

POLEMICS

The Independent Art School Conference

Supported by Hull Time Based Arts and running alongside the ROOT festival
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The Independent Art School Conference was held as part of a continually evolving project which began in Hull in 1999 as a student revolt. The Conference marked a turning away from simply being a student protest. It is now a process which encompasses artists from all walks of life. For this particular event, individuals responded to the question of how an 'Independent Art School' could take shape and provided thoughts on current educational structures.

During the Conference it became evident that a 'school' in itself was taking place. The success of this 'school'/conference undoubtedly lies in the model developed. A wide range of artists (students, lecturers, recent graduates, artists outside the system) gave talks, presented work and in turn listened to and discussed with one another. The informality of the situation allowed for abundant discussions and, for once, discussions surrounding art education were not simply academic, putting forward the message that students and artists should play an equal role in such events.

Michael Mayhew (resident artist, Green Room, Manchester) began with a piece which, through repetition of memories, heightened awareness. Participants wrote out 100 times, onto long sheets of paper lining the walls, their most vivid memory



Pippa Koszerek, Audience discussions.



Pippa Koszerek, Sarah Jones' and Charlotte Price's piece.

from their school days. Small discussions arose as people began relating their stories to each other. An intimacy was created which, prior to talks beginning, already allowed audience members to become 'speakers'. By including thoughts on 'School days', the scope of the Conference was immediately broadened to consider all aspects of education.

Awareness of one's own education was an issue which was continually touched on throughout the conference. Recent graduates Sarah Jones and Charlotte Price, described how an exchange visit to an Academy in Poland had changed their whole perspective on education. Realizing how greatly education systems differ allowed them, on their return, to feel more control over how they could use their original course for their own development. Kristen Ronnevik described, more analytically, the differences between the British and German system, which he had encountered on a recent exchange to HKB Braunschweig from the Hull School of Art and Design. These talks illustrated how, through being put in a situation which raises criticisms of one's original system, one is better equipped to deal successfully with any limitations within that system. One is also less likely to become constrained by blind acceptance of what one has come to assume as normal. The question was raised as to what kind of artist each system wants to produce. Michael Mayhew also asked whether the British system really gives students the tools to think for themselves and not simply within the structures/texts they've been given.

Lack of understanding of one's situation, or of the tools that one uses, was a focal issue for artist Trevor Batten's paper. Artists need, he argued, to have a thorough understanding of the technology they use in order to exploit it fully, rather than relying solely on what corporate software companies tell us. Only through an opening up of our knowledge and understanding will we be prepared for, and capable of loosening, the ties of management systems. We must embrace technology in order to understand its implications, and be able to work with and through them.

Korin Outagawa's presentation was in the form of a parable that merged fiction

with fact, where the Independent Art School became the *Théâtre d'art 2000*. 'This is no ordinary theatre; here, real and imaginary are on the scales of our political unconscious, culture is on the watery slab, the sort of culture we know as having to do with wholeness, the relation of each to all, and each to the void.'

In his talk, Helmut Lemke, who recently resigned as lecturer at the Hull School of Art and Design, described why he refused to teach under a modular structure. He equated the problems facing art education with the problems artists face when applying for funding: the necessity to prove oneself accountable through criteria which don't actually relate to what one is doing.

'The sixties may be regarded as the revolutionary era of student activism. Often when we talk of "freedom" or "change" our language bears some homage (or debt) to the period.' Philip Barnes (a recently graduated artist) combined a pre-recorded series of statements from that time with a scene from the 1971 film *Zabraskie Point*, a seminal depiction of 'student revolt', and a track by the Elgar Broughton Band, bringing forward both the energy and contradictions which can be associated with such revolts.

The Invisible College's performance/discussion involved them and the audience changing roles in an attempt to question and subvert the static roles and often awkward relationships of teacher/student, organizer/worker. Discussions evolved primarily along the lines of what it means to pass on knowledge/be a tutor, and why the majority of students are unable to relate to their tutors as friends.

Monica Ross (artist and educator), although unable to attend, sent in a paper which was read out by Philip Barnes. The BA/MA models, she suggested, are becoming less and less viable (through costs, lack of resources, etc.). Many students would do better to seek their education (and place their money) elsewhere. Explaining the problems which the students/consumers now face, she mentioned easily available alternatives such as free lecture programmes offered by many galleries and by organizations like the Architectural Association and one-to-one studio mentoring schemes. What, then, are the uses of an art school structure? Although it was generally agreed that education is a lifetime's experience, and as such is heavily undermined by the broken-up Western education system, many were of the opinion that there is still a use for 'The Art School'. The importance of having spaces reserved for creativity in our hectic society, and not least the fact that art schools (and universities) provide a situation where people with similar concerns can meet, learn from each other and, through being together for a substantial period of time, form long-lasting friendships.

Karin Paish, a self-taught artist, spoke about her experiences outside of the Art School system. Having walked out of an art course in the first few weeks, she described her reasons for following her own path and the way this had shaped her own practice and philosophy. Seeing her work in terms of one lifelong experience, she has refused to compromise her own pace for that expected by society and has consequently found a more holistic way of living.

Working outside of both the funding system and the art world were fundamental issues in Duncan Reekie's paper. Drawing on his experience with the collective Exploding Cinema, of which he is a founder member, he questioned the pre-conceived notion of Art, stating that as a construct of the bourgeoisie it can never be democratic and that Popular Culture, in the sense of a post-punk DIY ethos, is much more innovative and also democratic. What kind of 'art' would an Independent Art School encourage? And if it is an Independent Art School, what is

it independent from? Duncan Reekies' answer was that the funding system with all its requirements and double standards would 'kill' any autonomy. His solution was rather to 'embrace capitalism' in order to survive by one's own means.

An awareness of what one is 'independent from' was also raised by Rob Gawthrop (Hull School of Art & Design). His argument lay in the fact that although one may work in an alternative way, one must not cut oneself off from everything else. He pointed out that the Independent Art School is only one of the many waves of discontent about the situation of art education. 'There is independence *from* poverty, modularity, and regulatory and economic control, and also, to be independent *to do* something'. If one cuts oneself off from available resources one could be limiting one's reach. To set up an alternative which could viably compete with the present structures, financial and supportive help would be needed. Looking at how things could tie together, how students could work alongside artists and within a wider context, he suggested that an art school be associated with Hull Time Based Arts' proposed Centre for Time Based Arts. Under the umbrella of specific institutions (universities, colleges of further education, etc.), the 'art school' could have enough autonomy from each one, while simultaneously having enough support to exist.

During the Conference several more hypothetical models for an alternative art school were presented. Alternative structures for actual 'schools' were discussed as well as more abstract examples of what a 'school' could be, other than what we often limitingly read into that term. 'Ten points for the Independent Art School' sent in by Markus Eisenmann, sparked debate about whether it was really possible to have an art school with 'no unilaterally directive management structures or administration of any kind'.

Professor Pavel Büchler, (Manchester Metropolitan University), described how a model art school could take on a cooperative structure which would rid it of the many inequalities within the current system. A model such as this is possible because of the 'artistic licence' which society has bestowed upon the 'visionary' artist. However, society's view of the artist does not see him as capable of social change. This perception is heightened by academic qualifications which tie up the artist into the confining role of 'professional'. A cooperative art school would not be an end in itself but could only be a small step towards changing the whole education system, 'where art is part of all learning so that it may become part of all social life.'

Away from ideas of an official art school, Tina Keane, (Central St Martins College of Art & Design), showed the documentary *The making of Dandy Dust* explaining how the making of this film (with artists making the props and scenery and performance artists playing the characters, etc.) had been an example of a collective learning experience. Dr Roland Miller (Huddersfield University) used *Wond'rous Life*, a series of performance events he had set up in August 2000, as a model which the Independent Art School could take on. Over a period of two weeks, *Wond'rous Life* took place at four different sites: artists studios, a wood, an old mill and a subdued seaside resort. The emphasis lay on an imaginary journey traced by the order of events and ending where the Meridian line meets the North Sea. Artists came together to celebrate life and make performances. These two examples illustrate the importance of learning through 'just doing' things. They are also examples of how an Independent Art School could be extended to encompass artists' with varying

experiences, therefore moving away from the set educational routes which are often seen to be the 'only' forms for learning.

Through the ideas raised at the Conference it became evident that the Independent Art School must look beyond simply being a 'concrete' alternative art school. Continuing to question the whole notion of 'school', education in general, 'Independence' and much, much more, through actions, events, model schools, etc., the Independent Art School could be many things at once depending on the situation and people involved.

The principle of autonomy would create an open, constantly evolving network/ 'school' eventually led by noone and initiated by many. This would be a way for people to continually share news of the work they were doing, a collective learning environment tied to no particular place, incorporating artists of different levels of experience, coming together as artists rather than in the guise of student/lecturer to share information and learn from each other and re-defining 'school' as a lifetime's learning experience.

The Independent Art School continues to question itself and set up actions and events in Hull and elsewhere. If you would like to continue the process in your own way or take part in future events please don't hesitate to contact us at nschool@hotmail.com or 01482 212 478.

The website will be relaunched in February. If you would like your Independent Art School actions to be linked to it please let us know. The address is <<http://website.lineone.net/~nschool>>