

# The Importance of Appearing Earnest

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## Out of the Bubble: Approaches to 'Contextual Practice' within Fine Art Education

Edited by John Carson & Susannah Silver, The London Institute, 2000.

Two years ago I graduated from a fine art degree course. Having grown increasingly interested in 'Socially Engaged Art Practice' I began a post-graduate course: 'Art and Design in Organisational Contexts', which I did not complete, having never really got to grips with what the course could or could not accommodate. It had no handbook as such at that time. What initially appeared as a freedom soon proved to be a confusing lack of parameters within the broader institutional framework.

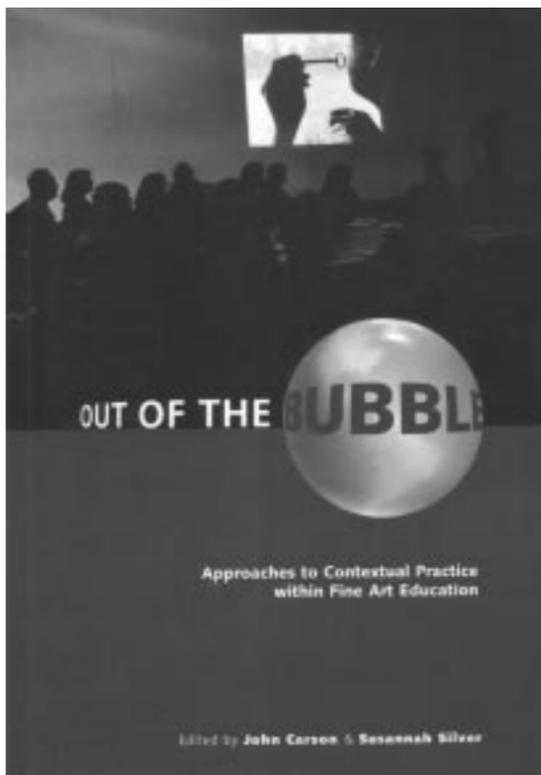
The course was known—although not exclusively—for accommodating the work of artists working with community and disability groups. With a change of Head of Department, it was a year away from its five-year evaluation review whereby it would continue or fold. In this very particular climate, the course offered to accommodate everyone from this broad field of practice. It was particularly interested in the idea of 'practice as research', as encouraged by changes in Higher Education funding. It appeared as though the resultant year group was split in two. The tuition fee payers coming from 'traditional' community arts backgrounds while bursary places were awarded to people who, I believe, it was hoped would produce work which would fall into the increasingly fashionable, apparently new, field of 'Contextual Practice'.

In many ways 'Contextual Practice' could be viewed as any arts practice that is concerned with how an artwork is received, the relevance of the audience, the importance of how and where the work is made and the value of the experience to people involved in the process of making the artwork.

Within the course there was an interest in appearing to accommodate the diversities of 'Contextual Practice', however, neither of the core teaching staff were what might be termed Contextual Practitioners within the fields of Art & Design. I also felt that there was an encouraged division between students who felt that some 'Contextual Practice' wasn't critical enough of itself, i.e. work with groups which was akin to 'baby-sitting with paints', and some practice that was too 'highbrow' and was of little benefit to the group the artist was engaging with. My time on the course was frustrating and confusing. I hoped that 'Out of the Bubble' might clarify in some way my own arts education experiences.

"The 'Out of the Bubble' conference and this publication of its presentation have a two fold aim: to highlight the diversities of 'Contextual Practice' in art and design [education] and to provide a forum for discussion as to its definition."<sup>1</sup>

'Out of the Bubble' presents the work of contemporary contextual practitioners, those in a position to commission, facilitate or present such practice and those writing about the field who are influential in its definition. The book is structured like a zoom shot pulling out from the artists working in their particular context, finally to the 'academics' writing about 'Contextual Practice'. The book is



split into three separate sections: *Tactics* is devoted to contextual practitioners, artists and their practices, describing projects and their working methods. *Manoeuvres* is a collection of presentations largely by curators and/or administrators. *Strategies* is written by researchers, a programme co-ordinator of a fine art contextual practices course, and an art critic/curator/educationalist.

What exactly is 'Contextual Practice'? Does it relate to 'Community Art'? How does it relate to 'Community Art'? Is 'Contextual Practice' an evolved form of 'Community Art'? Is it a separate, more critically aware development that now replaces defunct 'Community Art'? Does 'Community Art' still exist as a separate defined practice within 'Contextual Practice'? Does 'Contextual' mean 'good' while 'Community' means bad?

The term 'Contextual Practice' appears to be a US import defined by artists and educators Carol Becker and Suzanne Lacy, amongst others. Problems arise when trying to realise the relationship between 'Contextual Practice' and community orientated practices developed in the UK. 'Community Art' appears as an ancestor to the diverse practices that have evolved from this initial interest and could be encapsulated now as one specialism beneath this new umbrella term of 'Contextual Practices'; also beneath this term could be included, Socially Engaged Art Practice and Environmental Art Practice.

In many ways 'Contextual Practice' is not so radically different from earlier UK notions—such as those defined by the Artist Placement Group. But while UK community arts practice seems to have developed a very particular, institutionalised image—often synonymous in high art circles with bad art—'Contextual Practice' has a brighter contemporary image. But are the two practices really so different?

Take for example the work of the artist Alison Marchant documented in the chapter 'Living Room'. The project ran for four years from 1994 until 1998. It is described as a "conceptual intervention with residents of the Holly Street Estate in Hackney, East London"<sup>2</sup>. Marchant describes

the situation in which she works—a deprived housing estate undergoing a period of re-development. This scenario does not sound vastly different from the contexts that community art practice engaged with in the 1970s, yet what is very different is the language and manner in which the artist talks of the situation.

The image of 'Contextual Practice' has developed radically since the dowdy AN 'Art with People'<sup>3</sup> days, it is presented as no longer the politically hopeful community art of the 70s, idealistically engaging with residents of deprived housing estates. Marchant talks of being 'commissioned' by an arts agency to work in this situation. Work that is undertaken within this context today is done so under new terminology such as 'Social Inclusion', 'regeneration' and 'active citizenship'. What began as idealism within politically aware groups of artists has been appropriated and distorted into the art-speak of government, local authorities, arts bureaucracies and private commissioning agencies.

The motto 'Art changes lives' is to be taken as given and acceptable in the hands of arts and health administrators, whether artists believe it or not.

"The arts improve well being"<sup>4</sup>

"The arts increase self confidence"<sup>5</sup>

"The arts encourage recognition of differences and similarities"<sup>6</sup>

"The arts help self-expression and advocacy"<sup>7</sup>

"The arts break down barriers"<sup>8</sup>

"The arts strengthen communities"<sup>9</sup>

While I am not denying that these may be possible outcomes of 'Contextual Practice' arts projects in some instances, I don't believe that they are by any means a given. If artists are the people who facilitate these miracles, wouldn't we all want to live in the company of artists, perhaps with 'Heal the World' playing gently and continuously in the background?

What is worrying about the new sexy image that 'Out of the Bubble' is trying to project onto 'Contextual Practice' is this given: that 'Contextual Practice' is a priori a common good. Marchant's documented work 'Living Room' appears to bear some similarities with projects of the 70s, but is in contrast deeply de-politicised, but that is not to romanticise the political aspirations of projects of the 70s.

Are artists being asked to provide tokens of imagined community? Is it possible to have a critical, politically aware practice that also operates within heavily policed boundaries?

Although artists' intentions may be sincere their presence and work may effectively be a sticking plaster, validating the status quo, and in certain situations may be an effective diversion away from actual positive social change. If artists are involved in freeing the voices of others, why have we never seen a community project called 'Being Poor is Shite'; and is it just as likely to be sponsored by BUPA?

There is a preference amongst many artists and arts professionals to remain nostalgic about poverty and maintain the apparition of benevolently alleviating the depression of poverty through art

projects. Just look at the front cover of 'Changing Places: The Arts in Scotland's Urban Areas'<sup>10</sup> for an example of a suitably temporarily alleviated person, brimming eyes gazing upwards, broad smile.

The image of 'Contextual Practice' is growing fashionable as a means of laying claim to an actual act of social inclusion or real engagement. Consult, communicate and collaborate could be the keywords of such practice. The artist Edwina fitzPatrick in her chapter 'Exploring Fear and Liberation' asks questions which make 'Contextual Practice' dynamic as a field and is open about perceived failures of some of her projects:

"Issues were inevitably raised about the ethics of an artist working in collaboration with other people, especially about how the work is authored and presented. Taking the implications of this practice to its furthest limit suggested the artist may be using or manipulating human beings as raw materials."<sup>11</sup>

"Instead of being in place for the full two weeks, the [ice] keys had to be re-cast every thirty-six hours. This, in hindsight, was appropriate and added another layer of meaning to the work. However, it created disappointment as I had not delivered what I had promised."<sup>12</sup>

Whilst reading 'Out of the Bubble' I became aware of a project by Glasgow based arts organisation Heisenberg who specialise in Community based projects. In August they launched their project the 'Gorbals Artworks Masterplan' at the Lighthouse Design Museum, Glasgow. The exhibition consisted of "a series of documentary artworks relating to The Gorbals' community and the former development in Queen Elizabeth Square with preliminary thoughts from artists participating in the Artworks Masterplan."<sup>13</sup> Heisenberg were commissioned by the Developers to "deliver a unique artworks programme...that will enable both the existing and displaced communities of The Gorbals to engage with the fast-moving development of their environment."<sup>14</sup>

Evidence of Heisenberg's 'consultation' with the residents of the Gorbals existed in the form of video footage of interviews with locals. The footage was played back on an old bashed up TV as part of the exhibition. Within the context of the Lighthouse and the minimal nature of the exhibition that this was part of, it was a very definite statement. The Heisenberg interviews were faux-consultation, and they were not sensitive to the people interviewed (there is a general feeling within the Gorbals that the re-development will push out local residents as house prices and rents rise), nor was it sensitive in the manner or the place in which it was presented. Heisenberg have attempted to secure the outward consultative appearance of 'Contextual Practice' whilst ignoring genuine considerations of such practice, i.e. are people aware of the implication of their involvement in the work, etc.

The reality of critical 'Contextual Practice' is that it is hard work; it involves constant questioning of motivation and methodology, and also constant communication with the group or situation that the artist(s) is working with. It also demands compromise, yet compromise does not sit easily with the general individualistic model of the artist



or of authorship.

'Out of the Bubble' claims that 'Contextual Practice' is critical of how art is taught. Many contributors to the book mention the perceived model of the artist within art education:

"Teaching institutions are still struggling with hide-bound values based on an early nineteenth century model that associates the artist with prophetic genius, alienation, madness and martyrdom for the cause of art. Certainly students seem to think so, but where do they get it from?"<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the students, 'get it from', the very lack of contextual practitioners and the very structures of tutoring within those art schools. Charles Harrison writing in Studio

International in 1972 was critical of the situation then:

"I suspect that the situation outlined (the much-vaunted teaching system of group criticism of work and 'tough' exposure of the individual to and by the group)—like so many established in so many art schools—merely provides for success in its own terms and within its own limited context. Once armed with his [sic] diploma, or at the termination of his postgraduate course, the typical fine-art student is cast adrift in a world for which his studies have in no way prepared him."<sup>16</sup>

How much has changed in thirty years of fine art education? The following quote was published in 1999:

"What makes the artistic identity so tricky to negotiate is the widely held view (shared and promoted by many in the artistic community itself and latently supported by the dominant models of art education), that modern art necessarily exists at a distance from all other practices."<sup>17</sup>

The very term 'Contextual Practice' could lead to one pre-supposing that fine art practice exists which is non-context based. Perhaps it would be more fruitful to look at all artistic practice as contextual as Jane Calow<sup>18</sup> makes suggestion of. This might then enable a questioning of the methodologies, of the very acts of engagement, of the socio-economic relationships inherent in artistic practices. Yet still the paradigms of gallery and studio are taught as mainstream, while courses such as public art, environmental art, or artists in education are treated as peripheral.

The old term 'community art' had for a long time been equated as 'bad art' within fine art circles, an antithesis to an individualistic, professional arts practice. In parallel to the adage "those who can, do; those who can't, teach" my experience within art school and the idea generally held amongst students was, "those who can, practice fine art; those who can't, practice community art".

The reality of such an attitude was—is—that those attempting to pursue a career as gallery artists are more often pursuing practices that are split hierarchically. Arts workshops and sessional work are treated as a way to make ends meet, an acceptable yet annoying interruption to the real task of a 'professional' studio based practice. My experience is that 'bad' or rather inadequate contextual/community art continues to be perpetuated as a direct result of this motivation, with artists being involved in a miseducation about their own

work and role, and the responsibilities attached to it. This is something which the education system has to take a large proportion of the responsibility for. It is also evident that where artists are acutely aware of these discrepancies they are not making the effort to challenge uninformed arts administration as it's easier just to do the job and take the money than it is to challenge deficient ideas of what might constitute effective, relevant collaborative practice.

'Out of the Bubble' makes few inroads into suggesting how Fine Art education may go about addressing its failure to equip art students with relevant training and expectations for a meaningful working practice. Nor does the book seek to ask who benefits from out-moded models of the artist being kept in place at art schools or who will benefit from an expansion of the higher education sector as 'Contextual Practice' is offered as another choice on the curriculum. 'Out of the Bubble' does present the reader with a varied selection of practices but overall it fails to deliver in terms of discussing how art schools may begin to educate towards politically, socially and contextually aware artists.

## Notes

- 1 Out of the Bubble: Approaches to 'Contextual Practice' within Fine Art Education, Ed. John Carson & Susannah Silver, The London Institute, 2000, p114.
- 2 *ibid*, p38.
- 3 Art with People, Ed. Malcolm Dickson, Artists Newsletter Publication, 1995.
- 4 Changing Lives: The Social Impact of the Arts, The Scottish Arts Council, 1995, p3.
- 5 *ibid*, p4.
- 6 *ibid*, p5.
- 7 *ibid*, p6.
- 8 *ibid*, p7.
- 9 *ibid*, p8.
- 10 Changing Places: The Arts in Scotland's Urban Areas, The Scottish Arts Council, 1995.
- 11 *op cit*, Out of the Bubble, p26.
- 12 *ibid*, p28.
- 13 Stirring the City, Heisenberg project flyer, 2001.
- 14 *ibid*.
- 15 *op cit*, Out of the Bubble, p101.
- 16 Charles Harrison, 'Educating Artists', Studio International, May 1972.
- 17 Pavel Buchler, 'Other Peoples Culture' in Curious: Artists Research Within Expert Culture, Visual Arts Projects, 1999, p44.
- 18 *op cit*, Out of the Bubble, p106-112.