



## FROM A (GREATER) DISTANCE 1967 – 2009



## ***THEN AND NOW***

### **FROM A (GREATER) DISTANCE 1967 – 2009**

#### **Preamble**

This text probably requires a kind of health warning or note of caution. I retired from teaching over five years ago and have had very little contact with fine art education since then. But this position, as a *distanced* onlooker, has provided me with a distinctive and unique opportunity to reflect on experiences and commentaries – my own and those of others - with a kind of neutral detachment (maybe even a curious indifference?). The possibilities offered by this distanced, objectifying neutrality are, however, undoubtedly limited by the affect of being denied the richness of insight derived from the direct and active engagement within the contemporary world of fine art education.

“From a (Greater) Distance” takes the form of a reflective commentary derived from a series of “observations from a distance”. These have been informed by a number of roles and positions including that of a fine art student, a Pre-Diploma/Foundation tutor, a co-ordinator of visual and theoretical studies in a vocational design area, fine art tutor/programme leader, external examiner/adviser for fine art programmes and Director of Studies in Art and Media.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In more detail, these roles were:

Firstly as student of Fine Art in a time that has been referred to as the “Coldstream revolution” and was initially framed (in a very marginal way) by the idealised, utopian, radical thinking that led to events at Hornsey and Guildford in the early summer of 1968.

Secondly as a teacher in further education, working primarily with Foundation students advising them about applications to study Fine Art during a period of radical upheaval in the practices of fine art during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Later, during my time working in further education, I attempted to apply one of the propositions from the first Coldstream report and locate what was essentially a Fine Art programme – as Visual and Theoretical Studies – within the core of vocational design programmes.

Thirdly my time working in higher education primarily in the subject area of Fine Art initially leading degree development teams, then as Course Leader for both a new (innovative in a post NAB sense) programme and then for large scale, very well established provision in a large Faculty of Art and Design. I also spent a number of years acting as an External Examiner and Course Adviser for number of Fine Art courses and working for the QAA as a Subject Reviewer in Fine Art.

Finally, in my role as Director of Studies for Art and Media I was able to consider the workings of a Fine Art programme alongside closely connected disciplines such as filmmaking and photography as well as relationships with more disparate design and craft-based discipline areas. During this period I was also involved in the development of a cross faculty approach to the teaching of contextual and professional studies, designed to be responsive the specific demands of disciplinary areas.

Just before my retirement I co-curated Northern Graduates for Curwen and New Academy Gallery which involved visits to most of the art schools in the north of England. This experience provided me with a significant postscript to my involvement in Fine Art education allowing me to maintain a sense of an overall academic perspective while engaging with the material presence of the art itself. This was one of my most recent encounters with fine art education and although it is now six years ago it has retained a vividness that still inhabits and inflects my current thinking.

This is summed up by the final paragraph of my Introduction to the catalogue:

I want to finish by reflecting some more on this distinction between a student and an artist. Clearly we experienced works that had been created as part of the final year of an undergraduate degree. Occasionally this institutional context was over-active in the work and the way it was presented. But more often this sense of intrusion was overcome and an advanced level of professional behaviour that supported and enhanced creative endeavour became explicit. In the shows where this occurred any notion of a student was transcended by a real and vivid sense of artistic presence.<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Dunbar, (2008) Notes from the North. July 2008 (Curators Foreword)  
Northern Graduates 08, Curwen and New Academy Gallery

I want to consider the notion of *Then and Now* in a very specific manner. I want to consider the idea of *Then and Now* as being **then** but not as a singular **now**. In effect I want to consider two interconnected notions of “now”. The “now” of the period around my retirement from teaching in 2009 described as **now (then)** and the “now” of the contemporary moment described as **now (now)**.

But then, an application of this dualistic, distancing strategy in the **NOW** of the present – the first few weeks of March 2014 – generated a number of broader observations, as “distanced observations” or maybe “observations from a distance”.

Before entering into a more detailed consideration of these two very specific reflective moments, I want to suggest that there are, in fact, certain aspects of fine art education that have remained constant over the course of my forty plus years of involvement.

Firstly there is the ever-present distinctiveness of securing and maintaining an autobiographically defined concept of what it means to be active as an artist. This priority for the appointment of practising artists as teaching staff had been encouraged by members of the Coldstream committee back in the 1960s. Such a concept is concerned with how we define ourselves as an artist through our working practice(s), through our critical engagement with art practices, theories and histories, through our sense of being a practitioner and an engaged participant in contemporary culture. When I first started teaching there was a profound sense of the intrinsic value of this model of an *artist-teacher* and although this has clearly now been radically redefined through the impact of a “research culture”, it remains an embedded feature of contemporary art schools

... by teaching in an art school you now find yourself within the art school to behave as a professional artist. What you do, whatever its motivation, its form, its character, its ambition, has to be made understandable in educational terms.  
(Archer, 2010)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Archer, (2010) *Educating Art away from Life*, in, Felicity Allen(ed) *Documents of Modern Art: Education* WhitechapelGallery and MIT Press, London and Cambridge

Secondly, there is the surprising (maybe alarming) possibility that, at the most fundamental level, nothing has really changed in terms of how students are required to demonstrate levels of achievement at undergraduate level, at least, across the subjects of fine art. This can be illustrated by reference to my own submission for a Diploma in Art and Design (Painting) at Bristol Polytechnic in July 1971, that was made up of an exhibition of work and a thesis. This remains essentially the standard requirement for an equivalent award today. Interestingly, at postgraduate level my submission for an MFA at Reading consisted only of an exhibition of work with no requirement for written work.

Writing in 2008 Paul Wood highlights this sense of a structural constancy.

... strange to say how little has changed. The voice of management and the equal and opposite choruses of the rational planners and the creative free spirits drone on undiminished. They say should be wary of desire lest you are granted that which you wish for. The elevation of modular over linear teaching programmes, the educational incorporation of theory, the breakdown of modernist medium specificity, the critique of the (mostly male) expressive author, perhaps even a questioning of the authority of the Western canon were all songs in our radical repertoire. Yet in fact that these have come to pass, and now count, if not as the norm, then as significant components of a contemporary education in art and design, has been in the end less significant than *the fact that the underlying structure (and of course the wider structure-beyond-the-structure) has remained intact.* Wood, (2008)<sup>4</sup> [my italics]

**now (then)** around 2007 to 2009

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Wood. (2008), Between God and the Saucepan: Some aspects of Art Education from the Mid-Nineteenth Century until Today, in Chris Stephens (ed) The History of British Art 1870 – Now, Tate Publishing, London

In April 2007 I was asked to make a presentation to a NAFAE conference based on the nature of change in Fine Art education over the last forty years. I called this presentation: *From a Distance: some personal observations on developments in fine art education*.<sup>5</sup>

I decided to apply a similar approach to an overview of forty years involvement in fine art education so that this blurring away of the details of the particularity of specific episodes would then allow the more significant experiences from those years to be highlighted and focussed on.

In my presentation back in 2007, [**now (then)**], the issues and questions raised included:

- What has been the impact of massification of student numbers to Fine Art education?

1969/70	22 providers	700 students
1984/5	37 providers	2987 students
2012/13	124 providers	4590 students

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<sup>5</sup> I first used the notion of “distancing” experience in the exhibition *Paintingish: an exhibition about painting* at Chapman Gallery, University of Salford in May 2006.

Being distant, or more specifically, being self consciously aware of the distance between you (as an experiencer) and the object that is generating an experience. This notion of distance might be a durational quality – something that occurred some time before and only exists as a memory – then and now – or it might be a feature of a physical space – operating as a measurable dimension between things – here and there....

So, by attempting to locate (the) painting – both as a discrete material form that is presented to our direct experience, and as a more generic term that referring to thousands of years of practice, tradition and cultural value – as something to be scrutinised from a distance (physical and durational), the same condition of blurring and destabilisation of our powers of recognition and understanding of our experience so we have something that becomes paintingish.

From Paintingish Notes, May 2006

- “Fine art as an attitude”<sup>6</sup> – how has the proliferation of government reports impacted on the nature of Fine Art education
- What were the implications of the National Advisory Board to Fine Art<sup>7</sup> in the mid 1980s?

But now, with the benefit of hindsight I think it is possible to summarise more succinctly the nature of my observations from **now (then)** by reference to the confrontationally oppositional descriptions of Fine Art education revealed in texts produced by Simon Lewis and Paul Wood in 2008. These perceptions of the situation appear even more uncertain when these texts are framed by the comments of Sir Michael Bichard in his keynote address at GLAD Conference: *The Student Experience in Art and Design Higher Education* in Cambridge 2007<sup>8</sup>, where he refers to the sector entering a “golden age for art and design”.

Higher education, art education included, is relentlessly transmogrifying itself into the education industry, and taking its place in the wider consciousness industry. It remains to be seen whether an experimental or critical art practice, let alone an education devoted to encouraging such a thing can survive in these conditions. (Wood, 2008)<sup>9</sup>

A context of change that has led art and design from peripheral small scale activity catering to a separatist student community who would characterise themselves as outsiders or educational misfits which found the free flowing, largely anarchic culture of an art school environment with fine art at its centre a natural and supportive

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<sup>6</sup> “We believe that studies in fine art derive from an attitude which may be expressed in many ways.” From The Structure of Art and Design Education in the Further Education Sector, 1970. This notion of “fine art as an attitude” introduced in the second Coldstream report also appears to inflect the ambitions for fine art in recent Subject Benchmark Statements: “The practice of art is a creative endeavour that constantly speculates upon and challenges its own nature and purpose...”

Subject Benchmark Statement Art and Design 2008

<sup>7</sup> The National Advisory Body was established in the mid 1980s as a means of rationalising art and design provision and drawing attention to what was considered specialist and non-specialist areas of study. Post NAB developmental strategies across HE art and design were all pervasive when I started to become involved in curriculum development for new HE programmes in the late 1980s. In particular:

National Advisory Body, Art and Design Working Group, 1987 A Wider Vision, NAB, London

<sup>8</sup> Linda Drew. (ed) (2008) The Student Experience in Art and Design Education: Drivers for Change. Group for Learning in Art and Design (GLAD), JRA Publishing, Cambridge

<sup>9</sup>Wood, (2008)

environment in which to grow; to a context of mass higher education of large, resource intensive, technologically sophisticated schools and university faculties of art and design, where a greatly expanded design provision now predominates and fine art is no longer at the apex of the pantheon.  
(Lewis, 2008)<sup>10</sup>

Also, in 2008, evidence of a more deepening crisis in fine art education became an increasingly public (art world) debate. This seems to have been initiated in Art Monthly by a letter from Graham Crowley (former Head of Painting at Royal College of Art)

Art education is under attack and has been for over 20 years. The driving force behind this is the politicisation of higher education and the public sector in general. Tutors are frightened to speak out for fear of reprisal. An art school purged of dissent and scepticism is anathema. The problem is the appointment of managers who have no personal experience of fine art practice. They can't understand the kind of knowledge that supports such a discourse. They project their facile understanding of art, and in doing so they infantilise our discourse, and our culture. They see 'subjectivity' where there is analysis.  
(Crowley, April 2008)<sup>11</sup>

This debate was followed up later in September/October 2008 with two public events at ICA London and Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. There have been further contributions to the debate in Art Monthly<sup>12</sup> more recently such as *Rebel without a Course* by Peter Suchin in April 2011<sup>13</sup>. And, maybe more speculatively, *The Art Party* Conference in Scarborough in November 2013<sup>14</sup>.

So looking back to the period around **now (then)** about five years ago, there is a sense of a confused and conflicted situation in which while there clearly

<sup>10</sup> Simon Lewis, (2008), Keynote: The student experience in art and design: action for change, GLAD Conference Nottingham Trent University

<sup>11</sup> Graham Crowley, (2008) Can't get no satisfaction, Art Monthly. No. 315. April 2008

<sup>12</sup> ... The alacrity with which art schools surrendered their autonomy in return for the spurious prestige of university status played right into the hands of the Conservative government whose initiative had nothing to do with elevating the status of polytechnics. On the contrary, it was about reducing the status and privileges of the semi-autonomous older universities, and ultimately of all universities. Thatcher saw universities as bastions of resistance to Conservative reforms aimed at cutting funding and putting universities, like other publically funded organisations including the Arts Council, onto a more 'business-like' footing effectively turning education into just another commodity that could be mass produced and subjected to quality control. From, Art Monthly 316, Editorial, May 2008

<sup>13</sup> Peter Suchin, (2011) Rebel Without a Course, Art Monthly 345, April 2011

<sup>14</sup> The Art Party Conference, The Spa, Scarborough, November, 2013



were serious attempts in improving the quality of the student experience in fine art higher education, demanded by the problematics brought about by increased student numbers and the number and variety of institutions offering awards. But more fundamentally, there was a pronounced and profound sense that fine art had been irrevocably changed. This was evident, not only, in the academy itself because of fine arts repositioning in the subject pecking order, but also across the wider cultural field, where it was clear that many observers (from both inside and outside fine art education) now considered that the impact of bureaucratisation and the artificial professionalising of a fine art curriculum had eroded (beyond repair for some) fine art's essential character and cultural value.

**now (now)** reflecting on 2009 to 2014

During the process of gathering material for this presentation/text I started to realise that although the contentious issues identified six years ago and the emerging sense of crisis were obviously still relevant, there was, it now seemed to me, a much more essential and pressing concern that had been implicated by my earlier reflections, although it was not always emphasised enough. It was evident in the critical tensions still echoing from five years ago that an absolutely fundamental concern needed to be addressed: what should be taught as fine art and how should it be taught? In fact the question had been explicitly raised as an issue in Paul Wood's 2008 essay, in which he references an earlier pamphlet written by the painter David Sweet back in 1992 in which his discussion was prefaced with a plea to confront the issue directly.

Right at the centre of fine art education is something nobody really wants to talk about... The neglected topic is nothing less than the definition of the subject itself.  
(Sweet, 1992)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>David Sweet, (1992) Towards a Militant Academy, Manchester Metropolitan University, in Wood, 2008

More recently I came across a number of other similar pleas. Michael Baldwin, for example, from a directly opposed artistic position to Sweet, raises a similar concern

A decent beginning to research in the circumstance of the studio might be made in trying to find a shape and a substance for what is actually taught there. This would involve some attempt to discover what you can teach once the conventional student ethos of abuse and arbitrary power is abandoned. This would, of course, be a reflexive project. The abandonment of an abusive ethos will equally depend on what the teachers teach.

(Baldwin, 2000)<sup>16</sup>

And then, from a more academic perspective, Neil Walton writing in HEA Shared Visions Conference in 2002

My point is that since the 1960s we have had an art education system that benefits from freedom and openness, but lacks a vigorous and broad debate about what lies at its core... A debate waiting to be had. We should learn from this that a pedagogical approach which is merely open and receptive to the fluidity of contemporary art is no longer enough. If we do not formulate some systematic way of understanding the breadth of fine art practice, then we will tend to fall back unreflectively on older models of what the arts are like... art educators should be attempting to build through debate, some more unified and structured overview of the activity of art.

(Walton, 2002)<sup>17</sup>

So, if we consider this fundamental question as kind of “ur-question” and then allow it to be inflected by the debates described in **now (then)**, a number of questions are revealed:

What is the relationship between an established subject of fine art and any curriculum that might be generated by it? Or, then again, maybe, the actual process of generating a curriculum somehow creates a version of the “subject of fine art” ? And then, given the academic situation we are involved with based on definitions found in the Benchmark Statement for Art and Design - what are explicitly the connections between fine art and design?

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Baldwin, ‘A Story, A Moral, and a Postscript’ in Antonio Payne (ed.) 2000 Research and the Artist – Considering the Role of the Art School, Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, University of Oxford

<sup>17</sup>Neil Walton, (2002) Art Education and the Medium-Disciplines of Art, Palatine Shared Visions Conference

How far can the subject of fine art retain any discrete integrity when it is being disrupted, extended and possibly distorted by extra-subject requirements demanded by external, institutional pressures? This situation clearly originates from the 1960s Coldstream revolutionary model of fine art that included compulsory studies in History of Art and later in Complementary Studies, such a pluralistic interpretation of the curriculum more problematic following government reports and shifts in strategic priorities leading to a more centralised institutional pressure on programmes to demonstrate compliance.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to clarify my responses to these questions I have turned to personal reflections on a number of issues raised at two conferences from twenty years ago. These conferences were part of a number of events that occurred in the 1990s providing opportunities for academics from fine art to engage with debates associated with the radical changes for the fine art curriculum that were emerging because of paradigmic shifts across both the academic and cultural contexts for fine art education.<sup>19</sup>

Firstly, Issues about art and education: The Curriculum for Fine Art in Higher Education<sup>20</sup> at Tate Britain in 1993.

Here Sylvia Wickes in a presentation called 'Decisions about the Curriculum'<sup>21</sup> raised the question of how to devise a fine art curriculum that would support

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<sup>18</sup> In particular the impact of the Dearing Report – National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997 – with an emphasis on demonstrating reflections on learning, understanding of context, subject based and key skills, subject benchmark statements etc. and then the demand for demonstrating subject based professional awareness.

<sup>19</sup> As well as the increase in institutional pressures for the implementation of centralised systems such as unitisation and modularity, there were more subject-based issues such as the development of context-based approaches to studies and the impact of critical practices. From my own experience:

The Impact of Modularity on Art and Design in Higher Education,  
Dartington Hall, 1994

The Relationship of Making to Writing  
Exeter School of Art and Design, 1998

Contextual Arts Practice Symposium  
Exeter School of Art and Design, 1997

<sup>20</sup> Paul Hetherington (ed) 1996 Issues in Art and Education: The Curriculum in Fine Art Higher Education, Tate Publishing, London

<sup>21</sup> Sylvia Wickes, (1996) 'Decisions about the Curriculum', in Paul Hetherington (ed) 1996 Issues in Art and Education: The Curriculum in Fine Art Higher Education, Tate Publishing, London

potential professional artists together with those who would become what she refers to as “sensitive connoisseurs”. Such a curriculum should derive from an agreed position regarding a core of knowledge and capability – what should a fine art student know? Also, she raised very early the spectre of extra-subject interference in the curriculum introducing a notion of an “internal curriculum”, that would be defined by specific subject-disciplines and with a description of required intellectual capabilities, contrasted with an “external curriculum” derived from externally established professional competencies and transferable personal skills. Wickes exemplifies the potential impact of this position by referencing the 1992 conference *Managing the Curriculum in the Year 2000*<sup>22</sup>

The curriculum and teaching questions, once seen in many universities as essentially localised concerns for course teams and departments are now increasingly part of institutional decision-making and strategic planning

(Dai Hounsell, 1992)<sup>23</sup>

The curriculum will have to be conceptualised as an institutional responsibility shared by academics and support staff rather than something owned by individual course teams.

(Roger King, 1992)<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, later in 1993 The Artist and the Academy – Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context (Southampton) organised by Stephen Foster (John Hansard Gallery and Nicholas de Ville (Goldsmiths))<sup>25</sup>. In their introduction, the organisers raise the sense of a tension between notions of art: as a provision of liberation and freedom, but then contrasted with the categorical constraints attached to disciplines. This they describe as a conflict between *transgressive* and *therapeutic* models of art.

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<sup>22</sup>Managing the University Curriculum in the Year 2000, National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education

<sup>23</sup> Dai Hounsell (1992) Managing the University Curriculum in the Year 2000, National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education

<sup>24</sup> Roger King (1992) Managing the University Curriculum in the Year 2000, National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (eds) (1994) The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context, John Hansard Gallery and University of Southampton

The three presentations that seem (to me, at least) to engage most directly with speculations about definitions of fine art as an academic subject-discipline were by Thierry de Duve<sup>26</sup>, Colin Cina<sup>27</sup> and Nicholas de Ville<sup>28</sup>. De Duve proposes triadic notions of art that have been derived from “the historical, ideological paradigms that we inherit from our institutions” – from an academic model or from a Bauhaus/modernist model leading to a post-modernist model: creativity-medium-invention / attitude- practice- deconstruction. These triads provide a kind of model or paradigm of art that is then open for critical reflection and debate with a capability to inform fine art pedagogy.

Cina, presents an argument derived from an assertive critique of the emerging crisis in art schools during the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> But, for me, of more interest is the way in which he introduces his polemic with three anecdotes about definitions or maybe models of fine art. It is these anecdotes that are most useful to this discussion. In these anecdotes Cina establishes three competing, possibly overlapping, art worlds or communities that have the potential to inhabit or inform fine art education. Firstly, the “inheritors of modernism” (and beyond) who have the dominant voice across most of the recognised institutions of art, including art schools. It is this art world that we mostly inhabit (probably). Secondly, and the largest community, is based on an academic representational approach to art that embraces Royal Academicians and then through to traditional watercolourist amateurs – the equivalent to a cultural “silent majority” that has an enormous impact on a visual culture that is

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<sup>26</sup> Thierry de Duve, ‘When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond’ in Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (eds) (1994) The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context, John Hansard Gallery and University of Southampton

<sup>27</sup> Colin Cina, ‘TINA’s Academy’ in Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (eds) (1994) The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context, John Hansard Gallery and University of Southampton

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas de Ville, ‘The Interdisciplinary Field of Fine Art’ in Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (eds) (1994) The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context, John Hansard Gallery and University of Southampton

<sup>29</sup> Cina’s argument can be summarised: “The operational and ethical problems that confront a fine art school trapped within the overly managerial environment that currently controls so much of the former polytechnic sector of UK higher education needs to be addressed publicly. The tendency in Britain today to keep debates about the purpose and content of advanced fine art education separate from the implications of its enclosure within the radically altered institutions in which the majority of fine art degree courses must live is short-sighted and politically naïve.” (Cina, 1993)

enjoyed by the majority of the population. Thirdly, there is an emergent, more mechanistic approach to creating an art world derived from the application of competence-based levels of qualifications that started to be established in the middle of the 1990s as part of a drive towards vocational education.

To me this is a crucial issue because seems to provide a possibility to frame any definition of art and any consequent curriculum in a much wider cultural and social framework, acknowledging and somehow responding to the existence of these other art worlds, and maybe, more importantly, a recognition that there may be many more.

Nicholas de Ville's paper 'The Interdisciplinary Field of Fine Art' may be the most relevant to this discussion, and it may be that the notion of interdisciplinarity could provide a platform for attempts to define the academic subject-discipline of fine art.

Origins of the term interdisciplinary can be traced back to the idealism of Hornsey in 1968 and then the potential of a multi/interdisciplinary approach appeared to have a major influence on thinking about the structure of art and design pedagogy.

The Hornsey position is clearly articulated in the paper produced early in the occupation and outlines the kind of curriculum structure students were intending to impose

A scheme for an open educational structure will be characterised by the following issues:

1.

An open system whereby all individual demands can be taken into account whether specialised or comprehensive.

Subjects to be set up in response to the need of an individual or group of individuals at any moment – thus the curricula will be in a constant state of flux,

Within the operational curricula of any one moment there will be a total freedom of choice of options and combinations available to everyone.

Complete freedom of individual or group research at any time with or without tutorial assistance.

(The Hornsey Affair, 1969)<sup>30</sup>

And then two years later, the second report of the Coldstream Committee appeared to have responded to the spirit of these aspirations, while maintaining a distance from the radicalism of the student demands.

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<sup>30</sup> Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art, (1969) The Hornsey Affair, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth

24. ... On the whole, it seems to us useful to retain these four areas of study (Chief Studies: Fine Art, Graphic Design, Three Dimensional Design and Fashion/Textiles) because they provide a convenient classification to which to relate the staffing administration and allocation of resources within a college as a whole. However, we affirm that from the viewpoint of education these four areas are not discrete and courses need not necessarily be confined to one of them.

25. ... We envisage a more fluid system in which students may, if appropriate, pursue a broad range of studies which cross and overlap the boundaries of chief studies as hitherto conceived. This would not affect the main character of studies for the majority of students. It would extend the opportunity for students within a given area to enjoy a wider experience than has been possible hitherto.

26. Whilst painting and sculpture or a combination of the two will, we expect, continue to be the main preoccupation of students in this area, we do not believe that studies in fine art can be adequately defined in terms of chief studies related to media. We believe that studies in fine art derive from an attitude which may be expressed in many ways. Their precise nature will depend upon the circumstances of individual colleges  
(1970)<sup>31</sup>

In his paper De Ville focuses his discussion around a number of questions regarding the impact of interdisciplinarity on fine art education. He is adamant about retaining fine art as something that has “very particular, imperatives, traditions and complex sense of itself – as something distinct, extreme and not collapsible into a generalised Art and Design field...” But he is equally aware of the need to consider the fine art curriculum and establish what needs to be preserved and what can be discarded or maybe reformed. The key questions seem to be about the ways in which fine art can operate effectively and with integrity as a feature of a larger interdisciplinary arts/design?/humanities field of study or how fine art’s embedded, internalised interdisciplinarity can be acknowledged while managing to retain the distinctiveness of it’s disciplinary strengths.

De Ville defers from the mundane, institutionally derived modular-like structure of interdisciplinary studies and, instead focuses attention on the need to understand and realise the implications of what is meant by “inter” in this context. Additionally, he proposes a possible approach in which conventional disciplinary areas such as painting and sculpture are maintained within the operational framework of interdisciplinarity.

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<sup>31</sup> Report of a Joint Committee of the National Advisory Council on Art Education and the Joint Council for Diplomas in Art and Design, (1970) The Structure of Art and Design Education in the Further Education Sector

An institutional reflex designed to maintain some sense of framework for the questioning that students must evolve if they are able to position their practice in the complex, seemingly structureless visual environment in which they find themselves living – and in relation to which they wish to perform practical acts that are in some way critical.

(De Ville, 1993)

It might be useful to reconsider the questions posed at the start of **now (now)** but to inflect any responses to them considering the potential of interdisciplinarity <sup>32</sup>:

*What is the relationship between an established subject of fine art and any curriculum that might be generated by it?*

*Or, then again, maybe, does the actual process of generating and then acknowledging a curriculum somehow create a version of the subject of fine art?*

Maybe, any interdisciplinary subject-discipline of fine art is, in fact, created through a notion of the curriculum itself whether this had been determined institutionally or derived from personal ambitions/aspirations of an individual student.

*Given the academic situation we are involved with – defined as it is by a Benchmark Statement for Art and Design - what are the actual connections between fine art and design?*

It might be possible to apply the potential of an interdisciplinary curriculum model enable a more explicit and dynamic interface between design disciplines and fine art exploiting the suturing effects of a critical interdisciplinarity?

*How far can the subject of fine art retain any discrete integrity when it is being disrupted, extended and possibly distorted by extra-subject requirements*

<sup>32</sup> A more appropriate term here might be transdisciplinary, post-disciplinary or even anti-disciplinary which provide a stronger sense of a critical interdisciplinarity that not only is concerned with connecting together disparate areas of study, but also does so through an interrogation of existing structures through a more active sense of transformation or dismantling of conventional boundaries.



*demanded by external, institutional pressures? This situation clearly originates from the 1960s Coldstream revolutionary model of fine art that included compulsory studies in History of Art and later in Complementary Studies, but has become much more problematic following government reports and shifts in strategic priorities leading to a more centralised institutional pressure on programmes demonstrating compliance.*

Once again the suturing effect of a critical interdisciplinarity should provide an adequate mechanism of connecting together and making sense of elements of an increasing disparate fine art curriculum? The capacity-based or attitudinal demands of the curriculum as identified in current Benchmark Statement can then be addressed both as embedded aspects of a fine art practice but, where necessary, as discrete components of a framing curriculum structure.<sup>33</sup> And again, it would be more possible to apply a critical interdisciplinarity as a means of extending a fine art curriculum to operate that is more conducive to the ever-shifting demands of a multiplicity of art worlds, alternative models of practice and conflicting ideological standpoints.<sup>34</sup>

**From A (Greater) Distance 1967 – 2009** has developed, through it's various iterations into a highly personal, rather hectic, and often rambling attempt to reflect on the changes that have extended and constrained fine art education

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<sup>33</sup> I'm thinking here of a concern to develop the capabilities of critical reflection, contextual awareness and even relationships between the written and the visual, both as integral features of fine art practice but also as taught elements.

<sup>34</sup> A good example of the recent dramatic re-definitions of fine art practice is what has become known as the notion of *Post-Medium Condition*, introduced by Rosalind Krauss in 1999 in her book: "A Voyage on the North Sea" Art in the Age of the Post Medium Condition, Thames and Hudson.

...an insistence on the internal plurality of any given medium, of the impossibility of thinking of an aesthetic medium as nothing more than an unworked physical support... artists have resisted, as impossible, the retreat into etiolated forms of the traditional mediums – such as painting or sculpture. Instead artists have embraced the idea of differential specificity which is to say the medium as such, which they understand they will now have to reinvent or rearticulate.

(Krauss, 1999)

More recently, and with regard to "post medium specificity" in painting:

Alistair Payne (2008) Painting as an Interdisciplinary Form, VDM Verlag

And then Isabelle Graw writing in 2012 in 'The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons' in Thinking through Painting – Reflexivity And Agency beyond the Canvas, Sternberg Press, Frankfurt

"We therefore cannot be sure what we are referring to when we talk about painting. Do we mean painting in the sense of a medium, a genre, a procedure, or an institution?... I will propose a less substantialist notion of painting: a form of production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized.... painting as a highly personalized semiotic activity."

over the last forty years. Reflecting on **now (then)** it is surprising to that the section draws attention so strongly to the impact of N.A.B. and Dearing during the later 1990s and then into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, this more personal response appears dwarfed by the enormity of the sense of crisis in fine art education that was being announced in a more public arena during 2008<sup>35</sup>. During these years this sense of crisis, in whatever form it was experienced, was unavoidably intensified because it was framed by the wider problems emerging in higher education in general, especially the impact of financial constraints and the radical changes to student funding.

**now (now)** acknowledged these profoundly altered circumstances for fine art, but the use of a *distancing* strategy made it possible to realise that something absolutely fundamental needed to be addressed, with urgency and with conviction. This was a more clearly defined sense of what is meant by the academic subject-discipline of fine art so that it could be located more appropriately within the ever-changing circumstances of recent higher education. Further reflections on this issue, informed by debates raised at significant conferences from the 1990s, led to three key questions that might inform any putative definition:

- How to ensure that fine art as a subject-discipline maintained appropriateness to all students including those who were aspiring to become “sensitive connoisseurs”<sup>36</sup>?
- How to establish a curriculum structure for fine art that assured a sense of absolute inclusivity acknowledging the multiple models of practice currently operative across contemporary fine art practice?
- What is the potential for interdisciplinarity, or more correctly a *critical* interdisciplinarity to provide a more adequate structural framework for an increasingly stretched and often conflicted subject-discipline of fine art? Somehow it is this sense of *inter* that requires to be understood allowing attention to be focussed on the essential reason for any

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<sup>35</sup> The actual scale of this crisis may have been overblown through its London-centric focus. Graham Crowley’s letter is certainly specifically drawing attention to the conditions associated with certain London art schools. So, while it is obvious that there are concerns across all fine art institutions about the pressures currently being faced by teaching staff they do seem to be different to what has been occurring in London.

<sup>36</sup> Wickes, (1996)

connecting or drawing together of disparate aspects of study into some sense of a singularity that might secure a shared definition that was understood by both staff and all students.

Tim Dunbar

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