

Paradox 2017 – Strand C Diverse Means

Feast: Collaboration between Norwich University of the Arts and Wysing Arts Centre

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A common component of any BA Fine Art course is its guest speaker programme, offering students and insight into the creative processes, maturation and professional challenges of artists and the art world. Although eagerly anticipated by students and often a highlight of the week, the format of a lecture, even with some attending tutorials, can feel regimented and sealed off from the creative process of the artist.

In my capacity as BA Fine Art Course Leader at Norwich University of the Arts, I have sought to instigate opportunities for students to engage in live projects, not exclusively but often aligned to the lecture programme. The specific aim is to create a more porous and non-hierarchical experience, one in which artist and student enter into dialogue, process and outcome, providing the student with a heightened perception achieved through experience and change. These projects we have simply called Feasts, because they are not fixed within the normal syllabus or timetable, they are moveable.

Change and experience are key words. The impetus to think and behave creatively is often accelerated by replacing the familiar, predictable and controlled environment with a new, uncertain and stimulating situation. This is recognized in progressive and creatively motivated organisations, where ‘transformational change’ leads to new states of being that are receptive to an unknown future. To quote from Jaap Boonstra’s book *Dynamics of Organizational Change and Learning*: “...*the actors interact with one another, reconstruct the organizational principles, create new contexts, envision the future, and create a collective desire for change and learning.*”ⁱ Boonstra’s observations reflect how creativity is paramount in a post-Fordist mode of production. The experience resulting from change often has a fundamental and enduring impact and in a learning environment, we inevitably find ourselves referring to Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycleⁱⁱ, whereby the learner, following ‘experience’, engages in a process of critical analysis, reflection, formative planning and testing before engaging with another significant project. Kolb’s model of the Reflective

Learner is enhanced through collaboration, where part of the initial experience is the unpredictable nature of co-authorship or at the very least some degree of dialogue with others. Liam Gillick deals with this subject succinctly in his paper *Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three?*, where he identifies the group dynamic as a *"...mode of generating ideas and placing structures into the culture that emerges from collaborative, collective, or negotiated positions rather than as varied forms of "pure" expression or super-subjectivity."*ⁱⁱⁱ

What I intend this case study to show is how, within the parameters of a UK HE Fine Art undergraduate degree course, the dynamics of change and experience can have impact on a student's learning, and how this results in both autonomous and collective creativity. The annual collaboration between Norwich University of the Arts and Wysing Arts Centre will form the basis of this case study, as a good example of the augmented curriculum that is offered through our Feasts.

Now in its sixth year, the annual collaboration between NUA and Wysing Arts Centre has brought over forty students into direct contact with significant contemporary artists. In each case, the artist has given a talk as part of the BA Fine Art lecture programme at NUA and subsequently led activity at Wysing Arts Centre. The activities, though different each year, have remained experiential, kinaesthetic, un-didactic and exhilarating.

I should at the outset, provide a little background on both institutions. Norwich University of the Arts (NUA) is an independent, specialist arts, design and media University, located within the city of Norwich in the East of England. NUA offers 18 undergraduate courses including 3 BSc programmes, 8 taught postgraduate courses and research degrees. Students studying Fine Art have access to purpose built studios, large project spaces and technical facilities which include printmaking workshops, a media lab and 3D workshops along with a casting room and a foundry.

Wysing Arts Centre is based in a rural location near Cambridge and provides a range of programmes for artistic research, experimentation, discovery and production, out of which emerges an ongoing programme of exhibitions, public events, activity for young people, families and schools. Wysing's site includes a

gallery, educational facilities, artists' studios, project spaces, a 17th century farmhouse, a growing collection of outdoor sculpture and an on-site cafe.

Since the inception of the NUA/Wysing collaboration in 2012, we have worked predominantly with Lotte Juul Peterson, Artists and Programmes Director at Wysing Arts Centre. Lotte has also given a lecture to students at NUA on the full spectrum of activity at Wysing Arts and Centre.

The choice of Wysing Arts Centre as an organization to collaborate with, was based on its International reputation, its broad programme of events, the emphasis on critical enquiry and, not least, its proximity to Norwich. Wysing's secluded rural setting contrasts considerably with NUA's urban location. Students have responded positively to the enforced abandonment of metropolitan distractions (you can't get a mobile signal at Wysing) and have experienced heightened levels of receptiveness and focus whilst undertaking workshops there. A student working on the project with Evan Ifekoya in March 2017 said *"It felt like being isolated on some sort of island populated by artists who feed on creativity. Which I think helped me focus on the activity as I felt a bit more submerged in what we were doing."* Although on a more modest scale, Wysing Arts Centre parallels many of the elements of Black Mountain College^{iv}, from its farmhouse accommodation for resident artists to its ethos of social interaction and generative process. Upon arrival, students have felt emotionally affected by Wysing Art Centre, initiating the 'transformational change' that Boonstra talks about, a heightened perception in readiness for the unknown.

For this presentation, I will concentrate on the most recent workshop involving the artist Evan Ifekoya, which took place in March 2017. But I will start by providing a short overview of the 5 previous workshops, in order to provide some evidence of the project's gradual development.

The first NUA/Wysing project, which took place in March 2012, was an ambitious task to re-stage John Latham's *The Government of the First and Thirteenth Chair* at Wysing Arts Centre^v, with students acting and narrating. The idea came from the artist Mark Aerial Waller, who at the time was a visiting tutor on the Fine Art course at NUA. Students were selected on the basis of a written proposal and subsequently

undertook workshops and visits with Mark Aerial Waller in the preparation for the event. We worked closely with the curators of Flat Time House, enabling students to research and gain insight into Latham's working process. The performance was staged as part of Wysing's programme for The Institute of Beyond^{vi}, only the third time it had been performed since its initial iteration in 1978.

In 2013 Laure Prouvost was invited to give a talk at NUA. Laure Prouvost was one of the artists included in the Wysing group exhibition *The Starry Rubric Set*^{vii} held in 2012 (also part of the Institute of Beyond programme). Having talked to Lotte Juul Peterson, Artists and Programmes Curator about the success of the previous year's project, it was suggested that we host a workshop for students at Wysing enabling them to work with Laure Prouvost on ideas emerging from shared interests. This started with a guided tour of Wysing's grounds, taking in the commissioned placards made by Laure Prouvost, followed by a seminar format presentation and group discussion with the artist. The simple format of a lecture at NUA followed by a 1-day practical workshop at Wysing formed the basis of what Lotte and I agreed should be an annual event.

In 2014 we worked with Cécile B Evans. Cécile had been a Wysing artist in residence in 2013 and would be showing work in Wysing's group show *Annals of the Twentieth-Ninth Century*^{viii}. I met with Cécile in the summer of 2013 and we discussed the type of work that she could do with a small group of students at Wysing. The result was a project brief entitled *Black Swans and Missed Representations*, which took as its main theme the malleability of cultural representations. To quote from the original project brief "*Using Taleb's Black Swan Theory as a starting point, which describes an event that comes as a surprise and contrary to previous events, we will entertain the notion of alternate truths.*" Students were tasked with creating interactive threads in response to the ideas discovered through group discussion, which ultimately became part of the material for Cécile's digital commission *AGNES*^{ix}, an interactive avatar living on the Serpentine Gallery's website.

Alice Theobald gave a talk at NUA in 2015, where she introduced students to her interest in the coercive force of language and the potential for communication to

become corrupted and unstable. Alice Theobald often works with a cast on non-professional actors, and this formed the basis of a proposed improvisation with a group of students using the domestic environment of the farmhouse accommodation at Wysing as the stage. The result of a day-long generative process was a short performance which explored verbal and body language within a web of misunderstandings. The following is taken from one of the student's reflective journals:

“The domestic setting subtly referenced the place where troubles of communication are normally played out, the bedroom in particular a mark of closed conversation that remains between person and person. Beds, duvets and bedside tables became integral objects of the narrative, emancipating the disregarded off screen space. During the second half of the day, Theobald asked the performers to take a hand held camera and film the workshop, freeing the regimental ‘frame’ as we hopped in and out of perception. The active camera shifted the performer to become the spectator, magnifying fragments of the story to define their own plot.”

The 2016 project grew beyond the format of lecture and 1-day project. We worked with the artists Kit Craig (one of Wysing's resident artists during the Multiverse programme^x) and Lisa Selby, part-time tutor at NUA, who combined a demanding series of technical workshops developing skills in mould making and slip casting with lengthy group discussion and planning. The themes explored through this project revolved around the tensions between memory and interpretation, observation and reinterpretation, detachment and immersion. Following Kit Craig's talk, the first task for the selected students was to make a series of sound recordings and documentations of domestic spaces. Continuing on from the research stage, workshop sessions took place in the mould-making and casting rooms at NUA, and subsequently at Wysing Arts Centre's ceramic studios. For the first time, students and artists utilized the accommodation at Wysing, discussing their work in progress around the kitchen table and talking long into the night. The interim display of works at Wysing was followed by an exhibition of outcomes at NUA in the Project Spaces. A student's journal entries include:

“Participation in this project gave us an expanded insight into what it means to work ‘collaboratively.’ Initially, we brought ideas and offered them up, functioning intuitively but individually, each selecting objects and sounds without knowing what form their final outcome would take or how they would work within a group. Our stay at Wysing further strengthened our collaborative bond: cooking, eating, writing, reading, making and presenting as a group. We let go of our preconceptions about outcomes and allowed each conversation and each step of the process to inform the next, our discussions throughout the process compounding our collective decision making.”

For 2017 we returned to the simpler and probably more sustainable model of 1 lecture followed by a 1-day workshop at Wysing. From the 10 artists who would be resident during Wysing’s Polyphonic programme of 2016^{xi}, we chose to work with Evan Ifekoya (who prefers to refer to herself in the non-gendered plural), an interdisciplinary artist and educator, exploring the politicisation of culture, society and aesthetics. The format would be a slot in the NUA guest lecture programme in February 2017, followed immediately by a call to students for submissions of interest in working with Evan. We made a conscious effort to encourage applications from year 1, not just the more confident year 2 and 3 students. The date for the workshop at Wysing was set as Wednesday 1st March 2017.

Evan’s lecture at NUA was dynamic, combining live spoken prose with short video and sound clips. It revealed a sophisticated manipulation of historical, cultural and popular material, of co-authorship and in general an investigation of poetic, erotic and radical forms of spectacle. At the end of the lecture, we briefed students on the planned workshop and stating simply that following the talk, students would know if they shared interests with Evan and would want to apply. The call for proposals was very simple; 250-words outlining why this opportunity would be desirable and a request for 3 images of current work. The proposals would be submitted online using the Fine Art course intranet site. The submissions would be assessed by Carl Rowe at NUA, Lotte Juul Peterson at Wysing and Evan Ifekoya. 8 students would be chosen from the submissions, based on the strength of their proposal.

A year 1 student wrote in her proposal: *“I left Evan’s presentation inspired to create new works. I feel Evan’s works on gender, the internet, and the presence of self are*

well conveyed and working together could give me insight on my future work about these topics.”

The 8 selected for the workshop included year 1, 2 and 3 students on the undergraduate course. There are just over 200 students on the course, so this part of the activity introduces a realistic element of competitiveness and professional practice.

Prior to the workshop at Wysing Art Centre, Evan provided 2 extracts of text for students to read by way of preparation. The first text was an extract from ‘She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks’, by M. NourbeSe Philip^{xii} and the second text from Roland Barthes’ ‘The Grain of the Voice’^{xiii}. Without providing a task or brief, Evan indicated the direction the workshop may go in.

We arrived at Wysing Arts Centre mid morning on Wednesday 1st March, where Lotte Juul Peterson and Evan Ifekoya met us and led us to the project space. The students were, at this point, full of expectation, exhilarated by the prospect of working with Evan, but also confronted by the challenges of the unknown. Their current research interests, processes and approaches to making art had to be suspended as the occasion, albeit for just a day, took over. The group started by discussing and analysing the 2 texts that Evan had provided. Students made observations about the differing narratives and unconventional structure of ‘She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks’, reading some of this aloud. We considered Barthes’ text, the physical nature of speech, intonation, the manipulation of air as it rises from the lungs and over tongue to form audible communication. Following the group discussion, Evan Ifekoya issued each student with chewing gum and instructed them to walk the grounds of Wysing, taking note of sounds and sights whilst at all times being mindful of the rolling of their tongue and the movement of their jaw as they chewed. Upon arrival back at the project space, these thoughts were transcribed.

We stopped for a lunch of lentil soup and bread in the farmhouse. It is not insignificant in this account to point out that lunch was prepared from scratch by the

Fine Art Course Leader, a perfect opportunity to reinforce the non-hierarchical and eminently social nature of these projects.

The afternoon was spent generating more free writing and intuitive text in response to physical experience. The group combined their writing into a collaborative script, which they performed as a chorus of spoken word. It was acknowledged by the group that the process of generating content, of working this up into a co-authored, collaborative performance, transcended any individual form of expression and was unlike anything they had done before. We were unanimous in our belief that the 'process' was a valuable learning experience and that although we documented the outcomes, they were by-products and less important.

A year 1 student wrote in response to the workshop "*I found inspiration from the workshops with thinking about context and inflection through words and speaking and used these ideas further in my practice towards my work...*" and a year 3 student noted: "*Writing has always been important to my practice and I was pleasantly surprised to find that we would be free-writing throughout the day. The freedom of this writing has continued in my work long after the workshop.*"

So what evidence can we find of the NUA/Wysing projects having sustained impact on a student's learning and creative production?

Tina Hannay, a student graduating from Fine Art at NUA this year, drew upon her experience of working with Kit Craig and Lisa Selby, by making a breath-taking installation for her degree show of several thousand slip-cast porcelain light switches. The work '063.et ceter 01100001' presents the viewer with lines of domestic light switches in a combination of 'on' and 'off' positions, indicative of binary code. The coded messages are actual conversations that took place in the student's house, between her son (who leaves lights on), herself (who constantly switches lights off) her husband (who leaves some lights on and switches others off) and other visitors to the house. This work is a direct comprehension of the workshops run by Kit Craig and Lisa Selby, both in terms of material processes learned and the conceptual basis for translating language into physical form. In her summing up of the project at Wysing, Tina writes: "*By the time we were practising slip casting*

techniques at Wysing, we had been transformed from a collection of individuals constructing individual moulds to one entity: pouring, emptying, timing, extracting and documenting our manifold of moulded objects.

Holly Priestly also graduated this year and at the time of writing this paper, is coming to the end of her High House Graduate Residency^{xiv}, a month-long residency in a converted stable block studios in North Norfolk. Holly was one of the 8 students who worked with Evan Ifekoya this year. Through her art, she has explored how language constructs an imagined landscape of interconnected objects, and reverses this to manufacture things from materials that persuade the viewer to feel language forming in their minds and mouths. She was profoundly influenced by the experience of working with Evan Ifekoya and has, whilst working on her graduate residency, introduced a performative element to her work. She writes in her reflective journal: “*I was interested in the artist's approach to performative practice and I was eager to be introduced to this form of art.*”

There are numerous examples of how successful those students who undertook workshops at Wysing have been since graduating. A comprehensive account would divert the focus of this presentation away from learning and into the field of employability. However, a significant example, and one perhaps with a poetic edge, is that of Emanuela Cusin. Emanuela took part in the Alice Theobald workshop in 2015 and after graduating in July 2016, was successful in securing a permanent studio space at Wysing Arts Centre. This year, during the Evan Ifekoya workshop, Emanuela joined us all for lunch and contributed to lively discussion. In April 2017, she curated an exhibition to accompany a symposium on the activist Rudi Dutschke at Cambridge University which included Lynda Morris among many others.

And what do the artists get out of this? It seems slightly problematic that the potency of these experiences inevitably relies on the elevated status of the artist. So whilst we might consider the level ground between the teacher and the student, this is not necessarily the case for the artist. However, in some cases it has been a fairly new experience for the artist to be engaged in a pedagogic role. For the early career artist, these skills can be a valuable way of securing a strand of funding, by providing lectures, tutorials, seminars, workshops and other educational services. Evan

Ifekoya, who refers to themselves as interdisciplinary artist and 'educator', makes explicit the continual process of peer learning as essential to the openness of their practice. In a conversation following the workshop at Wysing, Evan remarked at how much she had got herself from being in the company of inventive minds.

At the heart of this presentation is the aim to pinpoint the impact upon learning gained from such an egalitarian and decentred experience. The written critical reflection from students in response to working with Evan Ifekoya includes: "*The environment of Wysing Arts Centre, being so remote, had a lot of influence on what I ended up writing about...*" (Year 1) *There was only a small group of us at Wysing, which allowed each of our individual voices to be heard. This created an environment which led to very valuable and intimate conversations.* (Year 3) *The freedom of this writing has continued in my work long after the workshop.* (year 3) "...we became a part of the developing rather than being the developed." (year 2).

That last statement by a year 2 student is the best endorsement of what we believe we have attempted to engender through the NUA/Wysing collaborative projects and all Feasts over the years. It points to a student understanding the importance of self-critical reflection, illustrated by Kolb's model of the Reflective Learner. Building chance and the unknown into an educational programme is counter-intuitive, especially in a market-driven economy where significant sums of money are paid by the learner along with the expectation of careful guidance in pursuit of their degree award. In such a climate, the reassurance of a meticulously planned didactic programme and fail-safe assurances of grades obtained for assimilation, retention and recall of knowledge appear infinitely more marketable.

The common undergraduate framework and unitised structure of courses at NUA allows for considerable flexibility in delivering curriculum content. However, of course there needs to be a superstructure of equitable and manageable delivery for all students. It is the Feasts, the stand alone, flexible and moveable live projects that allow the Fine Art course team to provide unpredictable, challenging, non-hierarchical, process-driven learning experiences for students. These 'diverse means', enrich the curriculum and instil within participating students an understanding of the necessity for sustained critical reflection within the creative

process. This seems more crucial within the context of future employment models than ever before.

Returning to the NUA/Wysing projects and to conclude this presentation, I would like to give Lotte Juul Peterson, artists and Programmed Curator at Wysing Arts Centre the final word:

“Over the last six years Wysing and NUA has formed a really special relationship by collaborating on an annual artist workshop through the residency programs the arts centre is known for. It has always been really exciting to bring the students here to Wysing and bring an artist to Norwich and give them an experience outside the everyday setting. By joining up in this way, it has added to both institutions’ ways of experimenting with different educational forms and structures - gaining and sharing knowledge and practices in a truly collaborative way.”

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- ⁱ Boonstra, Jaap, *Dynamics of Organizational Change and Learning* (2007) Wiley
- ⁱⁱ Kolb, David A, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (2015) Pearson Educational USA
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gillick, Liam, *Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three?* (2009) accessed from e-flux <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68497/maybe-it-would-be-better-if-we-worked-in-groups-of-three-part-1-of-2-the-discursive/>
- ^{iv} Black Mountain College, set in rural North Carolina USA, was founded by John Rice in reaction to what he perceived as conservative teaching of the arts in 1930s USA. The emphasis was on learning through doing, method not not content.
- ^v *The Government of the First and Thirteenth Chair* was first performed in 1978 as part of a week of Artist Placement Group (APG) events held at Riverside Studios, London. Flat Time House website <http://flattimeho.org.uk>
- ^{vi} The Institute of Beyond, programme at Wysing Arts Centre 2011
<http://www.wysingartscentre.org/archive/residencies/2011>
- ^{vii} The group exhibition *The Starry Rubric Set* considered classical astrology as a device to bring together new works made by artists who were in residence at Wysing during 2011
http://www.wysingartscentre.org/archive/exhibitions/the_starry_rubric_set/2012
- ^{viii} *Annals of the Twenty-Ninth Century* was a group exhibition of newly commissioned work by artists who worked at Wysing during 2013
http://www.wysingartscentre.org/archive/exhibitions/annals_of_the_twenty_ninth_century/2014
- ^{ix} AGNES is a project by Cécile B. Evans, the first ever digital commission from the Serpentine Galleries curated by Ben Vickers.
<http://cecilebevans.com/index.php/projects/agnes/>
- ^x The Multiverse was Wysing Arts Centre's overall theme for 2016.
http://www.wysingartscentre.org/archive/residencies/the_multiverse/2015
- ^{xi} Fundamental to the Wysing Poly concept was that every element of the programme would be devised by artists, and where possible these events would form part of an art practice, so that enacting the events would be both useful in informing individual art practices as well as engaging wider audiences.
http://www.wysingartscentre.org/archive/residencies/wysing_poly_residencies/2016
- ^{xii} NourbeSe Philip, M, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) Wesleyan University Press USA
- ^{xiii} Barthes, Roland, *The Grain of the Voice*, (1981) Northwestern University Press USA
- ^{xiv} High House Studios offer residence to artists wishing to develop their practice alongside a willingness to physically immerse themselves in the natural environment.
<https://highhouseworkingresidency.com>