclusionary operations and gatekeeping that happens in

the arts industry – artists renegotiate, on their own terms, the exhibition and public presentation of their artworks and practices. The modeling of self-determination is significant when thinking about framing approaches to professional practice for visual arts students.

Artist-run activity also offers models of collaboration and collectivity that can be applied to teaching exhibition practices. The organisation and management of these spaces range from collectives of artists to more formal board and staffing structures. The collaborative nature of artist-run activity circumvents the prevalent mythologies of the artist as solitary and isolated individual (Bain 2005, 30). One of the key factors identified by artists to advance their careers is 'support and encouragement from others' (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017, 45). ARIs offer social networks, create communities of practitioners and build collegial networks, which can be of great benefit for artists and their creative process. The next phase of this research project will involve the development and implementation of collaborative activities focused on visual art students organising their own artist-run initiatives.

Conclusion

This research paper forms the first phase of a longer-term study. It has focused on the development of reflective models of teaching exhibition practice that draw from artist-run activity. Later stages of this research will involve the implementation of collaborative models in specific learning activities focused on student artist-run initiatives; and a longitudinal study involving conducting surveys of graduates as they transition to professional arts practice. This project examines how artists working together and collaborating, can challenge and reimagine the present and future possibilities of organising and participating in the arts, and how this understanding can be applied to exhibition frameworks in studio-based teaching.

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