

Unpacking a collaborative practice: merging art, research and teaching

Tracy Mackenna and Edwin Janssen

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The new world

“...no longer simply institutes for art education, but places where art is received, produced, presented, collected and distributed. The idea of the open academy has consequences for art, the practise of exhibition making, and art education itself.” (Verwoert, 2006)

The issues we face in our combined roles as artists, researchers and leaders within the art institution compel us to locate our collaborative practice centrally. While valuing the established view of the academy as a universal art institution that educates the individual, we recognise that core values must be reconsidered in this new world of rapid idea exchange. The social transformations of modernity have resulted in an art world that inhabits new and different audiences and economies. As an education sector we have yet to assert clearly the value of our current role and the potential of our institutions. The basis for acceptance of their place in society should be articulated in order to claim a solid intellectual position in public discourse. In a newly global and highly competitive environment, art schools have to make their case boldly, a key component of which is clarity about their main contributions to society.

The purpose and practice of the contemporary art school requires a renewal of its core mission and a radical rethinking of its relationship to society and partnerships. The authority and relevance of a pedagogical programme and educational philosophy are hanging in the balance. How do we decide on our new pedagogical, academic and artistic models? To address the question of what we should be teaching students and how, should not models be developed around artists' practices and research activities, leading through examples of what it means to be artists today?

Collectively we are educating the next generation of creative people to do and be, but the reason and purpose no longer have a shared basis from which to assert themselves. How can we assess when criteria are no longer common and agreed? When is an outcome good if the artefact is no longer centre stage? There is a necessity to maintain value, yet promote innovation and adapt to new demands and pressures whilst acknowledging that institutional history leads to inflexible structures. Today's societies have recently become all-embracing of knowledge and creativity, and academies that are transforming into nimble, multi-faceted entities can be key to that.

These issues are central to the structure, location and timing of the exhibition project '*Life is Over! if you want it*', 2009. The visual narrative that binds together the components of our collaborative practice is framed within the social, engaged and participatory.

Life is Over! If you want it

The exhibition project '*Life is Over! if you want it*', was developed in partnership with Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design's exhibition department, University of Dundee, Scotland and Metasenta Research Centre, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. In public university galleries students and staff across disciplines, along with external audiences actively engaged with an art practice that seeks to integrate production, presentation, exchange, research, teaching and reflection by foregrounding collaboration, interaction, curatorial practice, (personal) histories and interpretation.

Supported by the Wellcome Trust, the issue of euthanasia and assisted suicide was central. Taking the familial experience of Edwin's father's death by assisted suicide in the Netherlands in 2000 as a guiding narrative this exhibition project looked at the range of issues around contemporary death, how artists have interpreted death throughout history, how objects and images impact on people's ideas around death and the role that art can play in mediating issues of life and death.

The project was partly shaped by questions derived from our roles within the art institution. How can an interactive and collaborative practice be utilised as an educational strategy? How can we include students in our investigation of key aspects of our practice and its broader cultural context?

How will an inclusive approach enhance the students' experience and inform our practice-led research and pedagogic strategies?

How can the understanding of art as an agent for knowledge transfer be improved?

Starting with a personal story

Rein Wolfs (2005) wrote of the "continual tension between public and private" which is always evident in Mackenna and Janssen's work, adding "But so is the direct reworking of human norms and values, which has always formed a springboard for their direct communication with the public."

'*Life is Over! if you want it*' was created as an environment where a variety of narratives could be released, co-exist and develop. A visual narrative was established through the placement of new slide projections in conjunction with borrowed historical artworks, and new wall drawings. A purpose-designed environment integrated these elements with a public studio where we worked each day, and a series of public events.

Central to '*Life is Over! if you want it*' were two large-scale slide projections. The single work, '*Life, Death and Beauty: The Invisible Talk Back - Fear, No Fear*', 2009 comprised two elements, one complete at the start of the project, one complete by the project end.

Of '*Life, Death and Beauty: The Invisible Talk Back*', Jan Patience wrote: "Not long after the death of his father, Janssen's mother, who had been ill for a long while, also died. In the family home, almost in the manner of a Dutch still-life painter, he made a darkly mournful, yet beautiful series of slides using objects such as his father's watch, a glass and bottle of water, purple tulips and a changing series of highly personal photographs within a photographic frame". The complementary projection '*Life, Death and Beauty: Fear, No Fear*', 2009 was developed daily over the period of the exhibition project. Mackenna's presence in the gallery stimulated discussion with visitors on the subject of life and death. Excerpts of conversation were written, photographed then projected each day along with Mackenna's reflections on the performative qualities of language and the connections between words, their performer and the performance.

A second projected work, '*Life, Death and Beauty: Where Darwin Meets Courbet*', 2009 showed the artists' personal collection of art historical and contemporary reproductions and objects, on the theme of life, death and beauty, assembled in the studio during the research and production phases. The slides proposed a particular reading of the material through photographic framing. The projection medium refers to the "erosion of hierarchical distinctions within traditionally separate genres and the gradual loss of the 'frame' that renders art autonomous and unique", (Alexander 2005). Slide projection represents, as Harrison (2005) proposes, "a detachment from the cultural status quo with intangibility and impermanence of imagery".

Claire Doherty (2003) has typified us as "artists for whom a critique of authorship and the democratisation of art are implicit; for whom the role of the participant predominates through dialogical process; and for whom human relations or 'the relational' aspect of social context is a primary point of departure."

Presentation, making, research, teaching, participation, exchange, debate and reflection on the themes of art, life and death were addressed in combination, rather than in a linear, hierarchical manner. Starting with a personal story, contextualised visually and verbally through the theory and history of art, the exhibition project was opened up for the production of art and knowledge. A public events programme included a symposium: *What role can art play in mediating issues around life and death?*; a seminar focusing on the relationship between place, architecture and suicide; a lecture: *Contemporary art practice as a site for production, social engagement and reflection*; an in-conversation gallery discussion: *Artists' perspectives on mortality: life and death*; a podcast interview for the School of Medicine's Medical Ethics programme; a Master of Fine Art/Doctoral-student collaborative performative response to '*Life is Over! if you want it*': '*Exquisite corpse; a contemporary unfolding*'.

Parallel to the structured events, visitors and participants underwent a process of thinking out loud, engaging in the dynamic, associative and unmediated process of simultaneously thinking and speaking about the exhibition project's topic, amongst themselves, and with us. The exhibition stimulated positions of controversy, resistance, dissent and debate: alternative concepts and views were actively sought. The daily inclusion of excerpts of conversation in one of the slide projections exposed the subversive power of spoken and written text whilst revealing the inflationary and culturally laden use of words and phrases.

The gift of love for knowledge and beauty

The importance of siting '*Life is Over! if you want it*', in our own institution should not be overlooked. Placing ourselves centrally within an exhibition whose structure promotes exchange, research, production, presentation and the analysis of contemporary art, we chose to expose ourselves to students and colleagues whilst relying on their participation for the project's success. A primary aim for our collaborative practice is to develop it as a site of knowledge production and a dialogic approach to teaching and research that can challenge traditional genres and question academic practice in the visual disciplines. We represent artists who question art's commercial value amongst a generation who relish economic success often as much as critical esteem. The conviction that making art is about process more than product, about building social and intellectual capital and opening up new sites of inquiry underpins our belief in art education as an investment in social agency.

Primary and secondary education delivers to us new types of students. Embedded in them is immersion in new digital communications platforms, the phenomenon of social networking and access to world-class quality on-line educational resources. These demand of the institution a refreshed curriculum. Artists are aware of the plethora of skills and richness of qualities they can bring to a broad range of areas. Their power lies in the ability to enable those being taught to take the central role. This transfer of knowledge, skills and position places the student experience at the heart, making the processes they go through the substance of education, rather than the outcome.

We are motivated daily to create a space where learning consists of ambitious levels of discussion, fostered through equal exchanges among a peer group. We strive to nurture students by emphasising personal development, the political and the social; to question the status of art education within broad pedagogical structures; to question product making and presentation by promoting research as a route towards knowledge through creativity and discovery; to highlight self-awareness and independent thought as critical to the relation between art and education; to create new models that embrace failure as a valuable learning experience; to continually reassess intellectual and environmental conditions that challenge the studio/workshop model and the position of the solo artist; to erode hierarchies by strengthening reciprocal staff/student learning; to re-establish visual language's place at our core; to test and interrogate the methods of the institutionalised art world.

The methodology developed through our collaborative practice and in particular '*Life is Over! if you want it*', has crystalised our ideas of how to move art education forward and will enable us to investigate and test issues crucial to the development of the art institution of the future.

To finish where we began, with the words of Jan Verwoert, we would like to conclude with a quote that reflects *our* passion, through the coming together of pedagogy, knowledge, beauty and giving. "Socratic pedagogics then imply a simultaneous assumption and renunciation of authority as they are about giving the gift of love for knowledge and beauty to others in order to enable them to realise that love can be found in discourse (held over a banquet) as much as in their own life and work. As ancient as this is, it remains one of the most compelling propositions for a passion of the pedagogical." (Verwoert, 2006)



'Life is Over! if you want it', installation view.



'Life is Over! if you want it', installation view.



'Life, Death and Beauty: The Invisible Looks Back and Life, Death and Beauty: Fear, No Fear'. Detail.



'Life, Death and Beauty: Where Darwin Meets Courbet'. Detail.



'Life is Over! if you want it', gallery tour.



*'Life is Over! if you want it', student project:
'Exquisite corpse; a contemporary unfolding'.*