

Experience as Art: Fine Art Social Practice at Middlesex University

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Context

The *Fine Art Social Practice* modules at Middlesex University are aimed at fostering dialogue, commoning and change in cultural process and production through experiential learning and social inquiry. The modules take place over an academic year as part of the Fine Art BA Honours course, with second and third year students taught together to maximise opportunities for peer learning. Students develop a project with a community or group of their choosing; this can be realized as an actual placement of a number of weeks in an institution such as a hospital, support group or school, or interpreted through a collective initiative with their peers, a virtual network, or via collaboration with an action group. For third year students the work carried out in the module constitutes their major project, culminating in the degree show. From 2018 on, students will graduate with a BA degree in Fine Art Social Practice, from where they can apply for the one-year full time or two-year part time MA Art and Social Practice. Practical work for both undergraduate modules is supported by a programme of bi-weekly seminars and visits that alternate with one-to-one tutorials. In addition, two thirty credit modules offer support for professional practice and essay writing.

Below is an example of one of these seminars, followed by an outline of an external visit through which students encounter other socially engaged practices. These trips draw on the opportunities presented by the capital's urban environment for students to witness the use of art in urban regeneration and question the way in which artists, consciously or unwittingly, become part of that process.

Part 1 – Temporary Art Parliament

The Temporary Art Parliament is a way of doing active research on artistic practices using existing platforms of reward in prizes and competition. The name was borrowed from the VISIBLE¹ award jury event of 2015, a bi-annual international

¹ *Visible* is a award offered by the Cittadellarte cultural institution based in Biella, Italy to support “artistic

event that confers a prize to a socially engaged art project from a nominated shortlist. The artworld constantly reasserts the institutional hold on its own field through a system of award, prizes and competitions financed by museums, foundations and other various sponsors and partners. Think, for example, the Turner Prize, the Artes Mundi prize, the Hugo Boss Prize, The Golden Lion in Venice, The Art Prize, The Duchamp Prize, The Leonore Anneberg prize for Art and Social Change...the list gets longer every year!

In this event we turned the tables around: we presented the 2016 selection of shortlisted artists or collectives of a prestigious award for art and politics in 2016 to our students for judgement. In other words: taking a real award structure, the students would vote, discuss criteria, and choose their own winner.

Students introduce each of the six finalists and, through conversation and exchange, they familiarise themselves with the candidates, until their *Temporary Art Parliament* is ready to exercise its powers and deliberate through the vote who should receive the award. The actual winner is revealed at the end of the event so that students can see how their judgement squares with the actual decision, and whether that in fact matters.

This year, the *Temporary Art Parliament* took as study case the finalists of the Vera List Prize for Art and Politics 2016, awarded to Maria Theresa Alvez. In this instance, the student parliament concurred with the jury decision.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

[Figure 1 caption: **Temporary Art Parliament** Photo © Middlesex University, 2017]

Part 2 – Listening Exercise

Many skills are required to work with others on creative projects, either collaboratively or through participation, particularly when that engagement encompasses different experiences and disciplines. One of the most effective means of facilitating this process is that of listening – not just hearing what others say, but

actions which have a real capacity to experiment and produce visions that can have impact on the social and cultural imagination of our contemporary world“. <http://www.visibleproject.org/blog/about/>

also developing understanding of each others' needs, desires, and vision. An exercise that we regularly employ is one of *active listening*, where students think through the practice of listening and participate in small group work to experience listening, being listened to, and to observe the dynamics of this process.

Workshop Description

As a group we discussed the importance of listening and the difference between listening and hearing. Students were asked if they had ever engaged in a conversation where they wondered if the other person was actually listening to what they were saying, whether their message was getting across, if it was worthwhile to continue speaking, or they felt as if they were talking to a *brick wall*.

An interesting fact: people generally remember between twenty-five and fifty percent of what they hear - less than half of a conversation. Later, the group discussed what made a good listener, in reference to our own experiences. We introduced the concept of *active listening* as the conscious effort to hear not only the words, but also to understand the complete message. Following this, we brainstormed some of the advantages of good listening, as well as devices that can be employed.

Some of the advantages of good listening that came up during group discussion were: "opening up", "avoiding misunderstandings", "resolving conflict", "building trust", "facilitating cross-cultural communication". Furthermore, among the devices the group thought could be employed in good listening were: "Acknowledgement – could be just a nod of the head or a simple 'uh huh'", "without necessarily agreeing with the person, indicating that you are listening", "body language and other signs that acknowledge you are listening, and enable you to pay attention and not let your mind wander", "trying to respond to the speaker in a way that will encourage them to continue speaking, so that you can better understand what they need/want/think", "occasional questions or comments to recap or summarise what has been said, communicating that you understand the message as well".

All the above help the processes of opening up, avoiding misunderstandings, resolving conflict, building trust and facilitating cross-cultural communication. We considered the following checklist:

- seating/ body language / eye contact,
- not interrupting,
- respect,
- suspending judgement,
- responding appropriately (nod/smile/ posture/ verbal responses),
- not agreeing or disagreeing,
- deferring judgement - allowing the speaker to finish each point before asking questions/ not interrupting with counter arguments,
- clarification - "What I'm hearing is..." /"Sounds like you are saying...",
- occasional paraphrasing/feedback.

Practical Exercise (in groups of two or three):

Person 1 spoke for five minutes about a problem or issue they were experiencing with their practice. Person 2 listened, bearing in mind the *active listening* approach. Person 3 observed the interaction, noting use of the devices discussed. Each of them took a turn playing the different roles, for a total of fifteen minutes. After the conversation they reported to the main group on how it felt and what they observed.

After the practical exercise, the group rejoined and held a discussion as to where this might apply in social practice, particularly in situations of collaboration with partners, engaging with participants, setting up a placement, finding out interests and requirements of co-workers such as teachers and health workers, as well as hosting organizations and funders.

Students received a paper exercise to complete in their own time. This was a self-evaluation checklist designed to help them become more aware of their current listening habits

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

[Figure 2 caption: *The Common at Events Day*. Photo © Loraine Leeson, 2014]

Experiential Learning - student visit

In the *Fine Art Social Practice* modules at Middlesex we emphasise experiential learning, often curating visits conceived as itinerant discursive spaces where different approaches to a theme are cut together dialectically. Below is an example

of this collage technique.

Visit and Seminar: ‘Protest and Protest’

We visited the *Protest* exhibition at Victoria Miro, a private gallery showing activist art, and *Camesquat*, the occupation of the offices of Camelot, the company that started property guardianship in the U.K. Camelot has since come under criticism for their role in the London housing crisis and its exploitative practices, most often at the expense of creative practice students.

Within the same day, we saw several cases of visual representation of protest through artworks exhibited in both a private gallery and an actual space of protest, a few minutes away from each other. We interrogated both spaces, the work exhibited, the people living and working in them, and the reasons behind their positions.

The following week, research fellow Valeria Graziano helped students think through the politics of activism in art, the artistic techniques of activists, and the aesthetics of protest as art that the group encountered on the double-bill visits of the previous session.

Outcomes of students’ practical projects

In the academic year 2016/17 students are developing the following projects: a film about the Armenian/Syrian diaspora, a collective ‘portrait’ of the older residents of a Camden housing estate, a project connecting graffiti artists and homeless people, work with refugees through an art charity, an installation to highlight domestic spaces across global differences, work with young people with learning disabilities at a day centre, a documentary of an activist group from within, an animated oral history project of a community in transition whose housing is demolished through regeneration, a photographic project on the diversity of the Year 3 student cohort, and a project with a group of volunteers working at a socially orientated London gallery.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

[Figure 3 caption: **Documentary of an activist group.** © Helen Mandley, 2017]

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

[Figure 4 caption: **Setting our own Rules: a view from the elderly residents of a central London village.** © Hilary Barnes, 2017.]

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

[Figure 5 caption: **Photography Project for Young Children with Learning Disabilities.** © Katharine Gill, 2017]

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

[Figure 6 caption: **Refugee Project.** © Elif Aydemir, 2017]

Suggested bibliography.

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