

INFORMAL PEER LEARNING BETWEEN  
CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS IN BRISTOL AND  
SELECTED UK CITIES OUTSIDE LONDON

How do contemporary artists learn from their peers  
outside of formal education and what motivates  
them to do so?

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## ABSTRACT

### Informal Peer Learning between Contemporary Artists in Bristol and Selected UK Cities Outside London

#### How do contemporary artists learn from their peers outside of formal education and what motivates them to do so?

This research has been carried out as part of a collaborative doctoral award with partners Spike Island Art and Design Centre and University of the West of England. It employs a mixed methods approach, including participatory action research, reflexive practice and semi-structured interviews to explore artists' peer learning in the context of literature from education theory, network theory, philosophy, art theory and sociology.

It takes as research participants, artists from the Spike Associates Group, Spike Island, Bristol, and artists from self-organised groups and organisationally facilitated membership groups in several UK cities outside London.

It found that peer interactions between artists are particularly significant in times of transition when peer learning pivots on mutual recognition, countering isolation, nurturing self-determination and accessing resources. The construction and reconstruction of practitioner subjectivities and practice identities is a significant peer learning process, often incorporating the initiation of spaces where practice identities can be temporarily suspended.

Artists engage with artist-led groups in subtly different ways to organisationally facilitated membership groups. Participation in the former enables experimentation with roles and competencies in a fluid environment where a sense of shared purpose and ownership prevails. The latter are utilised less as 'communities' and more as resources to be exploited and graduated through.

Informal conversation is a vital site of learning and a catalyst for practice and peer critique, although an important staging post against which to measure practice trajectories, is often problematic due to tensions arising from the need for challenge as well as support. Aspiration towards reciprocity, hospitality and generosity represents a common ethics of entanglement. However, this breaks down where there are conflicting beliefs about what constitutes exchanges of equivalent value.

Visibility is a highly valued commodity amongst artists and they look to their peers for strategies to make practice visible to appropriate parties and to gain a clearer overview of regional and national artistic networks and communities.

Much previous research on informal learning has been conducted in the fields of work-based learning or community education. This thesis provides a much-needed microanalysis of learning processes that occur in temporary communities that are at the same time social and professional spaces. It makes valuable tacit processes visible in these situations, and the research findings can be used to initiate, adapt and inform learning programmes in arts centres, self-organised groups and other informal settings.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

My principal aim in this thesis is to analyse how contemporary artists learn from their peers outside of formal education and to uncover what motivates them to do so. The research offers an assessment of how meaning is co-constructed in specific situations and what kind of peer-led structures, relationships, practices and forms of knowledge artists value. I aim to provide a foundation for future work by asking the question: ‘how can informal peer learning best be supported?’

I take a mixed-methods approach and my core respondents are members of the Spike Associates programme at Spike Island Art and Design Centre in Bristol. I also reference other Bristol-based artist-led initiatives and art organisations with which members of the Spike Associates engage, or have engaged. Additional respondents are members of artist-led groups or organisationally facilitated membership groups (in the mode of the Spike Associates) in UK cities outside London.

Research questions that are contingent upon my aim are:

How do artists construct and maintain situations of interaction around art practice?

How do these situations affirm and progress both the development of artists’ practice identity and their sense of an artistic subjectivity?

What are the recurrent features of these interactions:  
cognitive, emotional and physical?

Can these situations be conceptualised as learning and if  
they can, how?

My objective is to develop a convincing and appropriate voice  
with which to animate manifold participant accounts (as well as  
my own), without reducing them to narratives of simple  
knowledge transaction.

Rather than looking at these spaces and processes in terms of  
the acquisition of skills alone, I would like to identify descriptors  
for a complex landscape of experience that fosters the conditions  
for exploratory, speculative, *as well as* goal-orientated learning.

I stress that this study is in no way an attempt to create a  
manual of best practice for artists' peer learning. I have traced  
commonalities and resonances between the experiences of artists  
both individually and in collectives, but I have also been aware of  
the unique nature of each initiative and the specific ways in which  
artists' experiences diverge. I challenge assertions that informal  
creative processes should always resist academic and/or textual  
articulation, and hope that my narrative style and research  
methods will act to redress concerns about reductionism.



My thesis is shaped accordingly:

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction, Context and Methodology**

After a brief introduction of the research participants and their particular contexts, I outline the theories and disciplinary perspectives that have informed my study. This includes learning theories, network theories, philosophical and sociological perspectives and an overview of the “Educational Turn” (Wilson and O’Neill, 2010) in contemporary art. I outline the political background and context of the study and note how I can disseminate my findings.

I outline my approach to the study and my position within it, how I developed my research questions and selected participants, collected and analysed data. I then provide an overview of the ethical issues that arose during the course of the study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Transitions: Artists’ Peer Learning After Graduation**

I consider the transitional period after graduating from university and look at the ways in which participants have sought to mitigate feelings of insecurity through engaging with their peers. I examine claims for particular skills being fostered in formal education (Oakley, Sperry & Pratt, 2008) in the light of thinking on knowledge production (Sheikh, 2009). I look at how participants legitimate their practice and build feelings of confidence and self-determination, both reacting to, and maintaining models from their formal education (Rogoff, 2008). I examine how they have accessed resources in the form of support and opportunities and what has motivated graduates to base themselves in cities outside London.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Identities: the Formation of Practice Identities and Artistic Subjectivities through Peer Learning**

I look at how artists learn practice identities reflexively in relation to their peers, informed by theories of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2006) and the construction of practice narratives (in relation to Ricoeur, 1992 and Wittel, 2001). I examine the need for differentiated project identities in organisational contexts. I consider the deliberate suspension of practice identities as a learning strategy, with reference to theories of the place of imagination in identity formation (Wenger, 1998, Mezirow, 2006) and agency (Mouffe, 2006). I also look at the formation of artistic subjectivities, in variance to existing research on artistic identity (Bain, 2005)

## Chapter 4

### Entanglements and Encounters: The Social Structures and Relationships of Artists' Peer Learning

#### Part 1: Participation with Artist-Led Groups

In this, the main body of the thesis, I explore the landscape of artists' learning through the structures and qualities of their entanglements with one another. I begin with participation with artist-led groups, examining the place of friendship in gaining access to and confidence in the social context. I discuss the role of tacit knowledge in social situations, with reference to Deliss (2008) and Pierce (2008). I refer to Mezirow's theories of "cumulative" learning (2006) and Wenger (1998) on participation as I explore the discovery of competencies and learning from proximity. I discuss how certain events play a part in the generation of energy, and the effects these have on encounters (O'Sullivan, 2006), participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and the homogeneity of groups (Uzzi, 2005). I trace the influence of "extended communities" contingent on artist-led groups and a sense of shared history and continuity of learning, informed by Wenger (1999).

#### Part 2: Participation with Organisationally-Facilitated Membership Groups

I look at the role of organisationally-facilitated membership groups, and principally the Spike Associates group in artists' peer learning. I begin by looking at the place of the group within the wider organization with reference to Doherty on "New Institutionalism" (2007) and the influence of artist-led culture on these groups. I explore the nature of social connections in the group through notions of flexibility, transience and "social capital" (Putnam, 2000, Coleman, 1988). I look at social brokering and the type of entanglements that exist with reference to network theory (Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007, Rossiter, 2006, Granovetter, 1983), and finally I look at conflict and change within these groups.

#### Part 3: Conversation as a Site of Peer Learning

I discuss the centrality of informal conversation as a site of participation in, and access to, peer learning between artists. I assess the reflexive processes it entails and the sense of group cohesion that can arise from it. I refer to Andrew's on "dwelling-with" (2006); Engestrom's ideas of collective action (2007); and Farrell on "instrumental intimacy" (2003). I explore how conversation can be a source of momentum-building in collaborative situations. I also look at conversation as an invitation and starting-point for exposure to peers.

#### Part 4: Peer Critique

I look at the role of criticism in artists' peer learning, with particular reference to the peer critique form. This includes a discussion of the place of critique and its effect on the social status quo, with reference to conflicting arguments about positioning from Bourdieu (1993) and Charlesworth (2011). I examine the dynamics of assumptions about peer status in critique, informed by Ranciere (1991) and Freire's (1998) writing on democratic learning exchanges and the work of Mouffe (2007) on "agonistic space". Finally, I outline how respondents intersperse their practice trajectories with periodic critique.

#### Part 5: Ethics of Entanglement

In this section, I explore aspiration to an ethics of interaction and encounter between participants. I look at different aspects of hospitality, with reference to Derrida (2000) and Wenger's writing on mutual accountability (1999). With reference to McRobbie (2002) and Lazzarato (2004), I consider reciprocity and generosity between artist peers in the context of a gift economy.

### Chapter 5

#### Viewing Points and Visibility: Gaining Personal and Collective Visibility, Perspectives and Overviews through Artist Peers

In this chapter I concentrate on ways in which participants have gained recognition through forming visible affiliations. With reference to Bourdieu (1993) I discuss the management of visibility, online profiles and ways in which artists make themselves and their knowledge and practices visible through collective engagement. I refer to Berardi's writing on the commodification of knowledge (2009), to Putnam on trust in groups (2000), and discuss the balances of tacit and explicit knowledge in different collective situations, with reference to Wenger (1998).

#### Conclusions

I sum up my findings; make assertions about their potential contribution to knowledge give an indication of the possible direction of future work in this area.

## Background

The themes of this thesis are in many ways a natural progression from previous academic work, while also reflecting strong personal interests. I had previously completed an MA in Art History and Theory in which I had interviewed artists for a dissertation entitled 'Ideas of Community in Participatory Art Practice'. Through employing interview, observational and reflective methods and through my consideration of the relationship between artists, artworks and non-artists, I became fascinated by the sociology and ethnography of artistic groups and networks.

Having completed previous degrees in Fine Art and humanities subjects, I was familiar with studio culture and had become increasingly engaged with artist-led activity in Cornwall. This experience made me very aware of the support, affirmation and critique that artists' peer communities could offer. I was also consolidating my interests in contemporary visual art and journalistic writing. Whilst I have found it difficult to define my own "practice" in the contemporary art sphere, I have embraced the position that conducting this research has enabled. It seemed appropriate to my mixture of skills and interests to belong to art communities, yet also reside on the margins of these communities. I have been a researcher working for the Spike Island Associates group (as part of the 'Collaborative Doctoral Award') and collaborated on self-organised discursive events with artists in Bristol, Manchester and London whilst being fully embedded in Bristol artists' networks. In this way I have experimented with various identities within the contemporary art realm.

In terms of research, I feel that I have also occupied a somewhat marginal position in several fields, a position that is also unique and compelling to me by its trans-disciplinary nature. Not having an academic foundation in sociology, education theory or ethnography, I have attempted to trace sources from these disciplines and to combine these with network theories, art theory, art commentary and philosophy.

Finally, I have a keen personal interest in different forms of learning and during the last four years I have been informed by my attempts to learn jazz improvisation on the clarinet in formal lessons on top of a classical foundation. This entails training the voice as well as the ear, learning a series of musical forms and technical skills and having the confidence to continually experiment. Being able to improvise with other musicians rapidly increases this confidence, as it necessitates all of these knowledges as well as the willingness to respond to another in the moment.

I am a keen autodidact in “popular” physics and have learned much in this area through reading and the media, but have integrated my ideas, images and sources of information into “knowledge” through discussion with my peers and family. Lastly, my experience of attending and facilitating several reading groups, in both art and non-art contexts has reaffirmed how the pleasure of learning is interrelated with a pleasure in social interaction.

## Context

The collaborative partners that provided the context for my research were Spike Island art space and University of the West of England (UWE). Spike Island is an art centre in Bristol that shows contemporary art as part of a gallery and events programme. It also provides studio space for around 70 artists and houses a design incubation centre, a print studio and rents office space to commercial and non-commercial tenants in a variety of creative sectors. The terms of my studentship required me to work with and for the Spike Associates (or simply, the Associates, as I refer to it) for at least the first two years of my study. The Associates is a membership group facilitated by Spike Island with a dedicated space in the building, comprising at least 90 local artists, writers and curators with a contemporary art practice.

While Spike Island has been the “industry” partner in this AHRC-funded collaborative doctorate, University of the West of England has been the academic partner, providing supervisory and research support and a PhD cohort. The collaboration has been an extension of an existing ongoing relationship between the institutions. University of the West of England rent studio and office space for their Fine Art courses at Spike Island. UWE students have exhibited their degree show work in the Spike Island gallery and many UWE graduates join the Spike Associates shortly after completing their degree, while Associates members can be postgraduates or postgraduate “fellows” (assistant tutors) at UWE. It was expected, therefore, that a study that (amongst other questions) examined learning both from the perspective of a recent graduate and an Associate member would benefit both organisations.

My study focuses on two interdependent spheres that provide contexts for artists' interactions. One is the organisationally-facilitated membership group, and in particular the Spike Island Associates Scheme as a facilitated programme of activities and a physical space within an arts institution. Alongside this group I have also referred to membership schemes such as Extra Special People at Eastside Projects in Birmingham and the East Street Arts Associates programme in Leeds. <sup>1</sup>

A similar proportion of my study takes as a context for learning, artist-led culture, as it is engaged with and initiated by members of the Spike Associates and artist-led groups around the UK.

### Geographical Context: Looking Outside London and the Art Market

My thesis is an attempt to represent artists' activity that is flourishing beyond the hub of the UK art world in London. My analysis is underpinned by the premise that art initiatives and organisations outside London have certain specific needs and patterns of activity that differentiate them from those in the capital.

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<sup>1</sup> While Eastside Projects is strictly 'artist-led', it differs markedly from other artist-led groups that I have looked at in that it is a not-for-profit company organised and run by a particular collective of experienced artists rather than a rolling committee structure. It has a director and a number of paid staff, unlike Transmission gallery in Glasgow for example, which is a volunteer-run charity. Indeed each organisation and initiative to which I have referred differs in several respects from its counterparts. My rough categorisation 'membership groups' and 'artist-led groups' is a convenient way of collecting together initiatives which, after consulting constituent artists and artist/organisers, seem to me to share more commonalities than differences.

The vast majority of artists, art colleges, public and commercial exhibiting and sales opportunities are concentrated in London. Because financial and social resources are centralised in this way, many graduates from colleges outside London choose to move to the capital to practice or study at postgraduate level after their degree. Those that do not may have fewer opportunities for professional development and will certainly have fewer opportunities to sell their work.

This is reflected in the fact that respondents spoke extremely rarely about commercial opportunities for their work, practicing instead within an economy of public funding or goodwill. Certain exceptions to this are artist-led groups who have exhibited at international art fairs. However, respondents from these groups were quick to distinguish the intentions underlying their participation in such events from those of commercial galleries. I did not, therefore, see a treatment of the art market as it affects my research participants as falling within the scope of this particular piece of research.

I found that during the course of my study respondents who based themselves in cities outside London often spoke about their municipal base in relation to London, accentuating its difference from the capital in terms other than commercial. They spoke instead about distinctions between quality of life, visibility, scope of opportunity and modes of expression. Artist-led groups and organisations outside London tended to regard other groups beyond London as organisational peers and to network and collaborate with them as such, and it is these constellations of activity that I hoped to capture.

In my examination of peer learning, I have therefore accentuated the skills, values and experiences that respondents



develop in their specific contexts, contexts that are often marginal to London, but pivotal to a variety of significant UK artistic scenes.

### The Spike Associates and Related Membership Schemes

The Associates membership constitutes a principle group of participants and has provided a hub from which to map out constellations of activity in Bristol and around the UK. The programme has been my place of work, and helping to shape and contribute to it has caused me to appreciate the structure and potential of the scheme and facilitated my acceptance within artists' networks in Bristol and beyond. In reflexive consultation with Associate members I have been able to situate artists' activity locally and nationally. The group has also provided a site for the development of my research questions through pilot interviews.

The programme was established in March 2007 for a variety of reasons that I will explore in greater depth later in my thesis. Briefly, it aimed to harness the energies of artists who did not necessarily have studios at Spike Island and to respond to "the wider needs of contemporary practice" (Spike Associates membership form, 2007) by offering a space for research and for discussion-oriented events. Other reasons cited for the establishment of the scheme include the provision of a focus and meeting place for local arts graduates, who might otherwise leave the city.

An early programme leaflet refers to an "Associates Manifesto":

The Associates Programme is seeking to foster a spirit of openness, enquiry and generosity – the sharing of information is part of the duty

and pleasure of being an Associate. The culture of the Associate Programme is centred around practice, production, dissemination and collaboration.  
(Spike Island Associate Programme leaflet, 2007)

I have contributed to the programme as an individual researcher, initially through the initiation of collaborative projects, and subsequently in partnership with the employed Associates Coordinator. This work has formed part of my research methodology, discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Such schemes have, like the institutions or groups that have initiated them, developed out of artist-led activity and studio groups that have acquired funding, expanded and become institutionalised. However, they continue to align themselves with the artist-led culture from which they originated. These schemes mirror changes in fine art practice, which in turn reflect late twentieth century changes in communication technologies, work and society, and the coinciding evolution of the art institution. Networked private social relationships are less distinguishable from public professional motivations and a rhetoric related to horizontal peer-led processes drives creative activity and dissemination.

### Organisational Culture and Learning

Now, the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore, the institutions to foster it have to be part-community centre, part-laboratory and part-academy, with less need for the established showroom function. (Charles Esche - former director Rooseum, Malmo – now director of Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, cited by Doherty: 2004, p.2)

My research is located in and around art organisations and artist-led groups and encompasses the plethora of activity that connects

these situations. In Spike Island a certain model of the institution is enacted. By housing the Associates Space within the building, and establishing an accompanying membership group, Spike Island, and other organisations with similar groups adhere to the tenets of what has been referred to as “New Institutionalism” (Doherty, 2004).

The “New Institution” is a site where borders are presented as permeable and flexible, regarded as a place where non-instrumental, exploratory learning can take place. The simple, visual reception of artwork is characterised as passive consumption and large, publically-funded art institutions will often accompany exhibitions with film screenings, talks, symposia, publications, educational and off-site events. The emphasis is placed on audience participation, critical dialogue and cross-institutional collaborations that surround and extend the dialogic range of the exhibition. The term: -

- embraces a dominant strand of contemporary art practice – namely that which employs dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects of passive consumption. (Doherty, 2004, p1)

Spike Island and other larger organisations which I visited such as East Street Arts in Leeds and Eastside Projects in Birmingham present themselves as spaces for production as well as for consumption of art practice. These organisations also use their membership schemes to connect with artists’ networks locally, regionally and nationally.

A 2007 governmental report on the economic performance of the creative industries comments on the changing face of the organisation in terms of this networked model harnessing “intangible assets”:

The network has become the new organisational paradigm. As

boundaries within and between organisations blur, so risks and resources are pooled and 'synergies' between organisational units are enhanced.

Networks are supplanting more traditional organisational forms supplanting – top-down command and control together with arms-length more traditional contracts – and, as they do, trust, the glue that holds a networked organisation together, becomes ever more important. (Hutton/Work Foundation, 2007)

My study will highlight the nature of the relationship between artist-led activity and art organisations and the ways in which artists work across and between these situations to further the development of their creative and professional practice. Rather than (as suggested by Doherty, 2004), arts organisations assimilating artistic practice and artist-led initiatives, I underline the prevalence of the symbiotic relationships that artists and organisations engage in and the ongoing negotiations about power, agency, visibility and support that characterise them.

Spike Island derives only 22% of its running costs from public funding<sup>2</sup>, the remainder coming from income from studio rents, private businesses and from the University of the West of England, who rent space for their courses in the building. Since the funding cuts to Arts Council England (ACE) in 2010, many arts organisations have had to reassess their business strategies. The most significant in relation to the scope of this study is the increasing need for arts organisations to promote alternative functions in order to attract funding and sponsorship. In the case of membership groups such as the Spike Associates, and Extra

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.spikeisland.org.uk/news> [accessed 27.10.11]

Note: Following funding cuts to Arts Council England in 2010 and the announcement of a 48% cuts to National Portfolio Organisations (e.g. arts organisations that received regular Arts Council funding), 206 bodies had their funding cut altogether, the largest proportion of which (24.8%) were visual arts organisations.<sup>2</sup> Spike Island received a cut of around 11% to its funding, but did apply for and receive an organisational development grant from ACE, also in March 2011.

Special People at Eastside Projects in Birmingham, this could include the presentation of such groups as sites of continuing professional development and learning: for example, as a supplement to and potential alternative to a formal MA course. I discuss the parallels and continuities drawn between formal and informal learning in such groups in Chapter 2: *Transitions*.<sup>3</sup>

**Fig 1. The locations of artist-led groups and organisationally facilitated membership groups visited during the course of my study.  
Credit: Maia Conran**

### Artist-Led Culture and Learning

Other than organisationally facilitated membership groups I have also visited and/or interviewed members of the following artist-led groups in Bristol and around the UK. These core groups are marked on the map overleaf alongside artist-led initiatives mentioned by participants and the aforementioned membership groups:

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<sup>3</sup> Dany Louise has criticised the ACE decision to give the lion's share of regular funding to larger organisations rather than smaller "practice-led" organisations, and highlighted a range of activities that she believes are provided by such organisations, which are at risk through funding cuts. These include access to networks and professional peers and the provision of advice for early-mid career artists. She quotes a spokesperson for Castlefield Gallery:

Nearly all organisations offer this through formal networking events and / or informally through their activities and locations as community-of-interest hubs. (...) Castlefield Gallery acts as "a hub for artists in the area, and inspiration and learning environment for artists and many students around the region". (Louise. D, a-n.co.uk May 2011)

Other roles, which are pertinent to my theme, are the activities provided by arts organisations that provide support to ease the transition period for recent graduates between college and independent practice. I look more closely at this period of transition and the many ways that artists address it in Chapter 2: *Transitions*. Arts organisations are also, as Louise points out, major sources of employment for artists and offer unpaid or subsidised opportunities such as internships and mentoring.

- Plan 9, Bristol (2005 - 2010)
- The New Bristol Diving School (2010 - 11, est. as The Bristol Diving School, 2009)
- Islington Mill Art Academy, Salford (established: 2007).
- Transmission Gallery, Glasgow (established: 1983)
- The Royal Standard, Liverpool (established, 2006)
- Catalyst, Belfast (established: 1993)
- Outpost, Norwich (established: 2004)
- The Lombard Method, Birmingham (established: 2009)
- Moot Gallery, Nottingham (active 2005-2010)

Temporary artist-led spaces mentioned:

- Rhys and Hannah Present (January – December, 2008)
- Central Reservation (March – July, 2010)

There are many other initiatives, projects and exhibitions mentioned, but I have chosen not list them all. Moreover, the groups that I have visited and the initiatives that I have been involved in or discussed, make up a tiny part of the huge array of artist-led activity in UK cities.

Artist-led groups generally attempt to structure themselves in a non-hierarchical way and to resist institutionalisation. They often present themselves as a do-it-yourself alternative to the commercial or purely publically-funded gallery system, in that the artists as producers, promoters and commissioners have collective control of all areas of production and dissemination of the artworks.

Chris Brown has emphasised their onus on practice, experimentation and self-determination:

Artist-led activity has an empowering effect on those players who want to seek an alternative to handing over the control of promotion and presentation of their work. These entrepreneurial types take responsibility for creating their own platforms for presenting work, and with that comes the freedom to control how their work is seen and by whom. On a practical level, this activity is a DIY approach to

promoting and presenting artwork; on a national level it is more a way of working, a mindset, than a prescriptive institution. (Brown. C, 2008)

Although many groups seek to mount an alternative to commercial and institutionalised models, both longstanding groups, Transmission Gallery in Glasgow and Catalyst in Belfast receive some public funding and Moot from Nottingham, Outpost in Norwich and Bureau in Manchester have each held stalls at commercial art fairs. Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt has refuted artist-led groups' anti-establishment credentials and charts the dependency upon "systems of patronage" of all of the Glasgow-based groups about which she has written. (Gordon-Nesbitt, 1996, p2). Indeed she sees the achievement of financial stability for some of these organisations as going hand-in-hand with additional layers of bureaucracy, which may take precedence over an emphasis on creative practice.

I do not argue that artist-led activity is somehow politically or creatively neutered because of its growing popularity and assimilation into creative industries political frameworks, (e.g. in artist-led exemplification of models of "DIY" entrepreneurship requiring little public support and groups' re-animation of neglected urban spaces). However, it is important to recognise that artist-led culture occupies a very different social, political and economic landscape from previous decades<sup>4</sup>. In Chapter 4: 'Entanglements and Encounters' I explore the "symbiotic relationships" - mentioned by Gordon-Nesbitt (1996, p3) - formed

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<sup>4</sup> I address the idea that notions such as autonomy and resistance are less imperative now to the motivation for self-organisation, as they once were, and that for some, joining or forming an artist-led group has become a form of continuing professional development<sup>4</sup>, a theme I expand upon in Chapter 5: 'Visibility'. Under Labour, artists were positively encouraged by local councils to "animate" areas in which commercial planners hoped to invest, as part of regeneration agendas.<sup>4</sup> Since the global financial crisis, artist-led activity is not being harnessed to animate empty buildings and shops as part of a 'recession-busting' agenda.

between artists in artist-led groups and arts institutions, arguing that they have become the norm in sustaining artist-led activity, and that, more significantly for this study, artists learn from one another how to broker and negotiate such relationships.

In all the groups that I have looked at, histories and mythologies have been passed down through the presence of event documentation on the Internet and orally between members. The notion of an 'expanded community' that disseminates narratives about groups, is itself is a form of learning between artists that I have chosen to investigate.<sup>5</sup>

There is, and always has been, a culture of groups exchanging information and collaborating with one another in a kind of gift economy, and I argue in Chapter 4 that (whether or not this is successful), there is a prevalent aspiration to adhere to a kind of ethics of interaction where reciprocity, hospitality and generosity feed into an idea of an artist-led 'community'.

Apart from a number of groups local to the city in which they are based, respondents have mentioned three particularly significant contemporary reference points. The "Young British Artists"<sup>6</sup> are cited in reference to their self-organised exhibition *Freeze* in 1988 as well as their effect upon the art landscape of the early 1990s, an effect that seems to prompt ambivalent feelings amongst respondents towards the artists' commercial and media success. The success and celebrity status of the YBAs and the status of London as an artworld hub have also meant that specific

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<sup>5</sup> Transmission gallery is the possible exception to this, as it has a written history and archive. *Transmission*, was published by Black Dog in 2001. However, respondents from the gallery indicated that they had learned about the gallery's history through conversations with ex committee members.

<sup>6</sup> Liam Gillick, Fiona Rae, Steve Park, Sarah Lucas, Ian Davenport, Michael Landy, Gary Hume, Anya Gallaccio, Henry Bond, Angela Bulloch, Damien Hirst, Angus Fairhurst, Mat Collishaw, Simon Patterson, Abigail Lane, Gillian Wearing, Sam Taylor-Wood



narratives of artist-led activity have been recorded in print. Gordon-Nesbitt is careful to point out the advantageous position these artists started out from, the support they received from powerful collectors and dealers such as Charles Saatchi and the advocacy of tutors influential in the art world like Michael Craig-Martin and Jon Thompson. I therefore do not regard their experiences as generally representative of that of the artists in my study.

Less well known outside the contemporary art world and in contrast to the YBAs is a book mentioned by several participants: *City Racing: The Life and Times of an Artist-Led Gallery* (Burgess, Coventry, Hale, Noble and Owen, 2002). In the late 1980s City Racing Gallery had its home in an illegal squat in Oval Mansions, Kennington, under the radar of Lambeth Council (Hale, Noble, Owen and Burgess, 2002). The book details its self-organised exhibitions with artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Fiona Banner and Philippe Parreno, their collaborations with Transmission gallery in Glasgow, their involvement in road protests and their collective ethos:

We were against exclusivity, hierarchy, celebrity, we favoured the collective approach, we favoured open access, we did not really care about good or bad, we cared about doing. (Burgess, Coventry, Hale, Noble and Owen, 2002, p13)

Many participants also mentioned Transmission gallery in Glasgow. Established in 1983 by Glasgow School of Art graduates who wanted to create wider exhibiting opportunities, it is the longest-running artist-led gallery in the UK. The structure of its “rolling” committee (a group of around 6 directors each serving voluntarily for 2 years) that represents a wider membership, has been copied by several of the groups I visited.

The focus of this study is the regional city: primarily Bristol, but with reference to the experience of artist-led groups and their various legacies in Glasgow, Birmingham, Norwich, Belfast and Nottingham, amongst other places.

### Changes in Formal Art Education and the “Educational Turn” in Contemporary Art Practice

Within the field of contemporary art, institutional and organisational developments also mirror, to some degree, developments in contemporary practice that foreground dialogue and other forms of “active” participation.

Of course, participatory art practices are not new, and theories of participation in art go back via Suzanne Lacey’s *New Genre Public Art* (1995), the Fluxus and the Situationist movements to Walter Benjamin’s 1934 essay, ‘The Author as Producer.’ Contemporary developments in art practice reflect an emphasis on participation, categorized variously as “Relational” art (Bourriaud, 2002) and “Dialogical” art (Kester, 2004), while many make use of Web 2.0 functionalities as a platform (at least partially) for practice and dissemination.

The direction of my research was informed by my immediate academic background when I explored the idea of community in participatory art practice. I examined community as a space of shared bonds, as outlined by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), and contrasted this with an exploration of community as the play of difference, informed by Claire Bishop’s ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’ (2004), Jean-Luc Nancy’s writing on the meeting of “singularities” (Nancy, 1991) and Laclau

and Mouffe's work on "agonistic democracy" (1985). The debates I explored on participation, collective meaning-making and community are also pertinent to situations of peer learning, particularly with regard to the term "peer" and the assumption of a symmetrical or equal relation of status between parties.

The requirements of physical spaces within arts institutions has therefore shifted, as have the kinds of interactions fostered through these spaces, and the social configurations made possible as a result of the dialogical and textual practices contingent upon the work. I explore the centrality, politics and ethics of the informal conversation as a site of peer learning between artists in Chapter 4.

In 2008, when I started my research, art practice with an emphasis on the dialogical had been responding to changes in further and higher art education. What has been termed the "Educational Turn" (O'Neill and Wilson, 2010) in contemporary art began as a reaction to an increase in assessment criteria and related administration, the merger of art colleges and universities, modularisation of courses, adoption of research degrees, higher fees and media attention on the perceived dissatisfaction amongst students.<sup>7</sup> In Chapter 2, I examine the evidence for participants' reactions to their formal education (both positive and negative) as it is evidenced in current peer learning scenarios.

However, since the Liberal-Conservative Coalition came to power in May 2010 and removed the cap on tuition fees (in effect

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<sup>7</sup> Thorpe, V (2008) Low Morale devastates Art Colleges. *The Observer*. [Online]. 10 February 2008. [Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/feb/10/art.furthereducation>] Accessed: <12.10.09>

Bickers et al. (2008) The Future of Art Education: Special Edition. *Art Monthly*. No. 320

from 2012), and following the mass student demonstrations in November 2010, this concern with education has taken on a new sense of urgency. Contributory factors include funding cuts to education and what is regarded as its increasing privatization.

The “Educational Turn”<sup>8</sup> has been characterised by a plethora of projects nationally and internationally. It has been

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<sup>8</sup> The “Educational Turn” was originally characterized by projects like the Independent Art School in Hull in 1999, [<http://www.independent-art-school.org.uk/> accessed 12.10.09], which has continued as a series of events and reading groups initiated by or involving the participation of artist, Pippa Koszerek, (I attended one of Koszerek’s *Short Term Solutions* reading groups on the radical educationalist, Ivan Illich, 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2011).

On an international level the ‘Educational Turn’ has been reflected in events such as the failed art school planned for Manifesta 6 in 2006 and the curatorial reasoning behind Documenta 12 in 2007: Director, Roger M. Buegel and curator, Ruth Noack cite the following as the art festival’s ‘leitmotifs’: “Modernity. Is modernity our antiquity? Life! What is bare life? Education: what is to be done?”.

Many other projects associated with this theme have impacted on my work, as I encountered artists involved in projects or attended events myself. In 2008, the ICA held a salon discussion entitled: ‘You Talkin’ To me? Why art is turning to education’, [<http://www.ica.org.uk/17479/Coverage/Salon-Discussions.html>, accessed 25.10.11], the recording of which was useful for initial reference material, and 2008 also saw a topical debate break out in the pages of the journal *Art Monthly* questioning the future of art education. This catalysed public panel discussions at the ICA, London and the Ikon gallery, Birmingham, the second of which I attended, (*Art Monthly Debate: The Future of Art Education* 6.10.08 Ikon, Birmingham).

In April 2010 I attended the Hayward/Serpentine conference ‘Deschooling Society’, a hub of debate about contemporary art-pedagogical experimental projects and a more rigorous and critical examination of the potential role of the artist and the arts institution in this climate, taking Ivan Illich’s 1973 work as its inspiration, [<http://thehayward.southbankcentre.co.uk/2010/04/22/deschooling-society/> [accessed 25.10.11].

Alternative art school projects have included: *Artschool/UK*, 2010 initiated by John Reardon, Sabine Hagmann and Johannes Maier, *FreeSchool* by Ladies of the Press/Five Years in June 2010 and the Free University of Liverpool, (courses starting 2011): “ARTSCHOOL/UK is an amorphous community of artists, curators, designers, architects and others. It is a community that is growing through a nomadic and context specific engagement with organisations, institutions, communities, groups and individuals, around the concept of learning.” [<http://www.artschooluk.org/#home>, accessed 25.11.10].

Skills sharing projects initiated by artists include Leeds Creative Timebank, [<http://leedscreativetimebank.blogspot.com/p/about.html>, accessed 25.10.11], and The Public School, Brussels, [<http://brussels.thepublicschool.org/>, accessed 25.10.11]. This is affiliated to Public School projects in eight other cities.

The most recent projects to come to my attention include *Our Day Will Come*, a co-operative art project initiated by Paul O’Neill, a month-long free school in Tasmania (October 2011) and *Forever Academy*, an experiment to see how artists “can develop practice outside of the traditional model of the art school”, initiated in September 2011 by artists in Swansea. The Hayward Gallery’s ‘Wide Open School’

particularly relevant to my research in that it has opened up areas for debate around the learning between artists: the ethics of diverse situations of interaction, models for learning in and from art, the place of 'knowledge' in artistic practice and an expansion of and politicisation of that word. Through practice and dialogues artists, curators and academics have also explored notions of radical pedagogy, some of which are highly relevant to informal peer learning and I trust that my research may be pertinent to some of the alternative art school experiments initiated in recent years. In Chapter 4, for example, I analyse artists' peer critique in relation to democratic forms of interaction posited by Paulo Freire (1998) and Jacques Ranciere (1991). The series of events that this wider preoccupation has engendered has also enabled me to expand my research community, and meet artists and researchers with similar concerns, and to test out ideas with this community. Projects and events associated, however loosely, with arts' 'Educational Turn' have fed into my research, and I have used such events as platforms to discuss my work. However, although one of the groups I visited in the course of my research is an independent art school, a study of the structure of such models is a minor concern of this thesis.

Neither am I seeking to explore how artists might teach or share knowledge and experience with diverse publics through their practice. I have been far more concerned with tracing interactions between artists that are not self-consciously regarded as experiments in education, but which can be conceptualised as learning.

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took place between 11<sup>th</sup> June and 11<sup>th</sup> July 2012  
[<http://www.wideopenschool.com/about-school>, accessed 23.07.12].

Neither is my research an experimental form of artistic or curatorial practice in itself (although I do employ multiple research methods, as recorded in Chapter 2), and in this sense it differs from many forms of practice-led research and projects in this area.

### Knowledge(s) in Learning between Artists

I dispute that much of what passes as contemporary art can be convincingly read as a form of knowledge in any meaningful sense. 'Knowledge' is socially defined, and art has – or should have – an awkward and abrasive relation to this official designation. It cannot be suddenly what it officially isn't without losing its relative autonomy in relation to the power structures that confer value. (Suchin, P, 2011)

In this thesis, I would like to think of the phenomenon of knowledge or the process of cognition in its widest sense, as arising from effects of interactions that comprise dialogue, influence through observation, contact and awareness, that encompass thought and practice, and that take into account somatic and emotional experience as well as the acquisition of manual and intellectual skills and information.

I will also discuss attempts at the deployment, organisation, legitimation and negation of all forms of knowledge, with reference to contemporary theories about the performance or assertion of knowledge and the links between learning and social participation suggested by this.

There has been a flowering of interest in this area since the development of the practice-led PhD in art and design in the early 1990s, and several cultural theorists who are also educators have been informative in finding terminologies and theoretical

approaches to explore the links between knowledge and art practice. Clementine Deliss explores “Initiate Knowledge” (2008) in her experimental work with the *Future Academy* (2002), James Elkins (2001) has commented on the lack of consensus on what constitutes knowledge and forms of learning in art practice and Tom Holert (2009) places art research and knowledge within the context of the knowledge economy and asks how a “discursive field” (Holert, 2009, p7) might be established that allows art practice to be taken seriously as a site of knowledge production. In Chapter 5, I consider how tacit and explicit knowledges interrelate in many practice-oriented and social contexts, and what this might mean for access to knowledge through participation.

The artist Elizabeth Price, in a chapter of her thesis, *sidekick*, (2000) manages to communicate the slippages that occur between language and art practice and also the redundancy of an evaluation of the art object with any known criteria (e.g. formal measurements, descriptions of intention). The chapter documents her construction of a huge ‘boulder’ made from packaging tape:

The tactics of the text have obfuscated the memory of producing the boulder. Also notwithstanding that these tactics have included attentive detail, the text does not seem to account for the thing with anything like the necessary particularity. The economies of prose: the choice and use of terms; the deployment of influence of explicit and implicit factors: the concerns of tone, of structure and of composition, the organisation of material according to the logic of a narrative (encounter this first, then this, then this and so on) are just all too unwieldy. The nervous craft of writing (of later being read) is just not generous enough. (Price, 2000, p130)

This raises questions about knowledge as a measurable commodity with regard to visual art practices, as in the “knowledge economy” and the psycho-somatic landscape of

practice that may be negated by such a framework. I support the view of art as a practice that can be purposive in and of itself, but also appreciate its potential as a form of research towards “New Knowledge” (Niederer and Reilly, 2007).

Kolb predicates the formation of knowledge on a process of integrative reflection:

Learning, the creation of knowledge and meaning occurs through the active extension and grounding of ideas *and* experience in the external world and through internal reflection about the attributes of these experiences and ideas. (Kolb, 1984, p52)

I concur with both Kolb and Wenger on the role of action and reflection (Kolb, 1984) or participation and reification (Wenger, 1999) as a dynamic continuum in the formation of knowledge. My study will also address how forms of tacit or embodied knowledge and explicit knowledge interact and how they may be catalysed in different ways in different individuals, perhaps by artworks, perhaps through collaborative working, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Although I mention tacit knowledge and its interrelation with explicit knowledge on many occasions and I am aware of Michael Polanyi’s foundational work on the tacit, (Polanyi, 1974), I have approached this theme from the perspective of more recent writers, such as Wenger (1998), Deliss (2008) and others.

### Learning Theories and Non-Formal Learning Between Artists Learning as Entanglement, Engagement and Participation

By looking at the entanglements artists work within, I am also looking at situations of engagement or participation. My study has become to some extent an analysis of forms of participation in art



worlds, and I have turned to contemporary art theory and analysis as a way of helping me to portray debates about participation.

Writers such as Claire Bishop, Grant Kester and Jorella Andrews have both celebrated and put into question situations of participation between *audiences* and artworks. My ideas about the possible effects of participation in *artistic* communities are informed by these arguments, in particular the belief that participation alone is not adequate for effects to be felt, that it is the power dynamics, the structure, context and the objects comprising situations that determine the way in which participants are affected by that situation. I am interested in this idea of learning through difficulty or antagonism, through difference as well as through harmony, and in Chapter 4 I explore the need to introduce challenge and critique to deliberately disrupt practice.

Jorella Andrews raises questions about ways of learning that draw on ideas of “rubbing up against”, that are not cumulative or transfer-oriented but require listening and dwelling with both objects and others:

Attending to the personal and personalised aspects of our lives means also becoming conscious of the actuality and singularity of other people, things, situations and information-flows. (Andrews, 2006, p182)

She is interested in “entanglement” but in an entanglement inasmuch as it may challenge, excite or provoke us. According to Andrews:

Personalised and participatory practices should not be idealised in and of themselves. Secondly, it is that learning is not fundamentally a matter of consolidating already embedded patterns of thought, but of questioning and possibly departing from them. (Andrews, 2006, p181)

In Jorella Andrew’s writing on “Critical Materialities” (2007), she asks how seemingly inactive phenomena can effect change. She

investigates how a flow of movements can be enabled in educational settings:

It is, above all, a question of individual locatedness and singularised questings in the midst of many other, similarly unstable materialised positionings and self-showings, with the aim of provoking thought and interaction. (Andrews, 2007, Summit.org)

Andrews presents entanglements as situations that can be sites of instability and therefore starting points for the initiation of change or difference. I would like to diverge from and extend this idea to one where entanglements can be both stable and unstable, tight and loose in collective social situations, rather than the situations of creative reception that principally concern Andrews.

I see “entanglements” as an appropriate word for describing the nature of interactions that occur through engagement with art practice and dialogue, where effects of proximity and exchange can be felt for the time that those practices and dialogues weave artists together. Artists may be tightly bound together for a period of time, threads touching upon one another, and loosely tangled with others and aware of others’ movements and influence.

These ideas are particularly relevant to my thinking in Chapter 4 about processes of inspiration, chance meetings and proximity of artists to one another in groups and studio environments. I explore artists’ awareness of one another through networks, both online and face-to-face, as well as ideas about learning through “jamming” as in contriving repeated responses to one another’s ideas and practices.

I am particularly drawn to Mezirow’s ideas about transformative learning that emphasise “cumulative” rather than “epochal” change (Mezirow, 2006), and to Grant Kester’s imagining of incremental learning over time, informed by a series of situations and encounters:

We (...) need a way to understand how identity might change over time – not through some instantaneous thunderclap of insight but through a more subtle and no doubt imperfect process of collectively generated and accumulatively experienced transformation. (Kester, 2004, p123).

## Participation - Social Constructionism, Situated Learning in Communities of Practice

Theories such as Social Constructionist and “Situated Learning” in “Communities of Practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) are relevant to my research for a variety of reasons.

They privilege the social situation as a site where knowledge is constructed and where learning occurs as a result of the dynamics of that situation, rather than predicating learning on the intentional transfer and acquisition of knowledge that forms the basis of the traditional pedagogical relationship. Fieldwork in this area has focussed on close analysis of interpersonal dynamics in work situations such as offices (Wenger, 1998) or apprenticeships (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which makes these texts relevant for situations of learning outside of the academy. Emphasis on informal exchange between colleagues establishes and reinforces norms, beliefs and practices that exist alongside more explicit, formal institutional mechanisms of control.

We suggest that learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community. Because the place of knowledge is within a community of practice, questions of learning must be addressed within the developmental cycles of that community, a recommendation that creates a diagnostic tool for distinguishing among communities of practice. (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p100)

Lave and Wenger question learning as a process of internalisation and the emphasis this places on the mind rather than the body.

Again, many of the situations that I have participated in and

discussed with participants have relied on active physical (as well as mental) involvement in a social setting, often with art production or group organisation / facilitation being a significant dimension of a broader *experience*, comprising mental, physical and emotional qualities and intentional periods of collective reflection:

Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction – indeed, are mutually constitutive. The notion of participation thus dissolves dichotomies between cerebral and embodied activity, between contemplation and involvement, between abstraction and experience. (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p51)

These more contemporary theories reflect poststructuralist thinking on identity and the unstable nature of knowledge and meaning; the construction and ‘reification’ of meaning is contingent upon the situational context, the plethora of knowledges, practices and beliefs contributed by individuals and the interactions that occur between those individuals. They also question notions of a stable self:

It is by the theoretical process of decentering in relational terms that one can construct a robust notion of “whole person” which does justice to the multiple relations through which persons define themselves in practice. (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p53)

- and privilege process-orientated learning or the coming-into-being of identity as discussed in Chapter 3, rather than learning as product and the learner as a stable recipient of accumulated knowledge.

Conceiving of learning in terms of participation focuses attention on ways in which it is an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations; this is, of course, consistent with a relational view, of persons, their actions, and the world, typical of a theory of social practice. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p50)

This approach seems appropriate to discuss ever-changing social constellations and clusters, a landscape I explore more closely in Chapter 4. It suits an analysis of the temporary communities of artists that configure and reconfigure around different “projects”, many relatively short-term, and the evolving relationships that such clusterings precipitate.

A social-constructionist approach becomes particularly relevant to situations between artists where the coalescence of single authoritative meanings is often resisted and ambiguity of interpretation is readily tolerated, as in artists’ peer critiques. Lave and Wenger stress that meaning formation (based on integrated social participation and reification processes) is predicated on the socio-historical and cultural milieu of the participants. This approach is consistent with my desire to identify tendencies in meaning formation that I believe are particular to contemporary art communities.

I acknowledge the danger of overemphasis on individual agency as I have spent more time recording the reflections of individuals on social situations, rather than recording all the nuances of those situations as they occur. Where possible, I have tried to be present at a selection of events such as peer critiques, exhibitions and talks and to describe my own experiences of informal situations. Gergen and Gergen have emphasised the congruity between participative action research methods and theories of social construction. The authors emphasise the collaborative nature of research and do not recognise an exclusivity of interests between “professional” researchers and non-professional participants. Moreover, they advocate a shared “pluralist and instrumentalist view of knowledge”, (Gergen and Gergen in Bradbury and Reason, 2008, p. 166):

This shift from an individualist to a collectivist orientation to research is in full harmony with the constructionist account of knowledge formation. (Gergen and Gergen , 2008, p.164)

The limitation of social-constructionism, however, rests in its emphasis on discourse and the expression of meaning via language.

### Network Theories and Learning

Like the Communities of Practice model, much theory related to organisational learning and networks is centred around work-based learning. Therefore it took me some time to be able to locate relevant sources on social configurations that are both temporary and flexible and also embedded in their contexts through repeated project-based interactions. Moreover, network theories around peer learning focus heavily on peer-to-peer interactions online, such as the Open Source movement. While online networking is relevant to my study, I have found that it is related far more often to promotion, documentation and connectivity, often supplementary to face-to-face contact or real-world events; rather than to situations of collaborative production online.

However, I have found several pertinent texts within the field of organisational learning and network theory: Rossiter (2006) has informed my thinking on power within networks, while Granovetter's work on "weak ties" (1983) helped me to conceptualise links within larger membership groups, particularly when integrated with writing on communal bonds and social capital. Uzzi and Spiro's theories of "small-world networks" in Hollywood (2005) helped me to describe homogeneity within

groups in Chapter 4, while Wittel (2001) introduced me to the idea of “networked sociality”, as mentioned in Chapter 5.

### Experiential Learning and Art

There are numerous educational and psychological analyses of the place of experience, and reflection upon experience. John Dewey (1934, 1938) made direct links between art and learning from experience and, in particular, to the democratic organisation of the educational experience. Carl Roger’s psychological theories and Abraham Maslow’s theory of self-actualisation influenced later educationalists such as Mezirow (2006) in his work on transformative learning through critical reflection on experience.

I have been engaged with how experience is reflected upon, contextualised, valued, censored, altered, deployed and enjoyed in particular contexts. I am concerned with how experience constitutes art practice development, for example in the collaborations explored in Chapter 4, but also in the role collective experiences can play in the context of self-directed career trajectories, as evidenced in Chapter 5.

Although artists may have experienced the same formal structures (peer critiques, artists talks etc.) during their college education, and may participate in similar events beyond these academic institutions, many other encounters and experiences will have no former precedent for them, particularly experiences of self-organisation.

Artists may share certain common tools and institutions that they use in the development of their practice (residencies, funding applications, competitions, exhibitions, promotion etc). However,

for each individual artist the particular *configuration* of each situation will differ. Therefore, when referring to experiential learning I am keen to stress the unique context of specific situations.

### The Relevance of Theories of 'Radical Pedagogy'

I have familiarised myself with certain classic works of critical or radical pedagogy, particularly as these, rather than contemporary texts on educational theory, recur on the “reading list” of influences associated with the “Educational Turn”<sup>9</sup> (O’Neill and Wilson, 2010) in contemporary art, its accompanying events, exhibitions and discourses.

Texts such as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) by Jacques Ranciere, *Deschooling Society* (1971) by Ivan Illich and *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) by Paulo Freire all question forms of institutionalised learning and power dynamics between student and teacher. They examine practices of learning or as Freire terms it, “praxis” that can oppose existing norms and power structures in education, a theme I have discussed further in relation to peer critique in Chapter 4. These thinkers also emphasise the importance of play, the critical potential and the “conviviality” (Illich, 1973, 1974) of the social sphere. I see this as consistent with

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<sup>9</sup> Short Term Solutions (a collective comprised of The Independent Art School, Free School and Free Press) created a series of monthly events in 2010 involving guest alternative art institutions. The Independent Art School Reading Group was one of these and includes reading Illich’s *Deschooling Society*.

*Deschooling Society* was also the title of a conference at the Hayward gallery (in partnership with the Serpentine) in April 2010. In 2007 Artforum devoted a large part of the journal to an in-depth look at the relationship of Jacques Ranciere’s writing to contemporary art, and the philosopher was also asked to speak at the ICA in February 2007.



the deliberate elision of the social and the professional in spaces for reflection and speculation between respondents in my study.

### Philosophical Perspectives

Although I have drawn on sociological and educational theory, as well as art and cultural theory, no single specialist area is able to fully portray these nuances. My mixed methodology approach is corroborated by social scientist, Bent Flyvbjerg:

I avoid linking the case with the theories of any one academic specialization. Instead, I relate the case to broader philosophical positions that cut across specializations. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p241)

Because of the absence of a field-specific approach, I have at times, turned to philosophy as a way of talking about the ethics and politics of encounters and their ontological and epistemological effects, without relying too heavily on discipline-specific terminologies. These terminologies can be inadequate for addressing this blend of the formal/informal professional/social discursive/somatic dimensions of entanglements.

In Chapter 4, I refer to Ranciere (1991, 2010) in relation to the power politics between participants, facilitators and artworks in peer critiques. I work with Ricouer's (1992) writing on the formation of narrative threads in relation to identity and subjectivity formation in Chapter 3, and in Chapter 4 I call upon Derrida's comments on hospitality (1997, 2000, 2001) towards an analysis of behaviours and ethics within artists' inter-subjective relations. In Chapter 4 I look at Mouffe's (2007) ideas about alterity within collectives in relation to ideas about "agonistic" democratic structures. Although I do not always concur with the extremity of

Bourdieu's theories on the artworld as a battleground, (Bourdieu, 1993), I cite the author in relation to his reflections on "consecration" within the field of art practice.

I have also considered the writing of cultural commentators on friendship (Vernon, 2005) and narratives about collaborative circles (Farrell, 2003). These two authors have focussed on creative biographies, underpinned by philosophy and popular psychology rather than employing academic sociological and psychological analyses.

### Work, Precarity and Artists' Post-Formal Learning

A large body of literature on the "creative industries" centres on the tension between the apparent freedom that freelance, project-based work patterns allow and the anxieties and privation arising from low-pay, financial and personal insecurity:

In the cultural sector, those up to the age of approximately 40 now normatively self-exploit themselves by working hours no employer could legally enforce; they also do without all the protection afforded by employee status, including sickness benefits; they are largely non-unionized; they are expected to take out private pension plans (which many cannot afford to do); they are unable to claim benefits for non-work time between jobs or 'projects'; and they also cover their own workspace and equipment costs. All of this in the hope of talent paying off. (McRobbie in du Gay, P, 2001, p.101)

I share Mark Banks's emphasis upon the agency of the cultural worker whose motives for practice are not economically driven:

The practitioner who wishes to acquire internal goods must seek to reproduce the practice and serve the community of practitioners. (Banks, 2007, p110)

I address the positive and negative reflections on working and practicing in a field that is increasingly project or event-based, and ask: How do artists learn to negotiate the concatenation of events that can make up a 'practice'?

I intend to reaffirm artists' individual and collective agency within the economic and social landscape. However, I want to trace how respondents look to their peers within and without existing structures, both to manage their choices, expectations and opportunities, and also to resist work-related pressures through the construction of situations based on interaction around practice.

It has been argued that in the "knowledge economy" model (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997), the orientation of learning within the arts has shifted from learning within a certain *calling* to an emphasis on the acquisition of marketable competencies for demonstration in professional practice:

Educational processes become individualised, reconstituted as market relationship between producer and consumer. Knowledge is exchanged on the basis of the performative value it has for the consumer. (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p14)

Accompanying these arguments are those that pivot on the notion of the body of the artist as producer of "performative value", namely, Hardt and Negri's idea of "affective labour" (Hardt and Negri, 2000) and its exploitation, and ideas of social capital (Field, 2003, Fine, 2001) in terms of the marketisation of social networks and learning.

Also of urgent contemporary relevance to an analysis of networked learning and "portfolio career" patterns is the notion of "precarity", as applied to patterns of living and working that appear to lack stability or sustainability, (Banks, 2007, McRobbie, 2000). Through the words of my respondents and through my own experience I have attempted to reveal the loci of power in these

distributed networks of activity and to assess how the present *organisation* of interaction (involving both artist-led and other organisational / institutional agencies) affects learning processes between constituent artists. For example, in Chapter 4 I explore how organisationally facilitated membership groups may be influenced by an idea of artist-led culture, but how an idea of transient participation underpins their functioning. In Chapter 3: *Identities*, I explore the conscious suspension of practice identities and the organisation of meaning contingent thereupon:

The real subordination of activity to capitalist valorisation that Marx describes cannot function with the cooperation between minds. It can only appropriate the organization of difference and repetition formally; in other words, it can make incursions in the archipelago, in the patchworks, in the network of subjectivities and 'communities' – but it cannot draw the map of the archipelago or patchwork, nor create forms of life. (Lazzarato, 2004, p205)

Lazzarato highlights the potentially radical role of sympathetic affinities in creative collective togetherness and the themes of conviviality, love and friendship provide a vital dimension to the processes of learning explored in this study.

I explore the formation of encounters, relationships and ideas of “community” amongst respondents in Chapter 4, while in Chapter 5, I address questions pertaining to communication and the performativity of knowledge, with reference to Lazzarato and Berardi (2009). I reflect upon artists’ comments on their need for visibility and the perceived pressures to manage their practice as a brand. I look at how they might learn strategies for making themselves and their practices visible to particular groups or individuals and the sometimes contentious crossovers between self-organisation and self-promotion, situations where, as Lazzarato puts it:

the investments in the expression machine can well exceed the investments in 'labour'. (Lazzarato, 2004, p189)

I am interested in the context of artists learning, both in terms of the links that are being made with learning and “social capital” (Field, 2005) and the flexibility, freedom and desire to work on the self as a “reflexive project” (Giddens, 1991, p32), supposedly demanded by the new western workforce in recent texts, such as Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2003). However, in Chapter 3, I present the formation of practice identities as a kind of narrative synthesis (Ricoeur, 1992, Wittel, 2001) that accrues over time, in relation to others through the pursuit of both individual and collective aims.

I am also aware that the way in which contemporary arts practitioners learn from one another may be unique to the discipline of art or of ‘Fine Art’ in particular, partly due to the sociable, relatively unstructured and more self-determined nature of Fine Art education.

Recent studies, such as NESTA’s ‘The art of innovation: How fine arts graduates contribute to innovation’ (Oakley, Sperry & Pratt, 2008) explore these areas in more depth, but have been criticized for the application of the terminology of the market to artists’ activities (McRobbie and Forkert, 2009). With this in mind, in Chapter 2 I am keen to develop a lexicon to describe spaces and situations of learning without resorting wholly to the language of formal education or the language of continuing professional development. I am also aware that peer-to-peer learning is currently being piloted at all levels of formal education.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See: University of the West of England Peer Assisted Learning Scheme: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/students/studysupport/peerassistedlearning.aspx> [accessed 23.07.12]

## Political Context

I have familiarised myself with governmental policies that have impacted on arts and arts education and employment under New Labour and during the Liberal Democrat/Conservative Coalition in order to determine whether policy rhetoric is reflected in the experience of research participants.

From 1997 until 2010 the Labour government developed the concept of the “Creative Industries”. The term emerged from ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947) that represents culture as fully integrated with and at the service of, monopoly Capitalism. Since the shift from “Culture Industry” to “cultural industries” a more complex taxonomy has developed of the differing types of cultural products and their relationship to different markets, forms of dissemination and types of value.

Markets have proliferated to respond to ever more specialised niches. Global mobility has increased and increasingly variegated social and spatial layers have become networked due to developments in communications technologies. The value of “untraded externalities” (O’Connor, 2007/10, p34) now includes phenomena such as trust, social cohesion and tacit knowledge as “social capital” (Putnam, 2000), a phenomenon I address in Chapters 2 and 5 in relation to both collective and individual learning.

The New Labour policy period formed the immediate background for the working conditions for my study. Between 1998 and 2008, the Labour government and Arts Council England sought to map creative practice in terms of its potential economic viability, beginning with the DCMS Creative Industries

Mapping documents of 1998 and 2001. These concentrate on international art dealing in antiques, and define art as painting, drawing, prints, sculpture and ceramics. They do not touch upon the market that surrounds the production of contemporary art or galleries, publications, public art initiatives and other contemporary art-related activities.

Then in 2004, ACE produced both *Market Matters* by Louisa Buck and *Taste Buds* (Hargreaves, McIntyre and Morris, 2004). These were attempts to scrutinise the contemporary art world more closely and make it clear to the layman that there were different sorts of value to be accrued by artists by placing their activities within an economic framework:

In general, artists can be seen as highly efficient micro businesses which, often on the slenderest of means, are able to convert creative value into commercial worth. This covers a breadth of practice that spans artists working in different contexts, in spaces orthodox and unorthodox, whose work may or may not be destined for the art market. (Buck, 2004, p22)

The papers also embedded artists' relationships with their peers in this economic model, as one of the means by which artists gain "subscription" (Buck, 2004), but conceded that around a third of artists resisted selling their work privately and the majority stated they made art for the public sector (TB, 2004, p8). Both papers were largely oriented towards artists in London, and regional artists were depicted as being at a disadvantage both in terms of the accrual of "subscription" and in terms of gaining financial remuneration for their work, (TB, 2004, p12). In Chapter 5, I make a critical examination of this notion of subscription as it may relate to artists' peer interactions.

In 2006 DCMS produced *Developing Entrepreneurship for the Creative Industries: The Role of Further and Higher Education*, a paper

that linked the Creative Industries with the UK economy and fostering of entrepreneurship through education. I expand upon this in Chapter 2. The report referred to:

- tensions between creative expression and commercial realities whereby academic staff and students are uncomfortable with the perceived conflicts between creative freedom and real-world utility. (DECI, 2006, p7)

Between April 2008 and March 2011 the *ACE Turning Point* Network had been developed, a pilot project to develop a 10 year visual arts strategy:

The strategy has five priorities:

- audiences, participation and education
- support for artists
- innovation and risk
- diversity and leadership
- places, spaces and partnerships. (TP, 2006, p6)

The emphasis upon innovation, entrepreneurship amongst artists, non-arts partnerships and the development of regional art markets has increased as public funding to the arts has been depleted.

Labour continued to attempt to make the case for the place of the Creative Industries in the UK economy and the place of art within the creative industries.<sup>11</sup> However, with the onset of recession from 2009, the change of government in 2010 and subsequent cuts in arts and education funding, the landscape in which I have pursued this study has altered very rapidly. By the time I had completed the majority of my fieldwork in October

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Note the following documents written or commissioned by DCMS in 2008 and 9:

DCMS, 2008, *Creative Britain: New Talents for a New Economy*  
NESTA, 2008, *Hidden Innovation in the Creative Industries*  
NESTA, 2008, *The Art of Innovation*  
Creative and Cultural Skills, 2009, *Visual Arts Blueprint*



2010, the Lib Dem/Conservative Coalition government were announcing the details of proposed cuts to the arts and education. This included major cuts to ACE's budget, a move that would directly affect all regularly funded arts organisations, including Spike Island, my partner organisation in the PhD, who receive 22% of their funds from Arts Council England.

This was paralleled by the implementation of recommendations in the Labour-commissioned Browne Report on Education (Browne, 2010), the removal of the cap on tuition fees across England and subsequent funding cuts and restructuring of higher education institutions. This has, of course, changed the landscape in which artists train, practice and work to support their practice and the resultant situation has implications for the place of both arts organisations and artist-led groups as well as for more formalised sites of further learning.

Other researchers working in overlapping fields include:

Andy Abbott from Leeds University who has recently completed a doctorate on Self-Organisation in Art. We have both considered social interaction and structural organisation in artist-led initiatives; Sophie Hope, who has recently been awarded a doctorate on Cultural Democracy and Socially-Engaged Practice from Birkbeck University. We have both looked at themes of critical pedagogy and criticism as it relates to interaction between artists and, in Sophie's case, between artists and the public. Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson have recently published *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010) and Kirsten Forkert is completing a PhD at Goldsmiths about artists' work and precarity.

## Methodology

### Approach

Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals. (Flyvberg, 2006, p224)

Informed by Bent Flyvberg's belief in the irreducibility of good case narratives, I have aimed to obtain nuanced descriptions of art practice and the interactions that surround and intersect practice from a number of artists in both individual and collective situations. I have been primarily interested in gaining a detailed understanding of the field through working and socialising within it as an active participant. I regard this as taking a mixed-methods approach reliant on "thick" description and have further interrogated my own ideas using various research methods ranging from participatory action research to participant observation.

Particularly relevant to my research into post-formal learning in art contexts, are theories which foreground the importance to learning of participation in social situations. This extends to my own approach to research, where I have chosen to be an active participant in networks and communities, whilst also observing my own response and the responses of others to a variety of situations. Without this level of participation I would not have adequately understood the situations that affect artists and therefore the learning processes that occur. Working with the Spike Associates Co-ordinator I have helped to plan and facilitate peer critiques, workshops and events and carried out administration for the group. I have also facilitated the Associates Reading Group for two years. While these roles have fulfilled my

responsibilities towards Spike Island as the industry partner in my collaborative doctorate, through friendships and entanglements that developed as a result of my growing familiarity with the artistic networks contingent upon Spike Island I have also co-initiated several collaborative projects.

These projects have primarily been self-organised, but supported in various ways by organisations. They include *Tertulia*, *Reading for Reading's Sake* and *Art + Writing*. Lastly, I have deliberately constructed certain discussion-based events in order to elicit information that I believed would clarify certain areas of my research (e.g. Membership Groups Debate) and that would, at the same time benefit or interest Associates members. In the sections below, I make a closer analysis of my participation in these projects and Associates work in terms of participatory action research methods and participant observation.

I have been sensitive to the differing levels of formality and informality, spontaneity and premeditated planning that have shaped these projects and, for the purposes of gathering fieldwork data have always declared to participants when I wished to treat situations as subjects for research, seeking consent accordingly as outlined in the Research Ethics section below. However, I have also reflected upon the experience of my involvement in artistic networks in more general ways that have not required me to mention specific practitioners.

The need I have felt to be continually aware of relevant projects, my need to participate to differing degrees in different situations and the need for sensitive and reflexive responses to new information, constructed knowledge and changing group dynamics have led me to think of my research as akin to a creative practice. I have attempted to weave together a series of meaningful

and coherent narratives from groups and organisational structures in constant development, from episodic artist-led actions and objects and from an array of knowledge domains. My research is an amalgamation of all of these influences, yet, as with an artistic practice, it also attempts to effectively express tacit knowledge and experience.

At the level of ethnographic microanalysis, the ontological approach I take is centred around the encounter, and the ways in which it affects those that become entangled together. From an epistemological perspective, I analyse the effects of entanglements in terms of the co-construction of meaning and ask whether relational processes can always be regarded in terms of learning.

I think of learning as a durational process, which leaves a trace or affect and is contingent on several conditions, as an encounter or a series of encounters with *other people* (intentional or incidental, through verbal exchange, physical proximity, influence through reputation, online interaction, etc.), and with *practice and the objects of practice* (with art objects, performative and functional actions, bureaucratic processes, technologies, texts etc.). I analyse the effects of these encounters upon myself as well as upon participants.

My approach is akin to Actor-Network theory in that I regard objects, as well as people to be “actants” within a situation; other “actants” (Latour, 2005) include artworks, spaces and buildings, all phenomena that act as mediators, which have an effect or leave a trace. Latour recommends the spreading out of phenomena across a horizontal (plane?) in order to be able to acknowledge the full complexity of webs of affect. However, I do not adopt the wholehearted rigour of the ANT approach and am interested rather in being able to trace affects as dimensions of a

more protracted process(es) to which the term “learning” can be applied. Like Latour I am reluctant to reify the network as an *a priori* structure which determines action within it, but prefer to concentrate on areas of movement, obstacles and lacunae that may be also networked connections to people, places and objects as starting points that catalyse affects and therefore contribute to the emergent structure of networks.

For example, these could include mediating points of access to networks or groups, (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) through technologies, organisational facilitation or friendship:

(...) we can state (...) that all the actors we are going to deploy might be associated in such a way that they make others do things. This is done not by transporting a force that would remain the same throughout as some sort of faithful intermediary, but by generating transformations manifested by the many unexpected events triggered in the other mediators that follow them along the line (...) a concatenation of mediators does not trace the same connections and does not require the same type of explanations as a retinue of intermediaries transporting a cause. (Latour, 2005, p207)

The politics, ethics and philosophy of situations of collective engagement between artists are complicated by the nature of the field; in art worlds formal and informal, social and professional milieus often co-exist. Therefore, the ‘rules’ of engagement are necessarily nuanced according to specific contexts. To negotiate this environment requires a familiarity with the practices of the field and an awareness of the interrelationships at work, both forms of knowledge that can be constructed in a partially tacit, partially explicit fashion, as discussed in Chapter 5.

## Entanglement as a Research Strategy

Making a textual account of experiences of another's practice and interaction is problematic in that it privileges language and the respondent's ability to be able to express themselves, and any effect upon them using language. So, I also wanted to reflect upon my own experiences and the effects that I felt came from these. The difficulty of expressing or conceptualising knowledge contingent upon art practice is illustrated by the following experience:

During my research period, in a studio where I was based, I saw a video installation, a cello case lined with patterned velvet in which a screen had been installed. On the screen a film played. It depicted a falling ribbon, red against the black velvet backdrop, dropping and looping gently until the screen was full of the red ribboned folds. Watching the video (an act which necessitated the posture of crouching down in a corner to see it) *affected* me in a way that I cannot *adequately* described using language. I could talk about the feelings of softness communicated, about the effects on my body and emotions of process, a sense of completion, fullness, etc. I could draw analogies and make associations. These would all be ways of talking *around* the work, but would not be equivalent to the work or even a satisfactory illustration of it. Moreover, I am affected differently (and cumulatively) by the work the longer I sit with it.

Something is produced between the work and myself, but how can that experience be described? I have learnt something about the expression of softness and about the possibilities of expression, about my reactions to an image: emotional, physical and intellectual. I have the feeling that I have shared something. I

am inspired and I want to write something, to create something myself. I am now “carrying” something I want to communicate.

I see this experience as one way of learning both from the artist and from her work while recognising that my experience may be quite different from that of any other viewer. To use the terminology of Bruno Latour, in this chain or network of interactions, the work is an *actant*, the artist is an *actant* and I am an *actant*. However, can I fully *comprehend* the knowledge I am carrying? In Chapter 4, I attempt to describe some of the collaborative encounters contingent upon practice in terms of a cumulatively built experience in a kind of ‘third space’ between artists and to a large extent I rely on respondents’ own words to define the dimensions of this experience.

Similarly, to describe the discrete parts does not adequately capture the summation of a dynamic emergent internal logic that is contingent upon practice, that tells the artist when something may be ‘resolved’, when to leave off, when it is ‘working’ or ‘not working’, all feelings I discuss in my thesis.

### Development of Research Questions:

Below, I discuss how the following research questions were developed:

How do artists construct and maintain situations of interaction around art practice?

How do these situations affirm and progress both the development of their practice and their sense of an artistic subjectivity?

What are the recurrent features of these interactions: cognitive, emotional and physical?

Can these situations be conceptualised as learning and if so, how?

At the outset of my research I constructed my questions around limited situations of artists' interaction, hoping to create a boundary around the enquiry by only looking at interaction within membership groups (such as the Spike Associates or Eastside Projects) or artist-led groups, thereby having some control over its scope. However, as Hammersley and Atkinson note:

In ethnographic research the development of research problems is rarely completed before fieldwork begins; indeed, the collection of primary data often plays a key role in that process of development. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p37)

Following pilot interviews I appreciated that interaction was not bounded in this sense. Affiliations that I deemed to be significant to respondents' development as practitioners spread messily across different interactions from clusters of friends to established groups. This tallied with my own experience of meeting potential collaborative partners in many different situations.

I was reluctant to let go of the term "learning", as it appeared in the original studentship brief, but as I engaged with respondents in events and through interviews I became increasingly interested in the qualities and structure of situations of interaction between artists and could appreciate that 'learning' was not often the primary motivation for respondents, but rather an occurrence that resulted from interaction.

Similarly, I started to deconstruct the word 'knowledge' as I became entangled with notions of inspiration, influence, motivation, failure and other effects. It was not simply the acquisition or passing on of explicitly articulated 'knowledge' that affected respondents, but a multi-faceted, distributed *experience*,



that was not always easy to describe in epistemological terms. I therefore altered my research questions to incorporate an interrogation of the experiences of practice and projects, as much as information gathered from peers.

A more detailed description of my interviews as they relate to the development of research questions and the development of themes can be found below in sections on 'Interviews' and 'Data Analysis'. These clarify how I came to re-root my questions in a more basic interrogative: what situations did artists construct to engage their peers, why did they construct these situations and how did these situations aid the development of their practice?

### Selection of and Access to Participants

Traditional ethnographic advice about the advantage of the sponsor and gatekeeper" figure for gaining access to participants (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p63) became less relevant to me as Spike Island itself became a 'sponsor'. As discussed in Chapter 5, many of the groups I visited recognised the Spike Associates name and expressed admiration for the model of the Associates. I believe that my institutional affiliations and my status as a researcher attached to the institution already inspired interest in other artists that may have facilitated further meetings. What is more, my work in the Associates gave me a role as both an actor in and potential facilitator of artists' professional development and inter-group connections. This role and Spike Island's reputation for having maintained links with the artist-led environment out of which it had developed, was advantageous to relationships with artists both locally and further-afield.

Before I had come to know any of the Associates individually I was aware that, as I was new to the organisation, some members would be more assertive and would perhaps be more adept at promoting their practice than others. I would be more likely to notice them and consider them as potential participants simply because I could see the physical manifestations of their collaborations and peer engagements.

The ability to network and socialise effectively is often considered to be a necessary skill for progressing in art careers (Oakley, Sperry and Pratt, 2008), but I knew that there would be 'quieter' forms of peer engagement and peer awareness that would not be evidenced so easily. Nor did I simply want to interview artists whom I had come to be familiar with most quickly simply because of their assertiveness. I therefore decided to take a random sample of around one third of the Associates group at the time of starting to interview.

In addition, I had a small selection of interviewees, chosen according to certain criteria. These included artists who had initiated or engaged in a situation or series of situations in Bristol that engaged a collection of other practitioners, and that I considered to be important in terms of peer learning processes taking place in or as a result of, these situations. Situations included peer critique groups, short and long-term artist-led spaces for exhibition and production, temporary artist-led events and 'nomadic' groups, which had grown around a certain practice.

This expanded selection of participants within Bristol (but outside of the Associates group) was also selected because they had been spoken about or recommended by the artists with whom I was interacting on a daily basis in the networks contingent upon

Spike Island. I relied to some extent upon the judgement of the Associate interviewees to help me to identify artists whom they believed were initiating or had initiated significant developmental situations around practice for themselves and their peers. It also seemed appropriate to the field to operate within this economy of reputation, as well as exercising my own judgement.

Part of my research then has been an in-depth exploration of the Associates and artists' activities in Bristol. I wanted to see how this arts 'ecology' compared with those of other regional cities, but knew that the time constraints of the PhD and the unique position I held at Spike Island meant that I could not repeat the research in another city in sufficient depth to make my study a detailed comparison of two contexts. I was also aware that the elements of my research that were embedded in the Associates group as a structural framework would be influenced by this framework, and that this model of an institutionally-formed and supported membership group was still unusual in the UK; the few comparable groups I identified that did exist operated in different contexts from different initial starting points. It seemed to be more productive to look at a range of groups in less depth, both as sources of comparison and as parallel narratives.

At present, in the UK there is a greater proliferation of autonomous artist-led groups than organisationally facilitated membership groups. I assumed that these groups were hugely important sites of peer learning for artists and to test this out, I decided to look at a selection of artist-led groups as well as the Spike Associates and certain similar membership groups.

I mapped out a selection of regional groups that I thought it would be important to study. A further motivation for looking at artist-led groups outside Bristol was that at the beginning of my

fieldwork period such groups were underrepresented in Bristol. One group, Plan 9, had come to an end in its form as a dedicated gallery and events space and another, the Bristol Diving School, was in the process of initial development.

Evidently, by making short trips to different cities to carry out a single interview in each city, I was unlikely to gain the same depth of insight into these groups as I could within Bristol, but I do not think that this in any way rendered my research in these places irrelevant. I considered this broad scattering of disparate artist-led experience to provide important additional information with which to balance the Bristol-centric perspective.

## Data Collection Methods

### Interviewing

Although my research methods have included participatory action research and participant observation, a large part of data gathering has consisted of semi-structured interviews.

The main aim of each interview has been to capture the spectrum of private and more public interactions between artists over a period of time. I did not want to rely entirely on the 'snapshots' I could gain from participating in situations, nor upon my own reflective practice or action research. I interviewed for approximately 50 minutes in order to allow artists to reflect upon their experiences since graduation by identifying significant peer interactions. Interviewing with this autobiographical focus allowed me to piece together both a poly-vocal description of a changing arts scene in Bristol and a nuanced idea of processes and

interactions that participants had experienced over protracted periods.

I am aware that, as an additional site for the reification of and reflection upon experience, the interview process could itself constitute a stage in a process of learning. This was another reason I was attracted to the interview as a research method; it offered the opportunity for the individual artist to privately articulate a disentangling of their experience from what were often complex collective endeavours, as well as the space to describe wider communal processes.

It took me a year to construct a mental map of artistic activity in the city through my engagement with sites, practices and people within Bristol, during which time I conducted some initial pilot interviews to test out research questions.

My interview questions evolved over time as I learned about the reactions of respondents to specific questions, and the responses in turn led to me reducing, altering and synthesising my research questions. My pilot interviews towards the end of my first year of research allowed me to test out initial “sensitizing concepts” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p212).

I learnt important lessons from these original interviews. Initially, I had started to interview with various “higher level” concepts in mind, (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). I later realised that it was not, for example, productive to ask questions about “friendship networks”, or to seek opinions about “exclusions and inclusions”, “aesthetic bias” and the “homogeneity and heterogeneity of groups”. In asking such questions I was expecting respondents to conduct a microanalysis of situations they had experienced based upon my own underlying assumptions. These were assumptions about the structure and dynamics of the

contemporary art world, and the confusion which such questions elicited in interviews reminded me to reappraise the value of studied naivety in research. According to Kvale:

The (...) interview attempts to obtain descriptions that are as comprehensive and presuppositionless as possible of important themes in the interviewee's life world. Rather than the interviewer posing pre-formulated questions with respect to prepared categories for analysis, the qualified naïveté and a bracketing of presuppositions imply openness to new and unexpected phenomena. (Kvale, 2008, p. 12)

I had originally approached the interviews with the idea that there were identifiable bounded sets of clusters of actors, each with specific characteristics, which my respondents would be able to define or recognise. In fact, what transpired which was more relevant and significant to my research on peer learning was that each situation of peer interaction elicited its own entanglement of effects, power dynamics, value systems, practices and knowledges. I initially concentrated on respondents' experiences of peer interaction, why and how they had engaged with their peers and what they had taken from these experiences. Again, whether these experiences could be conceptualised as learning experiences would emerge from respondents' own reflections upon their development, (in terms of their practice, their sense of themselves and their "professional" development).

I concentrated on overall simplification and made questions less deterministic, while experimenting with the form of the interview to see how certain themes and preoccupations recurred. Such thematic recurrences prompted me to focus in on particular themes in later interviews, similarly adjusting the interrogative mode to allow respondents *themselves* to highlight, for example, how questions of time or practice development might be *contingent*

*upon* interaction with peers, rather than assuming that peer interaction already formed an important facet of their practice.

Thinking about learning as predicated on encounters that have subsequent effects, I attempted in my interviewing to map out a personalised landscape of interactions, projects and collaborations centred on the respondent, using their practice as a starting point. See Appendix I for an overview of interview themes and 'Data Analysis' for a more detailed breakdown of questions.

### Participatory Action Research

They move along in a manner one shouldn't move along – the way children move, blindly, figuring out riddles.  
(Ranciere, J. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1991, p10)

Hilary Bradbury Huang defines Action Research as: “an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners” (Huang, 2010, p93). She emphasises Action Research as a potentially transformative tool as well as an analytic one, in that “action researchers seek to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers.” (Ibid.)

My work with the Associates Programme throughout the duration of my PhD can be construed as participatory action research, in that I have had a hand in shaping the programme for the benefit of the members and wherever possible in consultation with them. My reflections on these processes have informed my thesis. I also co-orchestrated certain events as part of my work of facilitating interaction in the Associates group, such as the Associates Annual General Meeting, feedback sessions about

residencies and research trips, reading groups and peer critiques, and, with the consent of participants, recorded certain of these events as part of my data-gathering, (see Appendix II for details).

Huang states the importance of the role of the research participant as co-designer and evaluator of the research. However, I see Action Research as a continuum, whereby in its 'purist' form participants co-construct the research hypothesis and methods as well as participating in the research itself. On another part of the spectrum (and in my own case), the researcher may construct and adjust situations and circumstances in order to test out certain propositions or to learn from these experiments, always incorporating a process of reflexive feedback with participants.

The emphasis that McNiff and Whitehead (2010) place upon improving practice rather than behaviours and on the relationship of values to practice, is particularly pertinent to this field of study of informal peer learning. Indeed, many of the existent situations of peer learning that I analyse could be partially framed as action research in that they take knowledge production and reflection out of legitimised spaces for learning and professional development.

As a result of my entanglement with the contexts of my study, I discovered an aspiration to qualities of interaction that I will argue in this thesis, are implicit to artists' informal peer learning. This includes an aspiration towards reciprocity and generosity, as well as a willingness to reflect upon practice and accommodate critique as a potentially supportive and productive experience.

Structures such as the Spike Associates programme and certain artist-led groups and projects that I have looked at resonate with action research processes, in that part of their purpose is to be



able to respond to and be shaped by the practices and people that comprise them.

I found it difficult to initiate events with a particular research agenda when I started to work for the Associates. Through interviews and increasing participation with members of the group, including involvement in others' projects and the initiation of my own creative projects (see Appendix II for details), I was able to understand the context of my research, perceive the potential for events that would address particular issues in relation to my research and rely more upon the participation of members in these events.

In some instances I co-created platforms where peer learning as a theme could be discussed more widely and I could examine the resulting discourse and test out particular propositions (see Appendix II for details). So, my methods, although not strictly action research (not sure if you are using CAPS or lower case for Action Research throughout) in their design in the sense that Huang outlines, consist of employing an amalgamation of conventional qualitative social science and action research tools. My research (embodies?) the spirit of autobiographical reflexivity used by action researchers to contextualise their assertions and concerns, and I have certainly approached it not as an 'expert' (single or double quotes?), but as an enquirer into the field.

Marja Liisa Swantz refers to "a mutual development of knowledge to understand people's problems" (Swantz in Bradbury and Reason, 2008, p. 33). Artists requested that I facilitated certain discussions for them (See Appendix II for details) and with their consent I sometimes recorded these discussions for research purposes. In these cases I felt that there was a mutual development of knowledge involving myself and

participant artists developing an understanding of practice and the interactions intersecting practice.

Art practice played a vital role in these situations as a leveller and mediator or what Ranciere terms the “thing in common” between us (Ranciere, 1991).

Learning from experience is important in these contexts, as is an acceptance of the co-existence of different interpretations or responses to creative practice and the interactions contingent upon them. In my research contexts, I learnt from a prevalent desire to be comfortable with *not knowing* and an aspiration to accept one’s own responses and those of others as equally valid. Of course this is an *aspiration* both for research and for interaction, but by aspiring to this humility I felt I was better able to discern power differentials when they occurred. Marja Swantz cites incidences where the symbolic life and its contribution to knowledge construction cannot be appreciated without participation in, and identification with, that culture (Swantz, in Bradbury and Reason, 2008).

I argue that to fully understand the emotional dimension of interaction and self-organisation around art practice, and the pleasure in collective creative action as an implicit value of artists’ peer learning, one must oneself be an actor within the field. This also raises questions about language. Specifically in discussions around collaboration, participants would refer to a “gut feeling” or “instinct” about what occurs between them in relation to art works. I believe that at these moments we reach the boundaries of a vocabulary that will fully encapsulate collective/ collaborative experience. Rather than try to reduce these experiences to processes of learning made transparent through language, I have

attempted to describe multi-dimensional entanglements out of which an appreciation of experience emerges.

### Data Analysis

I transcribed a core set of 40 interviews in full and made notes from other recordings. I had also gathered field notes, journal entries and reflective writing from situations of participatory action research (e.g. as debates, reading groups or peer critique sessions). I adopted a Thematic Analysis approach, informed by Corbin and Strauss (2008), based upon an inductive process of creating concepts from raw data.

My research methodology was already based upon a thematic framework in that I had focussed on specific themes in my interviews and was sensitised to particular occurrences and subjects of dialogue during the events in which I participated.

To recap, and to start to illustrate the analytical process, I have annotated below the principal thematic basis of an interview with a member of the Spike Associates in Bristol. This is merely a framework breakdown and does not specify the themes that arise in interviews as a result of intentional strategic questioning to elucidate, expand upon and reflect upon these core areas. Such details will become evident as a breakdown of the analytic method progresses. This also shows the interview framework after pilot interviews, i.e. after certain areas of questioning were discarded and questions were simplified:

A brief definition of the participant's art practice.

Reflections on final year of formal art education and transition period immediately after graduation.

Interactions with other arts practitioners outside of formal education and until the present time (interactions that participants feel are significant for them, i.e. have affected their practice and/or their sense of themselves as an artist). This is the main body of the interview and encompasses self-organised initiatives and/or group participation.

Other roles/jobs outside of being an artist and the peer interactions contingent upon these roles (should they influence the participant's development as an artist).

The participant's reflections on Bristol as a base for their practice.

The participant's reasons for becoming a member of the Spike Associates, and reflections upon their engagement with the group's programme.

The participant's Interactions with artist peers online and use of the Internet in relation to their practice.

The participant's reflections on their development, notions of 'success', 'failure', 'progress'.

The participant's reflections on time in relation to their practice.

What the participant considers most important for the development of their practice or for their development as an artist.

From the interview data, I noted structures and locations, particular relationships, interactions, processes and practices, roles and identities and dimensions of emotion, affect and reflection.

## Coding

As I have made clear, I applied the same process of coding and analysis to all data I used in this thesis. However, the process is best schematised by referring to interview data. Coding consisted of three phases:

Phase 1: Open coding according to thematic sensitisation.

Phase 2: Constructing an analytic scheme themes and sub-themes.

Phase 3: Focus back on research questions and axial coding.

A detailed analysis of these phases appears in Appendix III.

### Strategic Data Analysis

At certain points I felt that the analysis called for me to develop particular concepts, so I asked participants to elaborate upon particular points in interviews and also employed theoretical sampling strategies in events, such as panel discussions and recorded conversations.

An example of strategic data gathering and analysis as informed by previous data analysis can be seen in an interview with artist, Gary. Prior to this interview, I had extrapolated from previous data how in discussion, studio environments, emerged as important 'hubs' for peer interaction. I therefore began to probe more deeply into the qualities of the interaction that occurred in studio groups. Gary comments:

*I think that for the first time there was a supportive structure around the studio. Artists were more readily accessible really. Obviously Bristol's a smaller place and was less going by a cliquey attitude. It was a more supportive, less self-interested attitude.*

I respond:

*Can you elaborate on that a bit? How might you experience that as different?*

Gary replies:

*Well, immediately you have people coming into your studio and wanting to talk about work.*

I ask:

*Just spontaneously?*

Gary replies:

*Spontaneously yes. You know there was more of a social scene that was linked to the studio. Rather than having friends outside the studio, friends were created inside the studio. There was associated events. Obviously having a gallery here would pull artists into a social event...would promote discussion. It was kind of like a hub of like-minded people being discursive.*

Certain themes raised by Gary here resonated with previous data gathering and with my own reflective practice on experiences of studios, themes of friendship and social events around practice as a catalyst for interaction. Emergent concepts included 'friendship', 'supportive structures', 'peer support', 'thinking in common', 'discourse around practice', 'conviviality' and 'access to peers', which I then gathered beneath the higher level concept: 'Peer Relationships and Ideas of an Artistic 'Community', (See Appendix III for details of analytic scheme).

### Theoretical Sampling and Participatory Action Research

A researcher cannot possibly know all the questions to ask when beginning a study. It is only through interaction with the data that relevant questions emerge. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 216)

Corbin and Strauss (2008) advocate, where possible, the continuous alternation between data analysis and data collection, each process informing the other. This was not always possible for me, due to time constraints. However, there were certain points where I was able to focus on emerging concepts arising from the data collected and to intentionally interrogate these concepts in greater depth in subsequent interviews and events.

For example, I noticed that many artists used the words “criticality” and referred to a “critical practice” and that these were seen as positive attributes and sometimes accompanied by the term “rigour” or “rigorous”. As my data collection progressed I became sensitive to a potential tension between ideas of critique and convivial relationships between participants and I felt that, as critique was emerging as an increasingly desirable dimension of peer interactions between artists, I needed to examine with participants what were the connotations attached to this term and its apparent synonyms.

I explored this specifically in a recorded discussion with the artists’ group PoST and members of the Spike Associates, but also went on to interrogate the use of such terms further when they were mentioned in subsequent interviews. In this way the concept of ‘Critique’ became an important dimension of ‘Peer Relationships and Ideas of an Artistic ‘Community’ emerging from the in-vivo codes of ‘criticality’ and ‘rigour’ drawn directly from participants.

At a later date I explored the tensions I sensed between critique and conviviality with some analytical writing, and invited feedback from this and additional viewpoints at the event *Peer, Collaborator, Comrade, Friend!* (30 April 2011, Spike Island). This Membership Groups panel discussion and debate that I orchestrated and chaired on 17 September 2009, was both a method of data analysis or validation and a way of generating further data. I had been attempting, prior to the event, to piece together the reasons and motivations behind the formation of the Spike Associates group. One of the aims of my study was to analyse the effectiveness of the group in terms of artists’ peer learning and to relate exchanges facilitated through this group to

participant members' other informal interactions (e.g. in self-organised groups and projects). I had gleaned a certain amount of information from interviews and primary documentary research, but found that, as the group was established by a steering committee including artists and other artist professionals, and as participants who had engaged with the provenance of the group had experienced it in different ways, I needed to find a way of testing out and modifying the 'overview' I had formed about the origins of the group and getting the input of original committee members. This was partly due to expediency, in that I did not have the time to interview every member as well as my participants, as the emphasis in my research was upon the here and now. It was also a way of creating a dynamic situation in which participants could jog one another's memories and respond to questions from an invited audience also engaged in similar pursuits.

Further questions and concepts then arose from this debate, shaping the existing concepts that I had started to develop.

### Developing Higher Level Concepts and Thesis Structure

I started to gather concepts under various interrelated headings:

- Transitions: particular emphasis on the period immediately after leaving college. How peer interaction affects these transitory periods for participants. Skills acquisition in relation to peers, including ideas of 'professional practice', materials-based learning, and asymmetrical relationships such as mentoring.



- Being with others: relationships and interactions and the qualities of these interactions, dimensions and terms that were applied to these interactions including friendship, critique, “artistic community” or “critical community” (single or double quotes?).
- Visibility of participants and their practice to their peers and the views and ‘overview’ that they are able to gain of the contemporary art landscape from others.
- The construction and development of practice identities in relation to peers and peer practices and the role of peers in the construction of artistic subjectivities.

Certain dimensions of experience, such as a relationship with time and the specificities of location appeared to run throughout these other themes, so I decided to integrate these dimensions into the ongoing analysis rather than contriving to separate them out.

### Visual Elements

As my research has progressed I have realised the role that images could play in illustrating the unique nature and setting of different situations, the relative scale of spaces and the rough configuration of people participating in a situation. However, time constraints have meant that I have been unable to include a comprehensive body of images with an overarching rationale alongside the text. Instead I have inserted a small number of images, each of which illustrates a particular point in the text, clarified in a footnote beneath the relevant image in each case.

Many of the situations in which I have engaged, have been well documented by the artists involved for the purposes of their own publicity and record-keeping on blogs, websites and social networking sites, so I have sourced images directly from participants and requested permission to use them in this context. Because this material is often already in the public domain, artists have readily agreed to my use of their images in my thesis.

I decided not to video-record situations because of my own lack of competence with a video camera, therefore my ability to use it subtly and unobtrusively would have been compromised. I felt that the additional technical paraphernalia would make it harder for me to integrate into situations where I hoped to take the role of participant observer and would have further distanced me from participants, potentially inciting feelings of self-consciousness in those present. Moreover, the subsequent data analysis involved seemed unfeasible in the time allowed.

One of the potential problems of not having video recorded situations in my study is the fact that I cannot carry out a detailed analysis of the way in which people move around spaces and artworks in collective discussions, events or exhibitions. I am reliant upon still images and field notes as well as interview data from people involved in various situations.

### Ethical Considerations

#### Insider-Outsider Position

I began the study with several ethical concerns: would I be seen as speaking on behalf of artists and misrepresenting them by

somehow reducing informal creative processes through the use of academically-legitimised language? Would I be somehow co-opted into promoting a certain institutional agenda, or would I censor myself rather than voice institutional critique? Both concerns relate to a fundamental awkwardness about my position as both an insider and outsider in the research environment, a position that led to certain ethical dilemmas.

I worked for the Associates Programme and saw participants on a weekly basis through my co-facilitation of events, peer critiques, research trips, talks etc., but I also became embedded in the research context through friendship, as members and I became more closely acquainted. To some extent, I saw this growing familiarisation as inevitable because of the blurring between 'professional' and 'social' spheres in art worlds. I would meet participants at private views, which, as I discuss in this thesis, are also social events. I would attend artists' talks with the Spike Associates group, and go to the pub with many of the attendees afterwards. To have adopted a more distanced approach towards participants would, I believe, have been inappropriate for the milieu and would ultimately have impacted negatively on my research.

As I hope to show in my study, the context of contemporary art worlds relies upon informal participation, both social and professional in order to build up trust between artists, and this also applied to me as a researcher. I was therefore concerned with maintaining sufficient critical distance in order to be able to reflect upon situations and gain an overview of contexts, while establishing reflexive processes to monitor the relevance of my meaning making in construction. At the same time I did not want

to alienate participants by employing an over-analytical approach in informal situations.

I could readily identify with the researcher, Caroline Humphrey's discomfort in relation to her experience of feeling, at times, *too much* the insider:

The paradox here is that the insider who is too much of an insider in an organization, in the sense of chairing meetings, writing policies and spearheading campaigns, is likely to jeopardize ethnographic research which dictates that the insider have some surplus capacity for observation, and that the researcher is not simply reflecting upon phenomena which she produced in the first place. (Humphrey, 2007, p16)

Humphrey was a union member researching self-organisation in minority groups within unions and she found that her insider position, while it encouraged trust and candour at the interview stage, also led to expectations on the part of some participants that she would use her "outsider" (single or double quotes) or academic research position to promote certain agendas, agendas which would favour those groups. Her dilemma was one of maintaining a critical stance whilst not alienating completely her various disparate communities:

An insider-outsider who cross-fertilizes the values and views spawned from different life-worlds gives birth to a new world whose contours cannot be known in advance. If she is to become the hyphen, she must preserve attachments to different worlds in order to respect their inner truth, whilst cultivating a non-attachment, which allows for critical and creative growth. (Humphrey, 2007, p23)

The terms of my engagement with the Associates group as part of the collaborative doctorate required that I "feed into" the Associates Programme, promote it and also critically evaluate its effectiveness. I believe that I addressed the potential contradictions inherent in my role by consistently negotiating and renegotiating my engagement with the group (which was, after all only one

aspect of my research). I used my own involvement as an opportunity for reflecting critically on collaboration and learning, by working in negotiation with my colleagues the Associates Co-ordinator and the curator at all times and, with the Associates Co-ordinator, regularly appealing for input and feedback from the group as a whole.

I believe that my proximity to the Associates and familiarity with many of the members, while facilitating access to and ease with participants, became potentially problematic in another way. Despite assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, I believe that participants were sometimes reluctant to share negative feelings that may have implicated mutual acquaintances, due to their perception of my social integration in the community.

Based upon these realisations about the extent of my involvement with participants, I made the following decisions:

- I chose a random selection of Associates to prevent me working purely within particular social networks that I had become connected with.
- I continued to interview artists in other cities with whom I had no previous familiarity, save a mutual awareness of the organisations to which we were affiliated.
- I retained anonymity of individuals (although I was initially advised that this would not be necessary), partly as a means of assuring relative levels of protection should participants feel exposed as a result of voicing negative views about interactions with their peers.

I found that by regularly testing out my research propositions with artists at particular events that were still within the wider artistic field, but distanced temporarily from research participants'

specific projects, I could gain valuable feedback in order to be able to reflect upon my ongoing work.<sup>12</sup>

### Anonymity

I requested interviews with potential respondents via e-mail, attaching a Participant Information Sheet that outlined the aims of my study and the areas about which they would be questioned. For talks and events I also emailed participants in advance to alert them of my presence at the relevant event, attaching a Participant Information Sheet detailing the nature of my interest in the event and asking them to contact me should they have any questions about my presence or object to it in any way. In both cases, I either emailed a consent form in advance or brought one with me for the participant(s) to read and sign in-situ (See Appendix IV: Participant Information sheet 1 and Consent Form 1).

About halfway through the study I sought consent to alter levels of anonymity of my participants. I began the study by making all participants, projects and places anonymous. I quickly realised that the contemporary art world operates according to an economy of reputation, as evidenced in Chapters 2 and 4, where the identities of projects and groups are of significance.

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<sup>12</sup> These events included: regular (monthly) meetings of the *Funf* art group mentioned in the section on participatory action research, S1 Assembly, (5<sup>th</sup> April 2011), S1, Sheffield, where I spoke about 'Association'; Alias Hub Event, Cornwall, Back Lane West, (Sat 27<sup>th</sup> Nov 2010), where I discussed my research; a lecture at Corridor 8 Art School Alternatives Conference, Liverpool John Moors University, (7<sup>th</sup> Oct 2010), where I presented a paper entitled: 'Ethics of Encounter between Artists' and *Peer, Collaborator, Comrade, Friend*, (30<sup>th</sup> April 2011), Spike Island, a symposium I organised to discuss entanglements within contemporary art worlds.

Individuality and differentiation from other projects, artists or organisations is often a defining feature of activity.

I also wanted to protect my participants (and myself) in that I wanted artists to be candid about their experiences in groups and collaborations and also their experiences vis-à-vis institutions, even if these were not always positive. I thought that the fact that art communities can be densely connected and networked would mean that it might not always be appropriate to name people, particularly due to the aforementioned overlapping of social and professional boundaries. Artists become to a large extent dependent on one another in these networks, and reliant on their associations with organisations and groups for advocacy, visible affiliation and access to professional and social opportunities, as discussed in Chapter 3.

I also started to name projects and places so that the information would be more useful to my potential audience; I wanted them to be able to recognise projects and also to be able to draw comparisons between situations. I believe there is a tendency in art worlds to want to share information, both for the purposes of promotion, but also, as discussed in Chapter 4, out of mutual interest, generosity and a spirit of reciprocity.

A further reason for naming places and projects was the fact that when all of the data was codified, the narrative style of the text was not appropriate to the field. In sociological and psychological analyses processes have been codified so that they can be categorised as norms or trends. In art worlds, this process of taxonomy becomes meaningless when divorced from the specificities of contexts.

In light of my decision to make these changes I contacted all of the previous interviewees to check whether or not such

decreased levels of anonymity would pose any problems for them (See Appendix IV: Email). I then altered my consent forms accordingly. (See Appendix IV: Participant Information Sheets 2 and Consent Form 2).

As an added precautionary measure, I gave participants two specific opportunities to review their interview transcriptions and to contact me if they were not comfortable with me using any of the interview data in my thesis. I also made it clear that they were free to withdraw at any time and that, should they request it, I would also destroy all interview and research data relating to them on completion of my thesis.



## CHAPTER TWO: TRANSITIONS

### Artists' Peer Learning After Graduation

#### Introduction

No matter what their experience of college, many respondents talk about the period immediately after graduation as one of uncertainty, change and transition in terms of both their practice and their sense of identity as an artist. I was interested to see what strategies artists employed to manage this period and I wanted to assess to what extent peer relationships had been important to them during this time, and why.

In 2008, a report by NESTA<sup>13</sup> identified several attributes the authors asserted were exhibited by fine art graduates as a result of their formal education. The authors stress that artists have an ongoing engagement with both formal and informal training throughout their lives, that they can embrace ambiguity and uncertainty and make tacit knowledge into tangible form. They also suggest that creative art courses develop a process of “socialisation” through “communication skills, teamwork and emotional intelligence.” (Oakley, Sperry & Pratt, 2008, p28)

Oakley et al refer to their interviewees' responses to an unstructured, experimental, peer-orientated art school experience as being a process of individual “self-creation”. Working on a daily basis surrounded by others, students often experiment to

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<sup>13</sup> NESTA: 'The art of innovation: How fine arts graduates contribute to innovation', Kate Oakley, Brooke Sperry & Andy Pratt, Edited by Hasan Bakhshi, Research Report, September 2008, based on interviews with over 500 fine arts graduates from the University of the Arts London since the 1950s.

discover techniques rather than being taught them directly. Therefore, according to this study, peer learning or “learning by asking around” (Oakley, Sperry & Pratt, 2008, p30) is a large part of the formal art educational experience on Fine Art courses.

This report has been criticised by Kirsten Forkert and Angela McRobbie (Variant, 2009) for its application of economic terms to cultural engagement and to creative and social practices. Indeed, the NESTA report was originally commissioned to see how artists’ skills might be framed in terms of a “knowledge economy”<sup>14</sup> in the Creative Industries (DCMS, 2001, 2007). So socialising, working in open-plan spaces and collaborating are presented as the exhibition of “soft skills” (Oakley, Sperry & Pratt, p57) and “critical” or “‘interpretive’ innovation” (Oakley, Sperry & Pratt, p47).

With reference to Hardt & Negri (2000), Tom Holert underlines the perceived economic value of such skills in a post-Fordist economy:

the pertinent notion of “immaterial labor” that originated in the vocabulary of post-operaismo (where it is supposed to embrace the entire field of “knowledge, information, communications, relations or even affects”) has become one of the most important sources of social and economic value production. Hence, it is crucial for the visual arts and their various (producing, communicating, educating, etc.) actors to fit themselves into this reality, or oppose the very logic and constraints of its “cognitive capitalism”. (Holert, 2009, p1)

During the course of interviews, I questioned respondents about their experiences since graduation, but I also asked them to reflect upon their most recent course, and in particular the final year of this course, to assess how they felt it had prepared them for being

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<sup>14</sup> “Champions of the arts and of economic development have recently developed an alliance: they have linked this type of creativity to the type required for global competitiveness. The question is: is this link true?”  
[http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/reports/assets/features/the\\_art\\_of\\_innovation](http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/reports/assets/features/the_art_of_innovation), [accessed 04.07.12].

an artist outside of college. Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to consider some of the NESTA findings in the light of my own research, and the pressure of leaving college and expecting to negotiate an extremely complex terrain of choices.

I found that one of the reasons that graduates join groups and initiate collective projects is as a way of claiming space and time within this terrain and mitigating the anxiety produced after graduation. Respondents speak about disorientation, alienation and confusion that indicate an experience akin to culture shock. Rather than considering how to instrumentalise their skills for paid employment, they talk instead about seeking affirmation and confidence through engagement with collectives.

I expected that issues around the sustainability of practice would be the main preoccupation for recent graduates, alongside finding work to support themselves and negotiating a balance between earning money and making art work.

Although I found this to be the case, the challenge of sustaining practice brought other challenges with it. Respondents often referred to their formal educational culture in starkly contrasting terms to the experience of leaving university. However, often artists' informal interactions around practice were contingent upon these former educational structures and cultures, both as a reaction to them and an attempt to replace, continue or adapt experiences of formal learning. Respondents also spoke about groups they were involved with *alternative* forms of continued learning.

Although this thesis is not an analysis of collectives that describe or set themselves up as alternative art schools<sup>15</sup>, I would

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<sup>15</sup> I visited Islington Mill 'DIY' Art Academy and I discuss the proliferation of such 'schools' in the Chapter One, framed as part of the "Educational Turn" (Wilson & O'Neil, 2010) in contemporary art.

like to acknowledge how artists who are engaged with self-organised groups declare their participation as a form of learning, whether or not this has been an explicit intention at the outset. I am uncertain to what extent this is due to a preoccupation with the articulation of forms of knowledge in contemporary art as a result of debates relating to the “Educational Turn” (Wilson & O’Neill, 2010) or whether it is part of a wider concern with the production of knowledge as a useful pursuit that could legitimise group activities for the purposes of funding:

the notion of knowledge production implies a certain placement of thinking, of ideas, within the present knowledge economy, i.e. the dematerialized production of current post-Fordist capitalism; the repercussions of such a placement within art and art education can be described as an increase in “standardization,” “measurability,” and “the molding of artistic work into the formats of learning and research. (Sheikh, S, in Holert, 2009, p1)

Through interactions with their peers, respondents have found reasons to continue to practice after leaving their formal education. They value the surge in confidence and self-belief that these interactions encourage. The construction of situations around practice with fellow artists affirms artistic identities and gives legitimacy to practices and simply *belonging* to a group of fellow artists can provide a foundation for this confidence.

Respondents place great value on self-determination, both as an individual and collective phenomenon. Being part of a collective has often enabled them to create, manage or negotiate potential future paths. Those paths are contingent upon collective decision-making and seem more appealing than the disorientation and loneliness of isolated, autonomous practice at such a

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In Chapter One I outline the increasing preoccupation with formal art education in contemporary art contexts, its current perceived inadequacies and potential alternative avenues for progress proposed and practised in institutions, artist-led collectives and the art media.

precarious stage. Similarly, receiving regular affirmation from peers, either through verbal feedback in projects and critiques, through collaborations, or simply through company in a shared studio can provide the motivation to continue to make work.

I learnt from respondents, including organisers of facilitated membership groups and artist-led groups about how these groups provided access to resources, both human and informational, and how respondents used these groups and other peer-oriented projects to structure their practice. Lastly, I looked at the motivations for artists to base themselves in a UK city outside London following graduation and discussed in what ways this decision was related to the presence of strong peer networks and other peer-related opportunities for development and support.

### Self-Belief, Legitimation, Affirmation and Belonging

I have discussed the role of peer interaction in the formation of artistic subjectivities and practice identities in Chapter 3: *Identities*, and I will not repeat questions concerning a search for practice resonances and the use of the moniker “artist” here. However, respondents do report that initial shock or disorientation, leading to a certain diminution of self-belief in their practice and artistic subjectivity can follow graduation. This seems to precipitate a search for legitimacy amongst peers and organisations that enable access to peers, particularly if those bridges have not already been built whilst at college.

Kathleen moved back to the Bristol area after completing a BA at Goldsmiths college in London, and took on a studio at BV Studios, Bristol. A friend of Kathleen’s and fellow graduate had

become involved with the project, *DIY Educate*, at the Core Gallery in Deptford, “an evolving development and education programme run by and for artists and curators and art professionals.” (Core Gallery, 2012). Using elements of this project as a model, Kathleen established a series of peer critique groups in Motorcade FlashParade, the gallery at BV Studios, for the benefit of the studio artists and for any member of the general public who wanted to participate.

Kathleen makes the observation that self-belief is not an automatic outcome of formal education:

*I managed a shop for about three years, so everyone there didn't really get it if I did start talking about it, it was like okay, whatever, and they'd be interested, but you needed to learn, I needed to learn how to either make a circle like that again, or be that anyway and figure out how to keep going without saying what am I doing, because nobody really gets it.*

*(...)*

*I think coming out of certain universities gives you some kind of status, which helps in certain paths, but in the actual process of making and having conviction in your thoughts, I don't know how much it prepares you.*

Regular interaction with an artistic peer group is something that many respondents said that they were lacking during the period after graduation, and feelings of isolation at this stage could discourage them from sustaining an art practice. One of the reasons that Kathleen initiated the peer critiques was to encourage interaction between artists and prevent such feelings of isolation in her studio practice.

She is keen to attract participants who may not be artists, as well as fellow practitioners:

*I think what I wanted to do here is (...) just open it out basically, open out discussion to anybody who might want to turn up, whether you're an artist or not an artist or someone who feels very much like an artist, but who hasn't done anything for a long time perhaps, as a way in for people but also as a way for practicing artists to realise that other section – get feedback from people who aren't really, really involved in art, cause I think that's valuable as well.*

This is to some extent an attempt to gain conviction in practice beyond the validating agencies of art institutions, which, she suggests, are not necessarily conducive to sustaining self-belief. She refers to her experience at college in relation to the friend who initiated the peer critique sessions at Core Gallery, Deptford:

*I think she almost learnt more to be herself as an artist cause she had to fight to do what she wanted to do, and I fitted in a bit more to what they liked, so I didn't necessarily have that fight so much. And I think when you leave you find yourself not necessarily fighting but struggling to convince yourself of your ideas. And I think that's something that you really, really have to learn as an artist, to like be quite independent in your thought and believe in what you're gonna do.*

Kathleen links self-belief after college to struggle, and the need to test herself through exposure to non-artists. I explore the periodic desire respondents describe for their practice to be “shaken up” and critiqued in Chapter 4, ‘Entanglements & Encounters’. However, during this transitional period artists have abruptly lost their legitimating support structures and are often negotiating a complex work landscape<sup>16</sup> that can include establishing themselves as freelance project workers, working in low-paid non-art related jobs, pursuing internships and voluntary work, managing claims for welfare benefits or temporarily returning

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Creative Graduates, Creative Futures’ Ball L, Pollard E, Stanley N, Report 471, Council for Higher Education in Art and Design; University of the Arts London, January 2010 is a longitudinal study of the early careers of more than 3,500 creative graduates, undertaken between 2008 and 2010. ‘Creative Career Stories’ is the second report of the study: The report outlined graduates ‘portfolio’ working patterns:

In their early careers, graduates make frequent job changes and undertake unpaid work to gain experience, skills and insight into different sectors; and this can cause considerable hardship. (Ball, Pollard, Stanley & Oakley, 2010)

- but also states that, in general, respondents reported that financial reward was not their primary motivation:

Creative graduates are prepared to sacrifice financial reward for the personal satisfaction they derive from creativity. Working to high standards, making new work, rising to new challenges, learning new skills, recognition by peers and client satisfaction are important, as well as facilitating creativity in others. (Ball, Pollard, Stanley & Oakley, 2010)

home to live with family. Florian Schneider makes explicit the potential anxieties attached to the uncertainty of pursuing freelance, project-based work:

The nets of voluntariness, enthusiasm, creativity, immense pressure, ever-increasing self-doubt and desperation are temporary and fluid; they take on multiple forms but always refer to a permanent state of insecurity and precariousness, the blueprint for widespread forms of occupation and employment within society. They reveal the other side of immaterial labour, hidden in the rhetoric of 'working together'. (Schneider, F, 2006, p252).

Whilst attempting to launch oneself into this shifting landscape, particularly in an economic downturn, a sense of doubt about the value of practicing as an artist can take over.

At Moot artist-led space in Nottingham, Tegan describes how, in the early days of developing their work space, the group bonded not only through mutual enthusiasm about the space, but also through mutual frustration around a shared dislike of their low-skilled, low-paid jobs. Indeed, this seemed to act as a foil for their creative work:

*It was just knowing that we were going to get a gallery at the end of it and that we were actually pursuing a dream. We were doing what we had actually always wanted to do. So it didn't feel like hard work at the time. Only looking back on it now can I really say – that was a really difficult time. During the time it was just a good laugh. We all hated our jobs and loved being at the studio in equal balance.*

Members of New Bristol Diving School also comment on the struggle to survive while creating, compared to college life.

Member, Keira says:

*I think the third year made me realise how much I enjoyed exhibiting my own work and I think it made me want to carry on doing that, but I don't think it prepared me realising what it was like having funds, time, money, that sort of thing. I think you were just in a little haven in the studio in the third year and in the real world it's really daunting. You realise you've got to put in so much more effort and energy to achieve what you want.*



Fellow member, Murray comments:

*It's like a third job really.*

Keira replies:

*It's just a different lifestyle to what many people do.*

Theo, a Spike Associate member and graduate of University College Falmouth resident in Bristol, describes a similar feeling of alienation after leaving the college environment, a shock he was unprepared for:

*It did feel like being dropped out of a plane and landing in a desert and everything you thought you knew is kind of knocked down. And other foresights start to develop or you start to try to justify your four years of studying art from Foundation to Fine Art practice, so when you're looking for a job and you sign on and it's like "so what do you do?", "well, I'm looking for work as an artist" and it's just like "can't compute", so that was bit boiler-room and other priorities take over, which you're aware of. It's not like you were naïve when you were studying, but the seriousness of that feels much more apparent during that time.*

Like Kathleen, once outside of the college cohort, Theo keenly feels the lack of mutual recognition and identification he gained from being around fellow artists.

Theo describes, "*wanting more of a connection in Bristol, to find a peer group I suppose to sort of encourage work*", and after a year he joined the Associates group at Spike Island. In relation to the Spike Associates he speaks about the value he placed upon having a dedicated space to work in where he could meet other artists or those studying art, both because of the resulting exchange of ideas but also because of the validation of his practice:

*You can talk things through, understanding I suppose. When I was working as a temp, you'd talk to lots of people about the work and they had no idea what you were talking about.*

However, like Kathleen, Theo also sees interaction with non-artists as a worthwhile experience in relation to his practice development:

*There's a I suppose, a kind of trying to find an understanding of what you are doing. It's quite important and I suppose it puts a value on what you're doing. I suppose it's quite important as well when you're talking to people who aren't from an art background who get confused about what you're doing. It's quite a grounding experience (...) It does make you question what you're doing more, rather than someone who knows about something saying "oh that's amazing".*

This can be a time of missing one's peer group and the concomitant sense of belonging that they offer, while simultaneously being a period that offers the opportunity to gain new perspectives on practice outside of the art school 'bubble'. In such circumstances one's sense of artistic subjectivity can become confused, precipitating attempts to renegotiate this. Participants report the desire to justify their activity to themselves in order to be able to pursue it more independently.

Like Kathleen, Thalia had initiated her own external project, *northcabin*, whilst still a student. This involved curating shows for invited artists in a disused cabin on Bristol Bridge. She also started working as an intern in a commissioning agency, and although she was evidently motivated to practice outside of college, she describes the experience of being pushed by her tutors to gain external experiences as "really helpful". There is a strong sense that these projects encouraged her feelings of self-determination, in terms of being able to articulate her own creative desires and interests and developing a clearer, more personalised motivation to carry on practising:

*I suppose when I left, in doing those shows and the things I was doing, I've become clearer about what I want, what I'm interested in and being able to identify it more clearly, so whether these are opportunities that come to me or whether these are things I want to develop myself, so that's become clearer. For a long time I found it very difficult, possibly because I was thinking about the people rather than what I wanted to do. Trying to actually do these things for yourself. I think when you're in education for so long you get so used to doing stuff for other things so whether that's a mark or whether that's your tutor (...)*

Self-belief at this stage is linked closely to integration with an artist peer group for the mutual understanding and affirmation, as well as the sense of belonging participation brings with it. According to some respondents, self-belief is simultaneously linked to interactions with non-artists that elicit a sense of alienation or challenge. These situations have the potential to strengthen artists' resolve to continue practising. By initiating and participating in self-organised projects, respondents ensure a framework and routine for interaction with other artists, strengthen a sense of their artistic subjectivity and a belief in the power of individual and collective self-determination. The emphasis on social interaction that authors Oakley, Sperry and Pratt (2008) believe is fostered on Fine Art courses, is an ongoing feature of informal learning throughout this period. Alongside these concerns for some respondents, is the often tacit pressure to be both making, and beginning to gain practice opportunities, be they exhibitions or early-career residencies. I explore this issue more closely in Chapter 5: 'Visibility'. Spike Associate Robert, articulates his anxiety:

*I find a website on a gallery or something, just have a look at their images and their CV. I guess there is that subliminal kind of like slowly plotting things on a map, "oh okay...he went for that...and he was showing there then". So I guess that's kind of subliminal, not too conscious, "Oh I'm not showing there yet!"*

*I guess there is an anxiety about to have done something quite soon, that's quite important.*

*(...) having done that show, having put on an exhibition last year, which I was quite proud of, I felt quite good to have done something and achieved something that waylaid a bit of that anxiety about having graduated and then the expectation for you to be showing.*

Robert was involved with a group publication with his peers, *InterCity MainLine (ICML)*. Respondents indicate that becoming involved with a collective helps to alleviate this pressure upon

new graduates to display visible markers of continued practice and success. To some extent their activities become integrated with those of the collective and the period of engagement can provide a necessary breathing space in which to diffuse individual anxiety, whilst still producing work.

John, Robert's friend and initiator of *ICML* stresses the effect the project has had on *his* output:

*I started thinking about how we needed something quite formal that brought us together a lot, so that's how the idea of ICML came about. So that we all had this constant focus and it meant that we were able to regularly meet once a week and chat and indirectly then we got over that schtick about talking about our art with each other. That was amazing. We were doing something. There was a product. We were going places, meeting new people, going to these talks, actually making something, so the productivity (...) so that's why ICML was amazing because it kept me feeling productive.*

One of the main obstacles to practising after university is the absence of studio space. Several respondents had sought to set up studios together, and this has been the principal reason for many respondents to initially collectivise. The choice of open-plan studio layouts is often influenced by artists' college experiences. Suki, at the Lombard Method, an artist-led group formed in Birmingham in 2009 responded to questions about the development of the space. The group members researched other local groups in order to define what they wished to aim for in terms of studio structure:

*I guess there were things about talking to Grand Union about what they were doing, which meant that ours was kind of a bit opposite. They wanted theirs to be kind of neat, individual studios and we were really keen for it to be more open plan. Just about having conversations with people.*

*(...)*

*I guess it's more similar to the uni model, except I guess – when I was at uni the studio was often quite quiet and so we thought – well I guess it's only when you've had a bit of time out that you realise quite how valuable that situation can be.*

*I guess as we had all come together and wanted to do it outside of university, that it did have the potential to be quite a lively and useful environment.*

The studio provision seems to be appreciated by respondents in retrospect, and the potential for peer exchange in this open-plan arrangement takes on greater significance and generates more enthusiasm now that the group have ownership of and responsibility for their workspace.

Similarly, at Moot artist-led gallery, in the first building shared by the artists after graduation members' university studios had been an influence. Founding member, Tegan says:

*The old warehouse had a very open-plan feel to it because that's how we had it at university. There were not very many walls and everyone worked in the same space and that helped to encourage dialogues as well and it helped you to keep an eye on what people were making. If you saw someone was being really productive and you weren't then you were thinking, shit I'd better make some work. So that really helped people to keep going.*

Respondents value both the ability to easily talk to one another but also to be able to see what one another is doing. The motivating power of mutual visibility is echoed by members of New Bristol Diving School who set up their studios to encourage a "free-flowing model" between members. They speak about the generative force of seeing another artist "getting on".

Similarly, Lucy, at Royal Standard, Liverpool had welcomed the open-plan model as a way of challenging her natural tendencies:

*I really feel like I benefitted at university from being in a group studio and that's what I wanted to maintain I suppose. For me I think it would be easy to isolate myself and hide away, but then I think the coming out and showing my work to the world would be a big step, whereas I think it's nice to have that on a regular basis here.*

I have explored issues around learning through proximity or 'infection' between peers in Chapter 4: 'Entanglements & Encounters', but would like to acknowledge here how this is a model fostered in formal education that is highly valued in informal contexts.



**Fig 3. Lombard Method Studios, Credit: J. Masding**  
Many artists setting up studio groups after college adopt an open-plan format, influenced by experiences of formal education.

## Self-Determination, Motivation and Confidence: Turning Away from University and Informal Mentoring

I see now how, for some young students, school can provide a space, a moment for a breakthrough, maturity, self-discovery, and growth; but for others, school becomes a period of stagnation, and then only life outside school and conventional education can provide them with the necessary earned maturity.

(...)

I generally feel that young artists should be cautious not to get too trapped in a vacuum, where their imaginations look mainly to their intuitions as the source, as opposed to knowledge and experiences that can only be gained out of school boundaries.

(Neshat, S. 2009, pp324-5).

Irit Rogoff has presented education as a series of turns:

In a turn, we turn away from something or towards or around something and it is we who are in movement, rather than it. Something in us is activated, perhaps even actualised, as we turn.

(Rogoff, I. 2010, p42).

In turning towards their peers in this transitional period, respondents are sometimes consciously turning away from aspects of their formal education.

I decided to discuss issues about formal art education that had arisen through my research in a group situation, in order to test artists' opinions in relation to one another. I was asked to contribute to an event at Islington Mill in Salford, the site of a self-defined free and independent 'Art Academy' and I used this opportunity to invite guests to a reading group to discuss related themes.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I presented the group as a discussion (9<sup>th</sup> April, 2010) framed by my research to explore questions pertinent to art and education: Can art be taught? What knowledge(s) are valued by artists?, Is art a calling, a profession or both?

The majority of guests were not members of Islington Mill Art Academy, but were visiting artists from Manchester, Liverpool and London. I disseminated certain texts in advance in order to catalyse the discussion, and found that most participants appeared to have read at least one of them in preparation for the group.

Many of the participants had graduated from art courses, and the wider discussion caused them to reflect upon how their education had affected their subsequent informal learning. The debate, held in the courtyard at Islington Mill, was particularly rich and broad in scope and I have used it to intersect with material from interviews with individuals and groups. One of the recurring themes was a particular enculturation that participants had either noticed or experienced as a result of attending Fine Art courses. Participants spoke about how a lack of physical resources or space might lead to an emphasis on discursive practices and how personal rhetoric or the performance of assertiveness - having the 'gift of the gab' - was potentially as important as the success of one's practice in terms of progression in the art world. In the extract below I am MW and Violet, Patrice and Leslie are event participants:

*MW: I was thinking about the word "critical".*

*Violet: I was just saying how overused it was and how it doesn't really mean anything. People just attach themselves to these words and they don't really mean anything.*

*Patrice: Maybe it's just an identifier that you've been through art education.*

*Violet: Just the words themselves start to get on my nerves because I hear them so often. I just hear people using the term "let's unpick this" all the time as well.*

*MW: Something being "resolved". That's what my tutors used to say a lot – "this piece is not resolved".*

*Violet: I went to the Royal College of Art and the students were saying, "do you believe in this"*

*MW: Is something "working" or not?*

*Patrice: Is it "interesting"?*

*Leslie: Well that brings us back to the question - is what you are being taught this vocabulary or are you being taught art?*

Here there is a perception that the performance of certain discourses learned at college have an impact upon peer interactions after college.



I was interested to see to what extent verbal and written skills were valued in terms of being able to present one's practice to others, as experiences and initial interviews had made it clear to me that discursive practices, (as much as visual and experiential practices) were pivotal to peer learning processes after college. Articulacy in completing funding applications and speaking about one's work to curators and fellow artists were both valued, but there was also a mode of discourse that graduates referred to in quite cynical terms.

John, a 2006 graduate of Art & Visual Culture at UWE set up *InterCity MainLine (ICML)*, the publication project with fellow graduates mentioned above. This was partly initiated as a framework within which the group could discuss one another's practice. In addition to graduates from UWE, the group also included another friend of John's, an artist who had studied at University of Wales in Cardiff, and whose observations caused John to reflect upon his graduate cohort:

*He (my friend) says, when were all together and getting ready for a show and going through our work and hanging it. He said there was a definite complete new way of talking about art that he hadn't really ever experienced (...) We kind of had the same, quite refined ways of talking about what we think makes quite good simple artwork, (...)*

John describes friends of his in London who belong to a particular student body as also having a common way of speaking about practice:

*My friends who've been to the RA, they discuss work in a really formal way, which is strange. They don't have that same sense of irony or any humour. (...)*

*I can't really be that honest with them. If you're sat in a pub at a table with 8 Royal Academy graduates, the way they're like really flippant and slag work off. They're really critical about everything. Sometimes I think, do you like anything? It gets me down a bit and then I just don't talk about art that much*

*when I'm round them. (...) I can't talk to them the same way I can talk to my friends here.*

These comments imply that the college an artist attended and the teaching culture of that college might already dictate the ease of graduates' communication with artists and other peer groups, the way that a graduate cohort is perceived from the outside, what it includes and excludes, tolerates and dismisses.

At the same time, Ray and Collette at Outpost artist-led group in Norwich describe how the exposure to discussions about art in the gallery and in committee meetings have developed their "artistic articulacy". Ray says:

*I suppose you are exposed to a wider breadth than you would be on your degree for example, because you can focus quite specifically. In terms of talking about art it's different. I suppose you learn to take on other people's ideas and that broadens your way of thinking about art as well (...) earlier on I think I was describing it to you as an academic space. I'm still figuring out whether that's the correct term, but in terms of the amount of learning that's done here in terms of the range of learning.*

Collette continues:

*I suppose everyone's like minded in a sense and everyone's got - I don't want to say more of an interest because that's not fair, but it's much more constant. You have to be up on what's going on and be aware of everything. That's how I feel anyway and you constantly need to be aware of everything that's going on internationally, or wherever. So it's just moved up a gear compared to the level that I feel like I'm used to or even experienced on degree. It's definitely a faster pace.*

The artists indicated that this articulacy and wider knowledge of contemporary practitioners is largely developed by a need to programme exhibiting artists for the space, to be able to argue for their legitimacy in meetings and make collective decisions about events.

The drive towards self-determination or collective autonomy, and the resulting confidence and motivation this

develops, is something that respondents often experience through projects with their peers.

Oakley, Sperry & Pratt (2008) suggest that ex art students have already been primed to work in a highly self-motivated way because of the relative freedom of art school, with learning that is less structured than in other disciplines and a reliance on discipline development without consistent input from experts.

Associate member, Philippa co-founded the artist-led group Plan 9 in Bristol (active 2004 - 2009). She cites a “*slightly competitive*” drive to get work “*out there*”, fostered at college as part of the impetus behind the initiation of the group:

*Being an artist is about communication so you have to find a means of communication as an emerging artist.*

She was also, shortly after graduating, motivated by a reaction to the constraints she perceived in formal education. She describes a desire to collectively create an alternative means of communication “*out of that control*”. In this way, her art school experience had, through its institutionalised construction of learning, precipitated action that would sustain her through the post-graduation period. She felt, even before graduation that a peer group would be desirable and necessary after college, and like Tegan from Moot, a shared project was a way of sustaining activity with trusted fellow artists. Rather than exercising entrepreneurial skills for purely individual benefit, she provided a bridge to continue peer engagement. This experience had its legacy in the support that Plan 9 went on to provide for recent graduates in subsequent years.

Certain respondents are motivated to redress the perceived inadequacies or omissions of their formal education. Shortly after graduation, Sylvie initiated the Bristol Drawing Club with a fellow

graduate. This was an artist-led project where anyone could meet and draw at a public location during regular evening events. Sylvie felt a need for informal collective engagement with an emphasis on play, which I guessed to be due in part to her reactions to formal education, in particular the emphasis she felt had been placed upon the *presentation* of practice.

*I think it was a brilliant course and I think that my tutors were very good, but they prepared us for a certain element of being an artist and for example really thinking about how you hang your work and present your work and for example how to document your work well. I feel that they made me aware of all these details that go a long way to presenting your practice and talking about your practice and also I took on the extra theory module – I did Visual Culture – so I learnt to understand my work which was very good on that side, but I still feel that there was a huge gap in that I didn't develop my technical skills during the whole time I was at university.*

I relate Sylvie's decision to set up an assistantship with an established successful drawing artist to her disappointment with a lack of technically orientated skills tuition at college. This may have inspired her to actively seek a role model whose practice she could relate to:

*I was drawing for her two days a week and I think that was really, really inspiring, not only because her work's great but mainly because it gave me hope that - she's a successful, conceptual artist who's respected by her peers and yet she's earning a living making these massive murals, huge drawings.*

My thesis is not a study of organised mentoring programmes or apprenticeship schemes. However, the search for role models or mentor figures does not necessarily pivot on peer relationships that are asymmetrical in terms of status or experience. These relationships can come about through informal connections so that the mentoring relationship is not explicit or declared.

Through her ongoing co-organisation of the Bristol Drawing Club artist-led initiative, Sylvie was able to address, to some extent

the isolation she felt both in terms of her studio practice and in relation to the absence of her student practice community.

As well as finding an artist whose achievements she could aspire to through her assistantship, Sylvie was also seeking affirmation for her practice. Here she describes the participants she has met through her collaboratively organised drawing group as potential 'mentor' figures:

*(...) nearly all my friends aren't making art work any more, so I can't really talk to them about that so much any more and because until recently I didn't really know anyone else who worked in a similar way to me so now, because of Drawing Club weirdly enough, it's like people who are interested in drawing are being attracted back to me and people are now getting back in touch and saying do you know that we run a drawing school and we'd like to meet you and I've never been to the drawing school ever and I've had a gallery be in touch about my work. It's weird now people are getting in touch with me and it's weird – I never thought this would happen, but I'm finding the people who are gonna be mentors to me and that I can speak to a little bit more.*

Informal mentors can provide trusted feedback and make certain paths or directions seem possible by example. Rather than tutors, the relationship between artist and artist-mentor in these more informal arrangements can have porous boundaries so that it can form part of a friendship where generosity flows both ways between the two parties. For example, Spike Associates member Nina describes an informal apprenticeship she set up after leaving her degree in the US:

*You know, I'm a very non-traditional learner. The only reason I was at college was because it was something that was expected...but it was something that I just barely tolerated really, so I was just thrilled to get out of there and never gave a blink of a thought to any kind of further degree. So to me to be in the workshop of a master weaver, whose family had been doing this for five generations was heaven. And I ate with him and we worked in his fields and I made weavings and it was all part of this whole thing that we did together. It wasn't like 'now I'm making art', 'now I'm thinking about art'.*

As Nina told me more about her journey as an artist, including her move to England and her engagement with various individuals,

groups and organisations, I felt that this, and other early experiences of strategically seeking out artists through practice resonances had set a precedent for managing her own transitional periods. She describes the use of similar strategies on moving to England:

*Like I said I was really starving to be connected to people and also I didn't know how long we were going to live here so I felt this urgency, so I used Axisweb a lot and combed it to find people whose practices were – I kind of intuitively would look through and just say that looks interesting and then I just contacted people so there were a bunch of artists in London I met up with – “do you want to have a cup of coffee?” ...you know.*

*(...) and I gave them a link to my website - basically, “I've seen yours do you want to see mine?”, and I think invariably they all wrote back and said, “yeah I can see why your work relates to mine...it's interesting”, so I'd get together with them, so I did a bunch of studio visits in London.*

These visits led to a network of relationships and connections for Nina, increasing her visibility and developing her confidence, which ultimately led to exhibiting opportunities and collaborative projects.

Because of the unique nature of the practice that each artist engages with, and because artists are constantly looking to other artists for practice resonances, differences and references, these unsolicited communications, amongst my respondents at least, tend to elicit generous responses. In this sense, all artists can be said to be peers by dint of their choice to pursue art practice as a significant part of their life.

Moreover, interaction online via email, and on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter and file sharing on YouTube and Vimeo<sup>18</sup> is potentially allowing greater opportunity for informal mentoring. Spike Associate, Theo describes how a personal contact led to a mentoring relationship that spanned from

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<sup>18</sup> A file-sharing website for video, founded 2004.

the final year of his degree to the period immediately after graduation:

*Not having a studio and moving to Bristol and not being able to afford a studio or anything I had to strip my practice down anyway so I had to make it as minimal as possible, which meant going out with a microphone and a mini-disk player which I pretty much had the resources to do, and I was collecting sounds, and it's a good way of exploring a new environment because you're finding your way around anyway and you're exploring it and listening to a space, which is quite a good practice and also I didn't have a job at the time so I had some time to do that at the time.*

*So I started exploring that. There's an artist who's based up in Leeds actually who became interested in my work from Fine Art because his daughter was studying down in Falmouth as well, and his work involved a lot of field recordings, and he started becoming my mentor actually, so he started advising me and...It was mainly online really (...) it was a strange chain but my tutor put me in touch with his daughter and I felt a bit lost, because there wasn't many people working with sound as a real strong thing in Falmouth, and so she put us in touch and I started doing some projects with her and she was always talking about her dad and she would say you should meet my dad, you two would get on .*

*He's an artist and she's produced work with him as well, so we were going out and making field recordings and I didn't really check out her dad but I think it was in the summer that I discovered his website and became really interested in his work from that so I contacted him from that. It's always been this email exchange I suppose of kind of curious questions I think that was really important sort of finding point. After leaving college it was like he was my tutor, finding another person who can give you some guidance in a sense.*

Theo describes later unsolicited email exchanges with artists he admires that have inspired his practice. He also engaged with online communities of audio artists through file sharing using Soundcloud<sup>19</sup> and Vimeo, interactions that helped him to retain a sense of practice identity and confidence during this stage. In Chapter 4, I go on to discuss Theo's experience of online critique.

Certain respondents spoke about a perceived narrowness of focus during their formal education and a desire to seek influences outside of their immediate discipline. Sarah, a Bristol-based practitioner had done her degree in the USA and planned to

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<sup>19</sup> A file-sharing website for audio files, founded 2007.

complete an MA at Goldsmiths college. She had produced a film - screening programme for the Spike Associates group and had co-curated *Reception*, a multi-disciplinary event in Plan 9 artist-led space. In reflecting on these events and their audiences she describes her perception of the compartmentalisation of interests and scenes she had experienced:

*I think it's symptomatic of Bristol, maybe Britain, in that people seem to be really focussed on one thing rather than...  
People I went to school with, who I did my degree with, were interested in art, but also interested in music and lots of other stuff so there was all this other stuff feeding into it, and maybe it is and I'm just not aware of it in terms of being interested in other things, but a lot of people don't pick up on that other stuff, so I don't know...it just seems that way to me.*

Talking about the development of her ideas she again traced this back to art education:

*(...) because I went to university in America and that was a much kind of broader, you know I was doing history and theatre and Italian and stuff, so I've always had quite a broad scope.*

This perception of educational compartmentalisation is echoed by a participant at the Art & Education Reading Group, Islington Mill. She had wanted to apply for a residency at the A-Foundation gallery in Liverpool. As an artist whose practice also encompasses embroidery, she was concerned that the residency application stipulated that applicants should have completed a Fine Art course:

*It doesn't say anything about you as an artist, but for them it says something about you, and they don't want you if you haven't done that. I didn't know whether they would want me. Do they count it? Because when I started looking at courses I talked to one of the tutors in the Fine Art department at MMU and said "I'm really struggling where to place myself" and he said, "well, it's dead simple. If you want to be an artist, study Fine Art. It's as simple as that. If you want to stitch things study embroidery." (...) I think that's really common.*

Looking as I will, at post-formal learning between artists and the deliberate suspension of practice identities that I have identified in



both artists groups and between individuals (Chapter 3), I would like to suggest that many respondents only felt able to broaden the frame of their practice outside of formal education.

Spike Associates member Carl had graduated from an MA in Advanced Music Studies at Bristol University. He works at the Arnolfini Gallery and, through contact with fine art graduates there (amongst other factors), he became increasingly interested in alternative forms of creative practice.

He makes a sharp distinction between the Fine Art graduates he was interacting with and the cohort he graduated with from his MA:

*(...) I just by chance happened to meet more and more people socially who'd done Fine Art degrees, and much to my surprise (...) much to my interest, I found that they were so much, they had a kind of an engagement with their work, creatively and critically that I found really interesting and felt I had a lot in common with.*

I asked him to define the situations in which he had met Fine Art graduates.

*Mostly through the jobs I was doing actually...all these shitty jobs ...you know with people that had done Fine Art degrees, whereas most of the people that I went and did a BA at Bristol University with, they all went straight into graduate training things or arts management most of them.*

As with Tegan at Moot, and with Theo and Kathleen, directly after graduation many artists are concerned with jobs and other forms of work-experience that will enable them to continue to practice. The forms of employment themselves are often not the principal focus; jobs may be low-skilled and less absorbing than later employment opportunities, but this lack of focus on work life can allow for opportunities for peer interaction and the continuation of practice.

Carl's remarks reveal a particular response to an *attitude* to practice. Unlike many of his Music MA graduate cohort, the Fine

Art graduates he met had not abandoned creative practice altogether:

*I felt that they'd come out of their degrees with an ongoing interest and a kind of a sense of creative empowerment. That's a really bad word, but they'd been affected by more, whereas the people that did my music degree, they weren't interested in music at all really. It was just a kind of an academic qualification, and then they all went off and got these high paid graduate training jobs at like accountancy firms.*

Carl had taken advantage of his proximity to so many Fine Art graduates and had set up a regular peer critique group, principally for fellow staff at the Arnolfini, (box office staff, invigilators, technicians), and through this and other peer interactions he experimented with different forms of practice. These practices incorporated his music training, but they also, he felt, moved him beyond the perceived disciplinary limitations that he claimed had constrained him in college.

During this time he decided to study for a Fine Art MA. He started this course, but later abandoned it, saying that he found his college peer group “disappointing” in relation to the gallery stewards he was working with:

*I would say one thing that has been very useful is this group crit that I set up myself. That was again one of my reasons for giving up the MA, because I knew with the stewards I could set up my own crit group and there's been various meetings of that that I've found useful.*

In Carl's case the art institution had provided a context for continuous incidental and self-organised interaction with artists. He has gone on to develop a live art practice combined and informed by art writing and ethno-musicology and talks about his practice development occurring through incremental exposure to

other's practices, and the gradual sedimentation of the effects of many conversations with his peers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 4 for an analysis of Carl's gradual development of a practice identity in relation to his peers.



**Fig 4. Bristol Drawing Club, Credit: Max McClure**  
Collective peer engagement after college can lead to the establishment of informal mentoring relationships.



**Fig 5. Art & Education Reading Group, Islington Mill, Salford, 2010. My photo.** Participants speak about the significance of performing certain discourses learnt in university.

## Access to Resources, Support & Opportunities: Transition, Artist Groups and Informal Peer Learning

Joining an organisationally facilitated membership group, such as Spike Associates and Extra Special People, can also lead to episodes of informal mentoring. I have discussed in Chapter 4 how co-ordinators of these groups can select individual practitioners who they think may respond to particular opportunities. These pieces of advice or advocacy from respected, well-connected artists and curators can be incredibly valuable at an early stage in artists' careers and there is no doubt that they have benefitted many respondents. Here, Rowan comments on the Spike Associates, reflecting the organisational ethos of a transient membership<sup>21</sup>:

*I wouldn't want to be too critical because I think it's a really amazing thing and I think that's what makes Bristol have the art scene that it does, I think a lot of it comes from the Associates and I think Susanne's just really good at pin-pointing people who need support at specific times, and then I guess she hopes that people move on a bit, you know, they kind of separate themselves a bit or they do their own stuff and they initiate their own activity within... then it leads to more and more sort of thing. So I think that's probably the best thing about it.*

However, in Chapter 4, I also discuss the potential difficulties of this selective approach, in that it can betray a bias towards certain practices or to the strategic visibility of specific artists.

Often the artist-led group, or membership group acts as a bridge, spanning the gap between recent graduates' experience and facilitating access to institutions. The artist-led groups and membership groups I spoke to were keen to maintain links with local art courses at Higher Education institutions, often informed

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of membership groups and the idea of transience.

by their experiences and struggles as graduates. Phillipa, co-founder of Plan 9 artist-led space stated that part of the group's original remit was "supporting emerging artists" and Ciaran, a committee member at Catalyst artist-led group in Belfast, presents the artist-led scene as a springboard to debut recent graduates, a more approachable community or attainable forum for opportunity than many established arts organisations:

*We do try and fill a void where emerging artists, and also students that just wouldn't have a chance in approaching other institutions in Belfast, which are a lot more institutionalised, that we offer that platform for them to kind of showcase, for them to begin their career.*

In a subsequent section, I analyse the impact of this role taken by groups on the retention of graduates in cities outside London.

Robert, a member of the Spike Associates, often uses Spike Island as a meeting base *InterCity MainLine*. He talks about the importance of personal, informal connections in accessing arts institutions:

*I think it's quite lucky...my friendship circle...it seemed quite natural ...I would be coming into Spike Island a lot anyway...I suppose it is quite formal actually, quite a conscious decision to come in to see people, to see their studios. Anyway, I think it's quite formalized in a not-so-conscious way. It's like, oh I'll have a look and see what's going on and because of that kind of friendship or social network, that has allowed me to sidestep that kind of authority and intimidation you get from institutions.*

Artists can crave a sense of belonging after graduating, motivating them to join membership groups like the Spike Associates or Extra Special People. This need can change as those respondents grow in confidence. In Chapter 4: 'Entanglements & Encounters', one of the original organisers of the Associates describes the art institution as a space that artists should "graduate through". Indeed, many of the group members are recent graduates and artists appear to engage

with the group less as they become more experienced practitioners and their networks expand.

Here, Rowan portrays membership as a move from dependence to greater self-sufficiency:

*I guess I kind of see it as a continuous support really that I might go back to. I think I've definitely moved more away from it than I was when I graduated, I mean looking back at my CV I can kind of see points where Associates has been really good and Susanne has been really supportive in suggesting things or...I guess I was at a point where I needed it more, whereas now, I think after the gallery I have been quite fortunate in a position where I'm being offered shows and things at the moment. I'm quite happy to move away from, so in terms of, I always go when there are artists doing talks, all those kinds of things I'll always get involved in, but I'm not so much in a position where I feel like I need to apply for everything or...it's like there's enough going on for me to sustain what I'm doing.*

Robert sees the group as a support structure, but also a kind of breathing space, a place to inhabit amongst the various pressures and perceived pressures of being a recent graduate.

These informal social ties and friendships often act as a catalyst for artist-led groups and initiatives, collectives that can provide an entry point for recent graduates to wider art world engagement. Robert comments:

*I think that's maybe part of the importance of being very young, younger artists. I think that's maybe part of the support that it offers, to give the confidence just to go out and be part of something rather than being quite secluded. I think that can happen with lots of graduates, kind of with art, they become disillusioned with things quite quickly...what's that for in a way...to kind of connect with a kind of support network...things are still going on and people do still do stuff on quite an achievable level, rather than going to a big flashy show in London. I think, how do I jump from here to there I suppose, but it shows everything from the floor up really, from the ground-floor up and how everything works in between.*

There is a subtext here that progression in the art world can be somewhat of a mystery. Through exposure to other artists in collectives, respondents can access practice and career narratives, witnessing one another's development.

Similarly, Sylvie used her invigilation job at Spike Island to build convivial relationships with artist colleagues, whom she could ask for advice. She also joined Plan 9 artist-led group as an intern:

*(...) some of the artists I was working with were part of Plan 9, so when I graduated they were saying they would like new people to join and I was saying please can I be one of them, so that's how I got the internship there. I think I was just very aware that it was going to be hard and I just wanted to give myself all the chances, to surround myself with people who could advise me when I left uni.*

Apart from the sense of isolation, respondents also talk about the disorientation of the period immediately after graduation. There are many possible routes to take for an art career, but no 'official' trajectories. Keira left University of the West of England and became one of the co-organisers of the New Bristol Diving School artist-led group:

*I think also this year has been great for finishing UWE and having something to go into and having some sort of routine and direction.*

Self-organisation can simply provide a framework and a purpose to continue to practice towards collective goals in the form of projects, exhibitions, events and organisation of physical space. Importantly, goals that do not rely exclusively on one single individual's impetus to realise them. The momentum of the collective carries the members along with it. Keira adds:

*Without this year of having some direction I think I'd be completely lost.*

(...)

*We're all passionate about art and it's scary walking into a world where you have no idea and you need to create your own path.*



In certain cases groups have also inferred that an artist-led group might be able to provide an art education where there is no formal provision for that learning. In Belfast, for example there was no curatorial degree at the time of interviewing. Members of the artist-led group Catalyst mentioned one of their directors who had eventually gone on to study in Manchester because of this. Board member Tara speculated that Catalyst's ability to offer curatorial opportunities in the absence of such a course might have been a contributory factor in Arts Council funding being granted to the organisation. According to her colleague Andrew:

*Catalyst is a good opportunity for people...  
if they don't want to go away or can't afford to go away, they're not ready for it or they just want to get involved in the Belfast arts scene...and not just curatorial but everything...*

Tara remarks:

*It definitely gets you right into the scene.*

Andrew responds:

*Pretty much overnight as well.*

### Basing a Practice Outside London

The presence of these opportunities can affect graduates decisions about whether or not to remain in the city where they studied. Assuming respondents are not going on to further study immediately, the decision to remain in their university city or to migrate to a larger cultural centre such as London, is contingent upon several factors. Many respondents talk about the nature of the art scene as they perceive it in the city where they are based, as a vital consideration for this decision.

These interviews were conducted before the Coalition-led cuts to arts funding in 2011 and, as I have mentioned, some artist-led groups saw their future, in terms of forging closer, more lasting links with local colleges as potential centres for informal and peer learning. Engagement with, and emotional and practical investment in an artist-led group provides a compelling reason to base one's practice in a particular city and it is also within the group's interest to retain graduates where it can.

I guessed that, as with larger organisationally-led membership groups, framing the artist-led space as a potential site of further education or continuing professional development is not only a response to the multiplication of alternative art school experiments. It can provide these groups with greater leverage when applying for funding and can ensure a future audience and willing participants for group events.

Lucy at the Royal Standard in Liverpool describes the difficulties in engaging her local college:

*I hope we get some members who are current students who want to be associated with the Royal Standard and who want to learn from it I suppose. I'm guessing that they would be the more proactive students. I think that's quite important because there aren't strong links at the moment between us and JMU, (Liverpool's John Moore's University), and we've tried because they're kind of involved at the moment it's hard to pin them down to getting involved. That would be something that I think would be positive.*

Members of Catalyst speak about the potential for the group as a "centre of learning", not only for students, but also for the committee members themselves and they link the confidence to develop such a resource with their own ability to make a difference in the organisation. I discuss further knowledge sharing and the empowerment required to make significant decisions in artists' groups in Chapter 4.

Catalyst committee members, Andrew, Tara and Shaun make links between potential cuts in funding and the educative potential of the group:

*Andrew: I'm kind of apprehensive about the funding. Not so much for the programme, but as long as we get our rent and bills and all of that covered. If that gets taken away then we're in big problems.*

*Tara: I think they'll give us our rent. Like they won't want to be responsible for us not continuing. They'll just expect a lot more from us for a lot less.*

*Shaun: I think that they know that we're important to Belfast and there's a lot of people behind us as well, all the ex-directors and all the members as well. The members kind of see us as a platform for them. They know there's a chance that some day they could show here.*

*(...)*

*Tara: At the end of the day we're cheaper as well.*

*I know what you mean though, I mean where's Catalyst's function gonna be?*

*(...)*

*Shaun: The project space is a relatively recent change and that's one thing I think Catalyst does have at the moment, is a feeding ground for students to start showing their work even before they graduate. The second year show that happens every year now, they come in and put their work and they get it critiqued by their tutors and then there's the project space as well, so there's opportunities for ...*

*Tara: I think that's what I'd like it to be, it's good but a better centre of learning, so it's as much for the students but also as much for us in terms of when we come in here, you maybe don't spend 6 months thinking what the fuck's going on.*

Committee member Ciaran goes on to describe the proliferation in events, festivals and organisations that are starting up in Belfast and the positive effect this has had upon people's decisions to come to the city. However, he voices concern about the potential competition for funding this might bring with it, when several venues appear to have very similar functions. The image of a varied and rich art scene with different kinds of groups and organisations is repeatedly cited as a reason for graduates to remain in a city, and although this was unsolicited, artists

frequently spoke about levels of activity in their city in relation to London.

Ray at Outpost in Norwich talks about how activity (in terms of art fairs, organisations and artist-led groups) has a generative effect:

*There's a lot of grassroots thinking. I think Outpost provided a reason to stay and it's got to the stage where other things like Stew have started happening, which have a very different agenda, which is healthy because that then...more people stay because of Stew as well as cause of Outpost and before you know it you've got something else springing up. I think there's been enough stages of graduates staying to feel like there's a sort of strong community in Norwich, and it feels like, as a smaller city – and I had this thought after leaving Bristol – it's like it's a small focus of activity and we made comparisons in Bristol about places that were like places in Norwich but with four times as many bikes outside or ...but I think there's a concentration in Norwich, ...I think any of these regional places are in positions of strength if they're close enough to London, but not too close to be drained by London. The sense that organisations and art shows will attract activity to cities.*

As with Catalyst and Extra Special People, Collette sees Outpost as a platform for a stage at which artists can work together, learn from one another and then move on. So, this notion of participation in a peer-led collective as a phase in one's career trajectory and as one possible locus of interaction amongst many, is not only reserved to organisationally-facilitated membership groups:

*I just think that it's a great place to graduate from cause there is Outpost. There's so many opportunities to go onto from in the first few years, but there's not much more to go further. That's what I think I'm trying to hit on. It's a kind of first step of learning round then you move onto the next place or a bigger step. Just somewhere else, not necessarily bigger. Cause it just hasn't got that...I don't know if it's cause of it's size or what really.*

Like many other respondents, Collette and Ray talk about the presence of art fairs, institutions and other agencies as attracting a critical mass of further activity and opportunities to their city. In

Bristol, for example, the presence of the British Art Show in 2007 was mentioned by several artists in relation to mentoring schemes, fringe artist-led exhibitions and the renewed dynamism of the city's art scene.

Maeve moved to Bristol after graduating from her MA in Cardiff in 2007. She also refers to the diversity of art communities in Bristol as particularly positive. Here she feels she has room to manoeuvre with her practice, as opposed to the more stifling atmosphere she perceived in Cardiff and the acute level of competition in London. Her decision seems to hinge on quality of life as it interrelates with the experience she desires for her practice. She suggests that conditions in Bristol allow her the space for experimentation or exploration:

*There seemed to be a hard core, a very small hard core of artists that had been working and practising in Cardiff for a very long time, who had a kind of stranglehold I think. I mean I might be completely wrong. There always seemed to be a very tiny community and things started to repeat themselves very soon. There was a kind of feeling that there wasn't anything more to learn and that happened very quickly, and people here in Bristol said that'll happen here too you know, and maybe it will I don't know yet. It feels much healthier to me. There seems to be a larger community and more varied. I've met loads of artists who don't know each other, who don't know anything about each other and do completely different things and immediately that feels great.*

*It feels like a small London, a more comfortable London and that feels great. I found London, I find London, and certainly did when I was living there as well, quite overwhelming in its hugeness, and there's a kind of...you can get completely lost. There's also a really (...) it's really tough is London and I suppose I know that from when I was working in television that you had to be absolutely focussed on your career and holding onto that and there was no room for pussyfooting around and I don't want to feel like that, I really don't...about my practice. I don't want to feel that it's a dog-eat-dog career move...do you know what I mean? For me it's about making life...leading a meaningful life and that's why I left London so I think I'm sort of in the right place at the moment.*

Carl also points to the need to have his own identity or 'voice' amongst other artists as well as peer networks that give him enough support to want to remain in Bristol. Again, London is

presented as being both potentially intimidating and a place where peer networks are particularly difficult to access without a London-based graduate cohort:

*For me, having spent an awful lot of time having thought about moving to London, I think Bristol's got a lot going for it in terms of...for me personally because I've now got a really good network of people around me and I'm very aware of the benefits of networks of people just to support your practice and how that works in so many ways that you might never of realised before you set out on wanting to make work, wanting to be an artist or whatever. It's big enough but it's not so big that it becomes overwhelming or impossible to kind of find a voice.*

*If you didn't go there (to London) as a student, I think at my stage it probably would be difficult. I don't know, I think I might manage it, but I think if I was to, I'd want to go there as a student of some sort.*

Spike Associate, Diane sees the art community in Bristol as benefitting from the result of positive discrimination in funding. Amongst her artist peers in London it would, she feels, be far harder to make a mark. She presents London as more challenging and more 'real' than Bristol, where she feels artists are protected and nurtured:

*I think it kind of serves a purpose at the moment. It has been good for me in terms of my career because there's a lot of opportunities. Picture This – it's an organisation which really fits with what I'm doing so it has been really good being able to make these links here and I have made links because I have a studio, I was able to have studio visits and yes I try to take as much of the opportunities as are available while I was here, so it has worked for me in terms of having artist funding, people, proposing ideas. So I've used it, so compared to London – I suppose you will have a different, more exciting environment, a different way of meeting and establishing networks probably. Here is a kind of...your cushioned...and I think London would be a bit more harsh reality, well I don't know, you have more competition.*

*(..) because the Arts Council and the institutions are trying to create a vibrant community so there are things for you to do because they want artists to be able to stay here. Well in London it's not part of the agenda is it? So many artists! People do try to develop projects for artists but there are so many artists that it doesn't really matter if you are there or somebody else is there. Here it is much more part of the institutional agenda to develop local talent so in that sense you have more access to opportunities than you maybe have in London but maybe you have a different type of disability I don't know. I can't*

*assess how it would have been if I had stayed in London, if I would have been able to do the same projects there in a different way. I can't say yet.*

Her attitude, that Bristol “*serves a purpose at the moment*” also betrays an ultimate desire to move on, perhaps when these opportunities have been exhausted.

Overall, it is the presence of the mixture of larger organisations such as publicly-funded galleries and commissioning agencies, as well as artist-led activity that seems to allow respondents to build networks that keep them from migrating to London, at least for a few years. Moreover, respondents indicate that the need for affirmation, a sense of belonging and the space and opportunity to build up confidence through engagement with others is a crucial stage of their development.

## **CHAPTER THREE: IDENTITIES**

### **Learning Practice Identities and Artistic Subjectivities**

#### **Introduction**

Although the way respondents construct a sense of themselves as ‘an artist’ (i.e. their artistic subjectivity) or the way they describe and encapsulate the art practice they engage in are interrelated, for the structuring of this chapter I have contrived a separation between these areas. For respondents, who all regard themselves as producers of contemporary art, the range of practices they engage with can be fairly broad, and a sense of the identity of their practice may be dynamic and difficult to describe through a single term. Similarly, how respondents feel about their artistic subjectivity can shift according to circumstances. Accordingly, I subscribe to the social constructionist view that meaning and knowledge, and therefore the way we form identities, is an ongoing process of production, contingent upon social life. Moreover, I will argue that between themselves, learning processes often occur when artists employ the narrative or descriptive mode. It is the stories that artists tell to their peers about themselves and their practice, as much, if not more than the information they impart that affects the learning of identities and the construction of subjectivities.

Respondents learn the construction of both practice identities and artistic subjectivities through shared affinities with their peers, through resonances in thought, attitude and action, as well as through the recognition of differences. Through interaction



with peers, respondents imagine and experiment with new ways of practicing and experience places to dwell that engender a sense of belonging and therefore a way of seeing themselves and their practices.

In this chapter I will look at reflection and reflexivity from different disciplinary perspectives, principally informed by philosophy, organisational studies and educational theory. Educational theory, from experiential learning models to critical or radical pedagogy has made reflection and more contemporaneously, reflexivity, central to learning processes. John Dewey believed that reflection and experience were bound up together and that both were vital to adult learning, but also that the interaction of internal and external forces were equally important in interpreting the educational experience:

The two principles of continuity and interaction are not separate from each other. They intercept and unite. They are, so to speak, the longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience. (Dewey, 1938, p42)

Dewey later influenced David Kolb in his development of a theory of learning styles. According to Kolb:

learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. (Kolb 1984 in Tusting and Barton, 2003, p32).

In Kolb's learning cycle, reflection is seen as a necessary constituent of this process of transformation, preceding and succeeding action. Underpinning more contemporary learning theories is the holistic thinking of humanist psychologists, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow who influenced J. Mezirow's theories around transformative learning through critical reflection (Mezirow, 2006). In these and other developmental theories critical reflection and regard for the opinion of others is seen as something that feeds into self-improvement and self-expression, portrayed as

an active process, rather than a series of discrete events. Mezirow presents such transformational processes as occurring over varying durations:

Transformations may be *epochal* – sudden major reorientations in habit of mind, often associated with significant life crises – or *cumulative*, a progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in point of view and leading to a transformation in habits of mind. Most transformative learning takes place outside of awareness. (Mezirow, 2006, p94).

I regard the reflexive processes that I have explored with respondents as cumulative rather than epochal, developments that happen incrementally as a result of repeated interactions and processes of individual reflection and practice. In this chapter, I look at the gradual synthesis of practice narratives, informed by Paul Ricoeur's theories about literary character formation in narratives (Ricoeur, 1992). I challenge organisational theorist, Andreas Wittel's thesis on "networked sociality" (Wittel, 2001). In response to Wittel, I would like to highlight the part of "narrational" as well as informational exchanges in artists' entanglements, and to recognise how these play a part in the formation of identities.

I will also examine how artists may hold back from forming artistic subjectivities and practice identities so these resist full articulation as completely knowable or transparent, but still incorporate a synthesis of sedimented social exchanges.

In his theory of "networked sociality" (Wittel, 2001) Andreas Wittel maintains that networks and communities are characterised by different types of social relations:

In networked sociality, social relations are not 'narrational' but informational; they are not based on mutual experience or common history, but primarily on an exchange of data and 'catching up'. Narratives are characterized by duration, whereas information is defined by ephemerality. Network sociality consists of fleeting and

transient, yet iterative social relations; of ephemeral, but intense encounters. (Wittel, 2001, p51).

He relates the 'narrational' mode to Ferdinand Tonnies's

"Gemeinschaft" theory of community:

Communities share a common geographical territory, a common history, a common value system, and they are rooted in common religion. (Tonnies, 1979)

Wittel asserts:

In the age of individualization, identity depends increasingly on an awareness of the relations with others (Berking, 1996). Network sociality is not based on a shared history or a shared narrative. Instead it is defined by a multitude of experiences and biographies. (Wittel, 2001, p65)

I have found that the formation of relationships and exchanges of information amongst respondents is often based on narrational knowledge, and that imagination plays an important role in this. As I will show, both in this and other chapters, shared history, values, ways of thinking and the related narratives of others are an important part of subjectivity and practice identity construction for artists.

### Learning Practice Identities Reflexively with Peers

Before feeling able to experiment, many artists look to one another to search for commonalities and resonances, to find out where their practice sits in a wider contemporary art landscape.

Positioning one's practice becomes particularly important in times of transition, but also when practices do not seem to fit into a specific niche. This might mean affirming the legitimacy of artworks, events or projects and, through reflexive encounters

with other artists, synthesising these seemingly disparate acts into a 'practice', as I will show with the following examples.

After graduating from Advanced Music Studies at Bristol University, Carl had started to meet and make friends with Fine Art graduates and then later developed an artistic practice involving performance and ethno-musiological research, which he situates largely in contemporary art contexts. Following graduation, it was less the specific practices that these Fine Art graduates were engaged in that inspired him, but the way in which they *thought* about creative practice:

*much to my interest I found that they had a kind of an engagement with their work, creatively and critically that I found really interesting and felt I had a lot in common with.*

*(...)*

*the sense that you just sort of could have a lot more control in what you were doing yourself, rather than having to fit into this vast hierarchy of the classical music world. Things could just be a lot more kind of almost punky and sort of DIY. It seemed really exciting. I remember being taken to the Cube and seeing an exhibition by a friend of mine, and just thinking "God this is so different", but at the same time it was really engaged and critical and committed and intelligent. It wasn't like the experience that I'd had when I was trying to fit into these bands, which I found really just kind of not enough.*

Although he did talk about seeing shows at the volunteer-run cinema and music venue, the Cube in Bristol and had started to look at performance work, Carl said it was not necessarily the actual events that seemed significant to him:

*(...) more an attitude. Sort of a seriousness and an interest and engagement and a sense of being widely...widely cultured I suppose, widely read. You know, lots of film references, a much broader cultural reference...frame-of-reference...and my music background (...) people kind of found that interesting as well.*

Later, while working at the Arnolfini gallery, Carl initiated an informal peer critique group for the gallery stewards and other guests, and he and I co-organised a quarterly multi-disciplinary

salon-style event based around experimental approaches to language. Carl describes the development of his practice as a “gradual accumulation of insight” and in relation to the performance art community he refers to a “gradual growing awareness of that scene”. This incremental development over time has happened not only through the seeking out of attitudinal resonances and commonalities, but also through deliberate exposure to difference and critique.

I relate this experience to Grant Kester’s portrayal of gradual transformations, as opposed to the shock of sudden change. Kester states:

We (...) need a way to understand how identity might change over time – not through some instantaneous thunderclap of insight but through a more subtle and no doubt imperfect process of collectively generated and accumulatively experienced transformation (...).  
(Kester, 2004, p123).

The process of reflecting upon and reflexively constructing a practice is discussed by Paul Ricoeur in terms of narrative synthesis. Ricoeur presents *practices* as a taking-into-account of other agents through “external” interactions (e.g. conflict, co-operation, competition) and internalised interactions; as learning is sedimented it becomes competency:

One can therefore play alone, garden alone, do research alone (...). These constitutive rules, however, come from much further back than from any solitary performer; it is from someone else that the practice of a skill, a profession, a game, or an art is learned. (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 156)

Ricoeur describes the dialectic synthesis in literary narratives of discordant events with the “line of concordance” of a character (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 147). Discordant-concordant synthesis involves the chance events in a narrative weaving into a character’s “line of concordance”, giving the impression that the events were

inevitable or fated. Simultaneously these events become entangled with a character's identity. I propose that a similar process of composition occurs in the social construction of artistic careers and practices, consisting as they often do of seemingly discrete projects, exhibitions or residencies, and relying for a sense of cohesion, on the entanglement with, and exposure to, fellow practitioners.

I discussed the development of Islington Mill in Salford with the owner, Nick and also how he saw his own practice identity. He had studied fashion design at St Martins, London, but the Mill was developing into a thriving centre for a variety of art forms as well as incorporating a self-organised 'Art Academy':

*I saw myself as my approach to design, or why I wanted to design or the things I wanted to design were possibly concerned with some of the things that people who I'd describe as artists were [concerned with], and that because my partner at the time was on a visual arts course...I was essentially doing the course parallel with him. There was constant discussion. (...) He did very well on his course and I think I learnt a lot from kind of piggybacking along too.*

*(...) just being able to have those conversations that appear to be on a level. I mean he was kind of an undergraduate BA visual artist and I was a postgraduate fashion designer, but whereas some people might say as a fashion designer you might know something about buttons and selling something to Marks & Spencer's – that's what you talk about. We were actually talking about the stuff that artists talk about (...) communicating ideas. These ideas, thought-images, ways of being that you are wanting to be able to explore, discuss, talk about, understand and how you then present that back to other people, and why and how and what is most successful, the language you choose to use and the method you choose to use.*

Through discussions over time and exposure to his partner's practice, Nick experienced practices, thoughts *and* ways of being that resonated for him. He recognised an epistemological and ontological approach as an *artistic* approach, and as an approach he could potentially apply to his existing skills and practices.

I see this approach reflected in Islington Mill itself, in that it is a site for enormously diverse practices, yet coherence lies in the tenants' approach to the realisation of those practices.

Pippa had studied photography and was practicing as a photographer and making artists' books. Through a friend she had met a Dutch artist who was looking for British artists with whom to set up a collaborative exchange and exhibition. She eventually took a pivotal role in the project, helping to invite and coordinate the British artists. The resulting project, *Vice Versa* included a trip for the Bristol-based artists to Gronigen in Holland, an exhibition for the Dutch artists at Motorcade/FlashParade gallery in Bristol and a seminar on collaboration at Spike Island.

Pippa talked about the effects of the project on how she regarded her practice:

*In terms of my actual practice, I was the only photographer in the group...and that's another thing, am I a photographer, am I photographic artist, am I an artist using photography? It made me think about that debate - a lot, and in terms of the validity of my practice within that context.*

*It's almost like photography's too easy and so it made me look at my work in a different way and look at the complexity within my work, within my images and the ambiguity within my images, so it's made me look at more subtlety within photographic practice, (...)*

*So the first work that I exhibited in Gronignen was (...) I'd specifically edited my work and made a triptych that was ambiguous, because I didn't think that straight photographic works would have fitted in with the rest of the work, and we made an exchange visit to Groningen in the Summer and we went around on studio visits with one of the other group members and it was great.*

*I took some of my prints along and I had a chance to talk (...) I really took that opportunity to discuss my work with these artists and to find out which ones they liked...again bridging the gap between the photographic art world and the 'Art' art world. You know, there's quite a difficult area to traverse in the middle.*

The 'Art' art world is seen as having boundaries. One's chosen definition of practice becomes problematic if that practice is perceived to transgress those boundaries at times. While Pippa

adapted her work to make it fit more comfortably into a fine art context, she also gained a different perspective on her work through its placement. By taking an organisational role in the collaborative project she allowed herself to have important *access* to dialogue and exchange both with other artists and also their practices. Simply by participating in, and thereby co-constructing this project with them, she sedimented certain affiliations for her own practice.

The discordance she experienced with fine art practices - she describes certain differences of approach during the interview - became synthesised with the line of concordance of both her practice and her artistic subjectivity.

The Communities of Practice model (Wenger, 1998), as explored by Welsh & Dehler (2004), looks at the community as a framework in which the individual and the social shape one another; here I will substitute 'practice' in the sense of *type of activity* for *creative practice*. By organising reflection, the authors maintain, participants gain access to one another, define how practices might fall between certain parameters and assess which practices are worthy of their attention. Through asking questions of one another and one another's practice participants also become motivated to reproduce certain practices. So the individual and the social practices both accrue an identity and a narrative line incrementally coalesces:

(Communities of Practice) mediate between individual beliefs and social knowledge; between claims for legitimacy and political patterns of authority; between claims of significance and the processes that allocate social attention. (Welsh, A and Dehler, G in Reynolds & Vince, 2004, pp24-6).

I would like to reiterate that these reflexive processes do not *solely* legitimise a set of practices or knowledges, nor do they *solely* allow



access to certain communities of practice. They are also modes of constructing *new* practice identities, which resonate with ways of being, as well as ways of acting in the world. By placing herself in a practice situation where she was not sure if she felt at home and by exposing herself to previously unfamiliar practices and practitioners, Pippa opened up new avenues for experimentation:

*The second piece that I did as part of the project definitely pushed my practice to a place that it would not have been in otherwise at all, and I really like that. So really the people I met and the conversations...I mean putting yourself in that kind of environment where you were travelling and you are open to something new gives you a chance just to experiment and to try something and because it's part of a group show as well and you produce one piece, you can make a terrible mistake or you can fluff it and it doesn't really matter, so it's really important to play.*

Pippa's comments suggest that the collective nature of such a project enables greater risk-taking, because an amorphous group identity can take precedence over an individual practice. Although the *Vice Versa* project *did* have a public exhibition element, I believe that the mixture of practices and attitudes of the participants acted to suspend identifying parameters for the project, hence the situation fostered experimentation with new forms. Participants could experience their familiar practice in relation to another's unfamiliar practice in an unfamiliar context. The nature of the experimentation can simply reside in the way in which Pippa made her practice face and converse with other participants' work.

The integration of creative practice identity and the construction of individual subjectivities are embodied by another collective in which Pippa participated: *Girl Gang* is a loose collective of female artists who meet periodically for "dares and adventures".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 4, where I have discussed *Girl Gang* in terms of "kinetic energy" and collaboration.

Girl Gang members equip themselves with new skills and stories, inducing jealousy and admiration in equal measure. Girl Gang sanctions the exploration of different modes of behaviour via a slight change in individual perception. Gang members explore how a small shift in thought only can influence behaviour and free self-imposed constraints. <http://www.girlgang.net/> [accessed 25.07.11].

Pippa collaborated with some of the group on a performative work staged in the self-organised space, Central Reservation in Stokes Croft, Bristol (active March-July 2010):

*I was offering psychiatric advice. It was tongue in cheek and I did a kind of...it was funny...pushing people out of their comfort zone...kind of pushing myself out of my comfort zone. So I did that, but I also did something we'd talked about just through emails. We talked about a performance by Vallee Export from the 1960s.*

I asked how Pippa had become involved with Girl Gang initially:

*I went along to one of their kind of public events and then they invited me for an initiation and what I really like about that group is that it's not about making art in the traditional sense. It's about state of being, an outlook.*

Pippa had completed a psychology degree before studying photography. I was interested to see how she, like other respondents who had previously studied in disciplines other than the visual arts, reconciled these different areas of learning through interaction with peers. Reconciliation seemed to occur in part through a retrospective integration of their creative practice with a sense of self, the formation of ontological continuity or cohesion along the lines of the narrative synthesis outlined by Ricoeur.

This emerged as Pippa told me about the Spike Associates reading group, an informal group I co-ordinated from 2008 to 2011, which was originally set up as a way for people to discuss texts, theoretical and otherwise in a non-academic context.

*(...) these other things, I mean artistic practices and artistic dialogues that go on are helping me understand what my work's about and that's an ongoing process and the reading that I do, the academic reading and coming to the reading group, the Ecocriticism, those things that I do are directly related to how I express myself through photography so it's all connected. It's like I'm trying to understand who I am, a human in this world for this eighty years or*

*whatever that I live. I'm also really interested in space and I did neuropsychology. I'm interested in science, I did a science degree. It needs to make sense for me so I'm kind of making my own theories all the time to understand what my work's actually saying.*

Exposure to critique, artist talks and dialogues in the reading group contribute to narratives that feed into the way that Pippa understands her practice identity.

Critique is an important process for respondents in terms of the development of practice identities and artistic subjectivities and this is the area I explore further in Chapter 4. I will also look at certain examples below to discuss how the experience of peer critique contributes to the construction of practice identities.

In November 2009 I recorded and participated in an informal group crit organised by Carl at the Arnolfini for stewards who were also artists, and other friends. Carl used this crit to share his own work-in-progress. After watching his performance piece, participants made observations and questioned him about his feelings about the work:

At one point Carl sprays milk onto a white shirt:

Participant 1: *Why milk?*

Carl: *Well melancholy. I've been thinking for a while about listening to music and what that is as an intense private experience and this gradual realisation that the act of listening is kind of performative or can be, and the work that I've done previously to this is sort of exploring that kind of thing, but that whole idea of doing something very introspective and melancholic, (because obviously you are recording something that's not there)...it's inherently an entirely melancholic thing to do to listen to a piece of recorded music. The idea of that and then having the self-consciousness of it being performative. I thought that kind of tied in to this Elizabethan idea of fashionable melancholy, and when I found this song, which I've known for ages, but the two connected – 'I Saw My Lady Weep'. I was reading the lines. It's almost like a...it's so beautiful and so sad, but you know, watch it, because you might ruin your life. I just thought it was interesting. Does that answer the question?*

Participant 1: *I think so, but why the sleeves, why not all of the shirt.*

Carl: *I was thinking of the cuffs and the idea of hands. Hands are very expressive. They are our interface with the world, and the idea of them*

*exuding fluid. I was very nervy beforehand so my palms were very sweaty and I was thinking about stigmata. I think yeah the idea of wet hands.*

Participant 2: *And you were using your hands throughout, picking things up carefully.*

The critique is far more than a simple imparting of information about practice. Carl talks about the origins of his ideas and realisations that have fed into the work and he connects these with his practice history. As if the crit were a process of psychoanalysis, he charts the connections he makes and the development of the piece as a story, the story of a piece of work emerging according to his interpretation of potential symbolism and his feelings about his actions. Participants respond to his thoughts and actions in a spirit that is partway between curiosity and challenge. The process is one in which potential angles, adaptations and interpretations emerge out of the collective. Each artist may draw parts of the crit that resonate for them into their own 'practice narrative', and in this way help to shape practice identities.

In a Spike Associates peer crit, (24 January, 2011) Abigail showed several video and installation works. She began by giving a brief history of her work and the materials she had been using, her concerns and interests:

*Abigail: This is the step further from the little Snow TV Snow piece, which is a visualisation of data that's in the atmosphere. This is GPS data, so it's taking that which is a GPS device like a SatNav or what you have on your iPhone and then I worked with a programmer who works with pure data to build a patch, 'cause basically the GPS works with a device that is in constant communication with several satellites overhead, and there's a lot of error in that ... error signals. It's not how it's presented in your SatNav device. It's always going forward, there's never any error...you're always in control and I'm really interested in that*

*(...) If you've ever used a SatNav it shows you only a certain amount of information like where the nearest petrol stations are or the nearest MacDonald's. I'm interested in that that it's like an unstable...people often present the GPS as a stable, solid device and people place a lot of trust in it. Like I've had a lot of arguments with my Dad when he's stubbornly gone with the GPS.*

Participant 1: *So what is creating the variations? If that's the GPS and that's just sitting, why is the image changing?*

Abigail: *Because even with the static GPS there's a lot of information that comes from weather, like cloud cover. There's a lot here because the signal's bouncing around the building and we're not near a window. There's about ten satellites that it gets the data from (...). With this patch every 20 minutes it stops and then it re-builds the image again.*

Participant 2: *So what are we actually seeing?*

Abigail: *We're seeing a tonal image where the tone is built up through the error data of the GPS.*

Participant 3: *Being channelled through a programme?*

Abigail: *Yeah I'll show you the patch. That's the patch.*

Participant 3: *I'm clear now (everyone laughs). That in itself is quite interesting.*

Participant 2: *It is, yeah.*

Participant 2: *This follows the original one with the snow, cause it's live.*

Abigail: *And a sense of revealing stuff that's always already in the air.*

Participant 2: *Constantly changing...*

Abigail: *Yeah.*

Participant 5: *It is in the air.*

Abigail: *Yeah. I've started getting quite interested in artists like Christina Kubisch, who uses headphones. She's an audio artist who produces these headphones that reveal Wi-Fi signals and radio signals in the atmosphere.*

Participant 2: *Like it's only electronic static in the atmosphere isn't it.*

Abigail: *Yeah, and if you're wearing them she'll design maps of cities where she's working and you'll go up to the cash point or outside the stores and you can hear the security systems.*

(...)

Participant 2: *There was a great one in Leeds where it was an old clothes shop and she had cables overhanging and you could more or less compose something just by walking into the shop.*

Participant 5: *It's amazing what you can pick up, especially with old radio stuff, cause I remember at one point right next to our telephone we had a massive pile of wires, copper wire and whenever I made a phone call I got*

*Virgin Radio, because the copper wire was picking up the signal because there was enough of it and it was just using the speaker as the handset.*

*Participant 2: I was making something on a residency. I was staying in this cottage and I was recording a kettle with a contact mike and I was picking up this church service. I wasn't using radio mikes but all I heard was this church service going on inside this kettle.*

As with most crits, Abigail and other participants mention a number of other artists whose practice seems relevant to the work being discussed. Names, materials, technical details and ideas are often noted by participants, but it is the sense of practice as a journey that gives it its particular character or identity. This synthesis is obviously necessary for the efficient communication of practices, but it also gives participants an idea of a set of reference points to identify that artist with and prompts questions, comments and anecdotes as well as thought-experiments that expand the possibilities for the work. Simultaneously the experience of communicating this narrative to others gives the artist a sense of history, continuation and repeated tropes for their practice, which can help them to further communicate, build upon and also promote that practice with this cumulative or aggregate sense of practice identity.

Because participants are prompted by a focussed duration in which the work is physically experienced, reactions arise from emotional and bodily responses as well as from intellectual recognition. Identification is affective as well as cognitive and such experiences are best described in a narrative form.



**Fig. 6: *Pure Flow*, 2009, Digital Installation, Katy Connor. Credit: K. Connor**  
Peer critique is a process of collective, collaborative synthesis of meanings, techniques and references that contributes to an aggregate practice identity.

## Negotiating Project Identities

As I explore more fully in Chapter 4, the relationships between artist-led activity and membership groups can be symbiotic, in the sense that both artists and organisations benefit from those interactions. This is also true of associational identities. For example, apart from its enhanced access to networks, audiences and practices, Spike Island benefits from its association with the New Bristol Diving School group in that it is advantageous to identify with a young and vibrant artist-led culture, making the larger organisation seem relevant, exciting and useful for recent graduates, as well as potentially improving funding capabilities through links with local artistic communities.

A differentiation between the identities of artists, groups and organisations becomes significant when artist-led groups and organisations work together. Controversially, in these circumstances, artist-led projects are often pursued with little or no financial remuneration by way of a fee. Organisations may provide expenses for a project being held by a group in their space or under their auspices, but artists benefit from services such as marketing by the organisation, the provision of a venue and the added reputational value that these affiliations provide. I will not argue here for the potential ethical and political issues raised by the low or non-payment of artists for their work. There are, however, as I explore in Chapter 4, sometimes tensions that arise in terms of reciprocity between parties.

For example, two of the collaborative projects I was involved in contributed to institutional programmes: *Tertulia* (April 2010 - ongoing), a salon event for language and creative practice and *Art + Writing* (May – August 2009), a series of workshops based on the



intersections between art and writing. I devised and organised these projects with collaborative partners and they were hosted by Arnolfini and Spike Island respectively, who also contributed towards travel expenses for speakers. I mention these projects because I found that it was through conversations with other practitioners that I was able to explore ways of working with organisations without payment, whilst retaining claims to provenance for the projects and the identity and personality of those projects. Because these relationships are dynamic, the negotiation or discussions are ongoing. For example, as *Tertulia* accrues reputation, it may become more desirable for other organisations to host it, or as organisations acquire or lose funding they will favour certain projects above others. This means that there is an ongoing, if sporadic, checking-in with one another that artists engage in, in order to discuss these relationships and how they impact upon practice and artistic identities.

Online platforms for projects are a way of maintaining an identity or identities for an artist-led project that is differentiated from organisational identities, but that still acknowledges these affiliations through 'hyperlinks' and other textual references.

As far as art communities are concerned platforms like blogging, Facebook and Twitter are ideal for the dissemination of promotional identities, images, reputations and information. Rather than replacing face-to-face social relations, in the case of respondents these platforms often act as a supplement to, and extension of offline projects, contacts and relationships and *strengthen* a sense of 'community' around groups and projects, rather than diminishing it. In the case of *Tertulia*, for example, we used the project blog to document disparate events held under the *Tertulia* umbrella. As I have discussed in the case of Central

Reservation, this enabled a distributed and aggregate identity in terms of practices, but an identity that could retain its own 'personality' or cohesion for the sake of ownership, provenance, communication and promotion. We could inform peers about the kind of practices we showcased, and therefore communicate our curatorial approach. A supplement to this is the Facebook 'event', created for each separate session, which gives that session a more personalised identity and enables us to build a community of peers around it and for those people to be able to see one another.<sup>23</sup>

### Suspending Practice Identities

A community of practice can become an obstacle to learning by entrapping us in its very power to sustain our identity, (Wenger, 1999, p175).

I write in Chapter 4 about "extended communities" that are informally affiliated to artist-led groups, about how they contribute to the build-up of those groups' histories and mythologies, and therefore contribute to a sense of group identity. In Chapter 5, I discuss how artists choose to make deliberate alignments with groups and organisations to make their practice visible in a strategic way. While groups may acquire a sense of legacy over time through the practices, aspirations and expectations of members and organisers, the identity of the group can sometimes act as a constraint. Certain artist-led projects attempt to avoid this drive towards coherence.

In some incidences respondents have deliberately held off or

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<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 5 for a discussion of how respondents construct online visible affiliations with organisations and groups to promote practice.

suspended identifying their practices in recognition of the weight that an explicit identity can carry with it. Art organisations and institutions can acquire particular identities in the eyes of artists, and respondents seemed aware that by affiliating projects and practices with certain organisations they could potentially 'brand' practices with those organisational associations. This includes the practices championed by individuals attached to those organisations and the histories and mythologies organisations accrue. Through the presence, strength or absence of their ties with organisations artists make statements about the identity of their practice, its ownership and mediation as well as the potential commodification of practice as creative capital. Artists often learn the meaning of affiliation with certain organisations (as well as residencies, groups and individuals) over time, by noticing the alignments and affiliations made by their peers, moving from a position of naïveté to one of greater knowing.

Brian, a performance artist and graduate from Cardiff, had recently moved to Bristol when he initiated a collaborative event called *Spotlight*. The collective used a small gallery space in the city to stage this one-night event in order to show new work and receive feedback from an invited audience. Brian expressed a keenness to find his place in Bristol and he had already established links with other artists in the city, but did not want to replicate the existing performance "scenes". In fact, he described his perception of a compartmentalisation of different practices across Bristol as one of the main differences apparent to him from practising in both Bristol and Cardiff:

*Spike and Arnolfini's responsibilities to certain scenes or divisions within Arnolfini, (who I've had a lot to do with) ...the two separate departments of live art and visual art. And having, I guess two universities, sort of out of which different practices come (...)*

He did not find this arrangement conducive to his own practice and he contrasts this situation with Cardiff:

*(...) in Cardiff (...) I guess it it's a smaller scene and a smaller city, there seemed to be a lot more overlap and a lot more supportive overlap as well. We'd always go to Chapter openings or G39 openings, cause everybody knew each other and in the same way people from the visual arts would come to performance stuff. You know, galleries like Chapter or Tactile Bosch would host both without a problem, so yes, that's something that I've definitely noticed...here. So then I've somehow located myself between the two, feeling kind of displaced.*

One of the decisions Brian considered to be important was his siting of *Spotlight* in Two Degrees gallery, a gallery that was “not an established space in any sense”. So the reputation or the curatorial remit of the gallery would not precede, and serve to define the work shown.

Furthermore, artist-led spaces and arts institutions tend to attract a loyal, regular crowd to their openings, so this decision signalled the absence of an established gallery reputation or already existing group of affiliates that guests could identify the work with.

According to Brian, his collaborators would not normally regard one another as having similar or complementary practices. Instead their associations were through paid employment or friendship. This reiterates for me that it is a *way of thinking* or an *attitude towards practice*, a kind of *inclination*, that often provides the basis for mutual identification and a reason to come together; an attraction towards an attitude, approach or a set of references can transcend any concern about the exact nature or medium of the practice itself:

*(...) none of our work sort of fits within any existing scene or style, you wouldn't identify it with any existing scene or community within Bristol, so perhaps I was making a slight point of that...*

*...creating a space where we could, where we had that freedom to do what we wanted (...)*

Even after producing *Spotlight* and a subsequent event, *Aeon*, Brian and his collaborators resisted forming a cohesive group that could be identified as such and would go on to produce further events:

*we sort of prefer a sort of loose impromptu collective.*

He talks about the reasons for not formalising the group:

*I guess....there are certain sorts of responsibilities or kind of contracts that come into play then, be they sort of social contracts or power relations or (...) once it sort of has to have a name or it has to have (...) are we a group and why? Why is it that us five are a group, four or five or six, and who can or can't join that group and why? (...) It was more sort of collectively organised, but I think we sort of like that fluidity. Then, if any one of us do or don't want to get involved, or if we want to do something somewhere else, that we don't have to sort of identify it as a thing.*

The events were part exhibition, part performance, part critique or social event, but they were not adequately encapsulated by all or any one of these terms. The construction of unique events without familiar precedents had several effects. *Spotlight* was removed from the powerful hermeneutic authority of local art organisations and disconnected from their reputations, so this mitigated the likelihood that guests would have expectations of the work according to these associations.

Instead critique, comments and interpretation came from guests and fellow participants, and guests were largely friends or friends of friends of participants.

In the case of *Spotlight*, the practices were all performative, but the practitioners came together from different art scenes, so further disrupted the notion of an appropriate audience or mode of reception for the work. This suspension of fixed identities, a making-foreign of practices, allows artists to experiment with new approaches and forms. Brian later spoke about how the event had

produced a desire amongst some of the participants to be able to work in an even more collaborative way, blurring the boundaries between each discrete piece of work. This desire to collectively devise a piece of live art is something he would like to go on to explore within a similar “fluid” construct.

Imagination can be employed to test new possibilities in practice. It precedes the trying-out, extending, adapting, disrupting and generation of new artistic subjectivities and practice identities. Imagining together, in reaction to and reflection of one’s peers is particularly potent. I explore the momentum built up in a ‘third space’ between collaborating artists in Chapter 4. The voicing, enacting or making-material of imagination with others is often the first stage in forming previously unrealised identities:

Imagination of how things could be otherwise is central to the initiation of the transformative process. As the process of transformation is often a difficult, highly emotional passage, a great deal of additional insight into the role of imagination is needed and overdue. (Mezirow, 2006, p95).

According to Wenger:

The work of imagination entails such processes as: recognizing our experience in others (...) defining a trajectory that connects what we are doing to an extended identity, seeing ourselves in new ways (...) conceiving of the multiple constellations that are contexts for our practices (...) opening up to distant practices through excursions and distant contacts (...) documenting historical developments, events, and transitions; reinterpreting histories and trajectories in new terms; using history to see the present as only one of many possibilities and the future as a number of possibilities, generating scenarios, exploring other ways of doing what we are doing, other possible worlds, and other identities. (Wenger, 1998, p185).

Wenger refers to the role of imagination in the reinterpretation of trajectories. This is a process of synthesis or entanglement and disentanglement that I liken to the reflexive formation of practice identities as narratives.

In Chapter 4 I discuss collaborative relationships and look at how collaborating partners are often required to compromise in terms of letting go of ideas, or rejecting or setting aside familiar ways of working, a process that can cause discomfort and anxiety as well as excitement. In letting go of ways of practicing, however temporarily, artists are also relinquishing markers of identity

As artist Pat put it at the debate I chaired on collaboration, (Back Lane West artist-led space, Redruth, Cornwall, 2009):

*Why the hell would anyone want to collaborate? The point of collaboration is that you allow yourself to do something that you wouldn't, because you get terribly familiar with your own practice and really familiar with the conventions of your own practice: 'I always do this this way.' For me the really nice thing about collaboration is that suddenly you can't do this this way, because you've got this awkward bugger whose meant to be doing this thing with you and that's causing you to re-think what your doing, and that's what I think is interesting about (it).*

Other respondents cite examples where they have forced themselves to experience a position of awkwardness or discomfort.

Sylvie (previously mentioned in Chapter 2), a graduate from BA (Hons.) Drawing and Applied Arts at UWE, had initiated the *Bristol Drawing Club* with a recent fellow art graduate. She and her collaborator had initiated the idea while working together as invigilators in the Spike Island gallery and advertised it with an open Facebook page<sup>24</sup> and poster campaign. They publicised a location, (a local bar or café), provided a time and drawing materials, and regularly invited people to come together to draw for an evening. In part, the *Bristol Drawing Club* can be seen as a reaction to and strategy for coping with the pressures they felt after leaving college:

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bristol.drawingclub>.

*(...) we spent a lot of time in our studios feeling pressure to be creative, to be good. I think certainly on my part there was this need to just remember what it was like to just have fun and to be a bit silly with art and to have an informal kind of setup to kind of do little doodles in, rather than going in and thinking right I've got to do something amazing today (...)  
It's very informal and it's just something that isn't defined that much and that's a simple idea, but I think that what makes it work. I think that's what people look for.*

This lack of definition meant that participants, not knowing precisely *who* the group was aimed at were potentially less likely to decide that the group wasn't for them, and a cross-pollination developed between artists and non-artists. The emphasis on inclusivity, lack of formality and desire to simply *have fun* gave the group meetings the air of an *event*, and they were promoted as such, on Facebook and on the group blog.

BRISTOL DRAWING CLUB is a social platform for Bristol based drawing enthusiasts, which was initially founded by Bristol artists who wanted to get back to drawing outside of the context of their studios (and have a good excuse to go for a few drinks with their friends!). This soon developed into regular meets taking place in different venues all over the city, allowing artists and non-artists to mingle through a shared passion of drawing.  
<https://www.facebook.com/bristol.drawingclub/info> [accessed 21.06.12]

Sylvie also distinguishes between different kinds of practice, doodling for fun as opposed to being “creative” and doing “something amazing”. Although she talks about the amount of time it takes her to organise the group meetings, and the impact this has on her studio time, she says:

*(...) I think it's more that it's affected my attitude to my work. I can step back from it, go to Drawing Club and come back with fresh eyes, and also see what other drawing artists are doing which can be inspiring and also sometimes reassuring. It's good sometimes when they look at one of my doodles and say, 'yes I definitely recognise that's one of yours, I really like what you're doing', you go back to your studio feeling a bit more enthusiastic and positive.*

Although she doesn't consciously create ideas for her practice in the club sessions, there is an unintentional impact upon her studio



practice, (which Sylvie sees as her central practice). This extends to the way she sees herself and her capabilities more generally. The sessions produce a mixture of affirmation or confirmation, having her practice acknowledged as recognizably unique to her, and *contrast*, exposing herself to other practices. She does this in a space that she does not identify as her main practice space, so decentres her practice, or rather her approach to it. In this territory where her practice 'signature' is still acknowledged, she can afford to experiment, to take risks.

Sylvie talks about how she has deliberately placed herself in a situation that is potentially personally challenging and uncomfortable:

*I don't work well in that kind of environment, which is also why I did it to force myself to sometimes just relax and let go a little bit, but I need silence and peace and no-one around me to work really, so yeah it hasn't directly fed into my practice, but it's kind of allowed me not to become this kind of little artist on her own in her studio and really kind of locked in cause if anything people from Drawing Club have to come to my studio to pick up the materials to go, and every time I do that it means I have to show them my work because it's on the walls, so it kind of makes me open myself up to that as well.*

Sylvie expresses a desire to open up her practice and to expand the way she thinks of herself as an artist. She describes a relinquishment of control, a letting go of her usual approach to work and the accompanying discomfort this engenders. Whereas fear and pressure to produce have had an inhibiting effect on her practice, this space where the *idea she has* of her practice identity and artistic subjectivity is slightly de-focused and held more loosely can act as a pressure valve. There is a sense of relief and release that succeeds this relinquishment. The cross-pollination with other artists and those who regard themselves as non-artists also enables participants to challenge assumptions that may have

sedimented over time about good and bad, right and wrong, successful and unsuccessful practices.

There is a tacit negotiation at play, an attempt to balance a level of familiarity that fosters trust and social ease, and at the same time allows difference to enter or emerge, to be recognised.

If the identity of a social situation or group remains provisional, can those involved accommodate difference more easily, acknowledge it without assimilating it?

There is a less of a desire to achieve a consensus about practice, and more concern towards the enabling of a reflexive process. In these examples, there is little desire to arrive at a singular *meaning*; in the words of Chantal Mouffe, these situations hold open an “undecidable terrain” (Mouffe, 2007):

Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices, (Mouffe, 2007, p1).

Events and practices can be titled for the benefit of publicising them and creating a ‘buzz’ around them and for the convenience of aligning them with other events, but naming does not always reify the meaning, the content or the extent of the reach of those events and practices. Naming can be a rationalisation, a foil, a joke. It never entirely encapsulates identity.

The three artists who initiated the self-organised space Central Reservation in Bristol, (active from March - July 2010), programmed it to accommodate a range of events and disciplines: an art market, exhibitions, residencies, music, dance, talks, etc. They expressed clearly that the projects programmed for the space came first and that its identity was conceptualised afterwards:

*Anita: It was hard in between, because we wanted it to be formed within that time, but also not to get too caught up with having a fixed identity (...)*

They were concerned about constraining projects with an identity that they might exceed. This was a temporary project space, so neither did they have the time to develop a strategic coherent approach.

As with most artist-led projects that I have discussed Central Reservation had both a project blog and a Facebook page. The blog [<http://centralreservationuk.wordpress.com/>] is an ideal platform to present such disparate events under one 'umbrella' identity. It provided links to individual resident artists, participating groups and individual events that took place in the space and, as with many other ventures discussed it acted as an extension and supplement to the project, a way of acknowledging peers and affiliations, but also sharing the distributed, aggregate identity of the project.

The construction of spaces for practice, where concept and practice is not prescribed or directed, can elicit a process of *becoming* in both practice and identity. So, while not *independent* of other affiliations, the coming-into-being for artists in these situations of discourse or collaboration does not have to be constrained by familiar codes, hierarchies and knowledge structures:

This space between representation and reality, text and context, expression and experience, language and being, is the necessary and indispensable space of judgement and critique, creativity and value, resistance and change. (Finn, p336, 1996)

By holding off the strict or singular identification of practices and situations, artists are making a space and duration habitable, somewhere where they can both temporarily dwell and explore.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In Chapter 4 I discuss a "dwelling" space, informed by Andrews (2006) and Engstrom (2007) as a space between collaborating artists, in which energetic momentum and excitement can build up, thus catalysing further practice.

Colm had practiced for several years in Bristol following his BA at Glasgow and preceding an MA at University College, Falmouth. Although he engaged with many creative practices during that time, including producing projections for clubs and events he identified his art practice as something separate:

*I was at Jamaica Street (studios) and I didn't feel any connection with anybody else there so I just felt I was going in isolation and doing my thing, which was 2D works and prints, drawings and I did have a little exhibition at the Cube of a body of work I had put together then (...) so I guess that that was the proper work, doing that on the wall and doing all the expanded cinema stuff, mucking around with overlaying films and doing programming and doing this stuff wasn't my main artistic endeavour, so I guess, I always thought that I wasn't being an artist because I wasn't in the studio.*

He then got involved with the *Blackout Arts* collective:

*I'd been becoming a technician and being a VJ (...) and again I definitely didn't see VJing as my fine art practice or my art practice. It was a kind of applied arts, kind of like fulfilling a task, blending music with imagery and that had always attracted me since doing club nights in that you could put on stimulating imagery to people that are not used to art in formal spaces, (...)*

He describes how these collaborative projects started to feed into his Fine Art practice:

*I guess I started developing a lot within that, my own thing, which was 'flicker', and which was projections made with hybrid films and cut-up films that were soundtracked live, so it kind of started then to become more...bits of work came out of those two or three years of playing around.*

The playful attitude or approach towards creativity Colm experienced when engaging in these disparate practices became something he later actively desired for his 'art' practice:

*for that first year after the MA I applied to loads of things and didn't get anything (...) I was a little bit demoralised and was working on applications that were only coming to possible fruition later this year. So there was a lot of... far too much time sitting in front of a computer really and totally losing any flow in terms of having a studio practice. I guess just that thing of trying to apply for things or get to know people through that internet network and these different institutions has kind of almost totally destroyed my sense of playfulness or, you know practical play.*

Although neither *Blackout Arts*, nor the *Bristol Drawing Club* were identified by these respective respondents as their 'Fine Art' practice, or were pursued with the intention of furthering this practice the experience of participating in these collaborative situations seems to have affected the identity of both Colm and Sylvie's central practices. It both broadened the range of their influences and skills, and decentered the artists' focus, forcing them to renegotiate how they compose an idea of their 'fine art' practice.

Both artists retrospectively re-appraise experiences like making "doodles" or "mucking about" in the light of a spectrum of art practices. For example, Colm refers to "practical play", as if playfulness can be a method and means to an end as well as a diversion.

### Forming Artistic Subjectivities through Peer Interaction

In Chapter 5, I explore the alignments practitioners form with groups as a means of promoting their practice. These are also important in the formation of artistic subjectivities. Indeed, one of the stated intentions of organisationally run membership groups like the Spike Island Associates or Extra Special People at Eastside Projects is to provide a sense of identity through affiliation to a group. Sally at Extra Special People says:

*Primarily I talk about this sense of how it can be quite isolating being self*

*employed or having this sort of strand of your time where you're on your own potentially and how we offer a kind of group identity which can be really useful or just a group, a support structure.*

As I have mentioned when discussing Brian's projects, these larger organisational identities are tied up with reputations that they acquire over time. As artist Philippa says of the Spike Associates, (Membership Groups Debate, September 17 2009):

*I think it's also useful that it is affiliated to an institution so you can bring that kind of institutional kudos bearing, so that can help I imagine, one could use that to help you do other things.*

I was interested to see to what extent respondents saw membership of groups like Extra Special People or the Spike Associates as contributing to a 'professional' artistic identity. Amongst practitioners there seemed to be a need to associate with one another to reaffirm or legitimate identity both as artists and as professionals. In talking to respondents about their values and what they regarded as important for the development of their practice, or for simply being an artist the sometimes problematic relationship with non-artists was highlighted.

Urban Social Geographer, Alison Bain suggests that the construction of an artistic identity with one's artist peers is a means by which artists can gain professional status within the art world. However, she believes that artists conspire in the misunderstanding and devaluing of their work on the part of non-artists, due to the *nature* of their labour: often isolated, working irregular hours in an unregulated market, meaning that any problems they face in work are less visible. Bain maintains that artists perpetuate the romantic myth that they are isolated individuals who sacrifice money for freedom.

For example, she states that the reluctance artists show to mention non-art jobs, pursued to support practice on their CVs is a

possible example of a wilfully fractured identity. Furthermore, through working at home or in studios, she suggests their work becomes associated with personal, domestic and non-rational spheres of activity, (Bain, 2005):

(...) without clear institutional and definitional parameters to distinguish professional artist from art hobbyist, the qualifying term 'professional', in the arts, is, for all intents and purposes, an empty signifier that does not guarantee quality or excellence nor signify a degree of economic and social status. Furthermore, without this professional guarantee, as Cliche (1996: 202) has argued, it can be difficult to ensure 'that society and the marketplace recognize and compensate artists for their works'. Thus artists enjoy few of the rewards and privileges and little of the political power and 'respectability' that is generally associated with professional culture. To be a professional artist, then, essentially involves successful claim and defence of professional status through the construction and maintenance of an artistic identity. Once committed to, in order to make that identity believable and sustainable, it needs to be confidently asserted to oneself and to others. (Bain, 2005, p34)

To what extent do artists learn an artistic subjectivity from one another and how much is this tied up with an idea of professionalism that might be recognised within and without the contemporary art world?

Bain had only interviewed lone studio-holders, and tended to stress the isolation of artists' work. I have found the formation of artistic subjectivities and professional identities to be associated with multiple situations of interaction and affiliation between artists. These various situations seemed to me to be as important a part of the practice landscape for respondents as is their studio time.

Bain's paper is somewhat outdated now in the light of increased Facebook usage, the volume of artists who have online professional profiles on platforms such as Axisweb [<http://www.axisweb.org/>] and LinkedIn [<http://www.linkedin.com/home>] and the use of Twitter to share

professional opportunities. The rapidity of change in Internet use means that even since interviewing respondents between 2009 and 2011, platforms like Twitter have developed and many respondents who did not have online professional profiles or websites will now have them. Although I will not make a detailed analysis here of professional online identities for artists<sup>26</sup>, I will make the point that like other freelance creative workers artists use online platforms to create professional profiles as well as networks: using ‘dedicated’ platforms such as LinkedIn or Axisweb and personal websites they can differentiate these professional online identities from purely social networks, something that it is more difficult to do using Facebook. I believe artists either actively interrogate their peers to advise on the editing and presentation of these online identities or they carry out their own research online to see how other artists are presenting themselves.

Nina had moved from the US to Bath and involved herself in the art scene in Bristol, renting a space at BV studios, Bristol and joining the Spike Island Associates. I asked her about her decision to rent a studio and she said that this was a question she re-considered each time she moved location:

*I found that not having a studio was almost like not having memory, cause I feel like the studio kind of holds the place and it's a container. It's not just holding stuff. It's sort of holding the place of the action.*

(...)

*one thing I've done throughout my whole practice and my colleagues and my husband have helped me to do this, is as an artist, at least in the culture I come from, you know you're not really considered a professional and so you have to – I found I have to invent my own professionalism. So I have to come up with and find ways to categorise things, so like I'm going to New York, that's a deductible expense. That's an important thing I have to do if I'm an artist. I have to get there and meet people and see new work. So even though my corporation isn't going to reimburse me for it, so having a studio when I walk*

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 5 for a discussion of artists' various online profiles.



*in that door, even though I don't know most of the people in the building, I never see them, I know that this is a place that we are all coming to do this thing that we believe in.*

*It's a little bit like being in art school like walking into the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. I had amazing experiences in that building but really the best thing was just walking inside and we're all in agreement right that this is a valid way to live our lives, and it's really important. Whereas when I'm in Bath and I'm walking around and I'm meeting people and they're going so you're a painter and they have no sense and no even like ... 'do you have a job too?' I don't mean to colour people in Bath as stupid at all cause I've met fantastic people there but it's a more conservative place and I haven't met many artists there who are trying to work in a conceptual way. So it really helps to be in a milieu where people are like 'oh yeah...what you're doing is...'*

It is enormously important to Nina that she regularly and routinely practices in the company of people who share, value and take seriously her choice to be an artist. However, her artistic subjectivity is constructed as a result of the formation of strategic relationships, which are different and supplementary to those formed in her studio:

*You have to have something, some aspect of your life that reinforces your identity as an artist. That could be a relationship with a gallery. I mean some artists they get on a track, they're making their work, and they really don't relate to other artists that much. They like what they're doing. It's successful. They have a close relationship with their gallery, they're selling, and that's the loop that they're operating within, you know, and that works for some people. But, I think you have to have something, whether it's a peer group or an institution – a lot of artists I think go into teaching – so that they can have the 'I teach art therefore I am an artist' – 'people see me as an artist cause I teach art and I hang out with artists all day', and having a studio, so I think it really helps to have some tethers, something outside of yourself that reinforces that you're an artist, and then you have to have an incredibly fierce desire to do it because if you're just doing it to be cool or to have fun or to, god help you, make money, you know it's not gonna work out too well.*

For Nina, it's not enough to simply say, "I am an artist". She also needs qualifying and supporting people and institutions.

Nina has been practising for many years, but for recent graduate and Spike Associate, Robert, the inadequacy of the label 'artist' alone is keenly felt. He sees it as a description that needs to be earned:

*I think, fine art...contemporary art, you always have to justify it. (...)*

*There's always that undertone of always having to kind of justify yourself. I think that's having to ... always show that you've done things...*

He refers to a friend of his who has to respond to questions from his family about making money, but also to the pressure he feels from other artists to be *doing*, and to *have done* certain things to deserve the title 'artist'. This is far from the idea of seeing one's artistic life as a calling that one is born to follow, and closer to that of artist as a professional practitioner with a series of demonstrable achievements marking a career trajectory. Moreover, it is important that these achievements are recognised by one's peers. Miranda is a sculptor, Spike Associates member and also an ex-studio holder at Spike Island. When I spoke to her she was doing a short residency organised by the Sculpture Shed at Spike Island and was raising funds to return to India, where she had been practicing and where she wanted to embark on a second residency. She had supported her practice by leading educational art workshops, as well as through public funding and the occasional sale of her work. I asked her whether she was influenced by other people she met apart from the artists she had come across in her studio:

*Miranda: Well, I suppose my family in some ways. My family are very much nine to five, having quite a boring job kind of thing so I think that ... I've let myself be held back by quite low expectations of 'an artist isn't a proper job', all that kind of stuff...so I suppose that has been having some effect. That's another reason why it's quite good to go abroad because you get away from those kind of influences.*

*MW: So it's kind of an indirect effect?*

*Miranda: Yeah. I suppose it's more of a psychological one. All that sort of stuff's quite important actually because being self-employed, being an artist, you have to be quite self-motivated and very promotional etc (...)*

Miranda links the lack of worth placed on her artistic practice by her family with a need for activities such as active self-promotion. At several times in the interview she mentions her perceived lack of professional practice (she refers to “R&D”) and brings up the idea that she hasn’t been “*proactive*” or “*go-getting*” enough in this area. Self-promotion is strongly linked to the construction of a professional artistic identity: indeed, it is seen in contemporary art education as part of ‘professional practice’. This idea of a professional identity is also linked to a conception of social acceptability or respectability.

Miranda expands on her studio culture and the difference between the “practical” as well as the “support” network it offers, differentiating between the two. As well as identifying an artistic direction she talks about finding a position in a wider sense, “in the world”:

*It has always helped practically in terms of looking at other people’s processes and how they make work and then their approach to making work as well as the sort of practical hands-on. But I suppose it’s always useful in terms of comparing yourself to other artists, like where they’re going, their direction and is that a similar thing you want to do? You know, it’s like finding your own path.*

*In the midst of lots of other artists, everybody has their own angle on how they’re going to make their art and their place in the world kind of thing.*

This search for a ‘path’ can be akin to a process of narrative synthesis of the sort described by Ricoeur, constructed through listening to stories about another’s paths and practices.

The formation of an artistic subjectivity can rest on recognising or inclining towards a particular approach, and this can include an inclination towards a shared understanding of intensity or *commitment* to practice. Geraldine Finn, writing about the organisation of identity by language has described the,

pathologising of our experiences of excess, disjuncture, difference, ambiguity, undecidability, contingency and chance. (Finn, 1996, p338).

I want to suggest that such experiences of excess, undecidability and chance are positively accepted amongst many respondents in this study. Indeed, it has been my experience that these are integral elements of artistic subjectivities and practices, and are not necessarily divorced from an idea of professionalism.

Sandy, an artist who works a lot with socially-engaged practices, talks about what she gains from attending the Spike Associates reading group and talks and seminars at Spike Island. In her discussion of interaction with artists she touches upon this notion of a tolerance for “excess” and ambiguity:

*It's being able to talk and exchange with a huge amount of freedom actually, because it's within a set of understandings and shared...it's not necessarily shared thinking, but shared acceptance of a diversity of thinking, so I'm not expecting the people in the room to be approaching it from a particular framework as I would be with most other professions, or at the same time having a depth and a rigour and a deep interest – because a lot of the time of course I'm working with people outside of groups or organisations – and I'm working with communities – and there is a far more diffuse sense of identity or involvement, and it'll be that people's passions and interests are pursued in their lives (...) and to tap into those is very different.*

*So there's a certain kind of ease and equity, combined with the rigour and the ... depth of involvement, is really good for me. And I like the stimulus with the reading group (...) and through that finding out different people's weird and wonderful interests and their work, what their themes are, what they're working with – is really interesting to hear about, and also affirming about me going into something obsessively or taking something as far as I want and having the affirmation about pursuing something in the way that an artists does.*

Play can be serious and commitment can be playful. This is often expressed in the use of language and where identity and practice are woven together, a depth of commitment to an idea or practice is allowed. I do not want to perpetuate a myth of the marginalised, irrational artist led *purely* by emotion. I argue that within these frames for interaction, artists *aspire* to take one another seriously, whether they share similar practices or not, and that in itself can

allow for the expression of intensity whilst at the same time being deeply pragmatic. This intensity can often catalyse action, so practice and reflection are contingent upon one another in the formation of artistic subjectivities.<sup>27</sup>

Respondents learn about their practice through exchanging practice narratives, often inclining towards a way of being or a set of references rather than a particular medium. As much as they negotiate deliberate alignments with organisations and groups to reaffirm their professional identity and differentiate their group or project identities, they also construct collective situations away from these influences in order to suspend practice identity and experiment in a non-aligned space. Working collectively, respondents are often conscious of discomfort and challenge. However, a certain amount of discomfort is accepted. Indeed, such situations can provide the means for an artist to temporarily relinquish a strong image of their practice identity and allow themselves to experiment.

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of equivalence of commitment in artists' peer-led interactions.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ENTANGLEMENTS AND ENCOUNTERS**

### **The Social Structures & Relationships of Artists' Peer Learning**

#### Introduction

#### Conceptualising a Landscape of Entanglements and Encounters

Rather than trying to identify discrete communities or networks I have traced a social landscape of interrelated entanglements in which artists encounter one another. These include both dense clusters and more widely distributed constellations linked by ties of different gradations of intensity. Respondents invest differently in different areas, but sustain a tapestry of connections.

They occupy both temporary and more longstanding entanglements, bounded, but still porous. These may be horizontally, rather than hierarchically structured but still contain 'knots' of influence or power. They often form symbiotic relationships with other collectives and organisations. The relationships formed may cohere around temporary single foci (an exhibition or event, for example) but the influence of these relationships will resonate throughout multiple spectra of collective engagements and actual physical platform will also usually have a virtual online platform.

Much contemporary sociological literature separates the notion of 'community' in the sense of Tönnies's "Gemeinschaft" (1887) - a group of close-interrelated ties of reciprocal trust and mutual dependency - from 'network', which is more akin to Tönnies's "Gesellschaft" (1887), based on looser, more flexible ties. Putnam (2000), Coleman (1988) and Field (2003) have all discussed social capital in terms of the loosening of communal bonds

between people and an increase in flexible ties based on utility. I look at artists' entanglements in membership groups and artist-led groups in the light of these discussions of strong and weak bonds and cross-reference this with references to Mark Granovetter's work on the strength of 'weak ties' (1973) and Brian Uzzi's work on collaboration and 'small world networks' (2005).

On a social-constructivist note, I refer to Etienne Wenger's work on the place of learning as participation in *Communities of Practice* (1998) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) ideas about the trajectory of participation as applied to artist-led groups. I have been informed by Rossiter (2006), Mezirow (2006) and Engestrom (2001), as well as Deleuze and Guattari (2004), in my examination of the ways that bodies within collectives (including organisations) are affected through encounters. I also refer to Michael Farrell's (2003) work on dyadic creative collaborations.

Extending from these constellations and clusters into the temporal realm, I look at the "extended communities" around different artist-led groups: the influence of shared history, legacy, mythology and knowledge handed down and passed on from ex-members with an investment in that group.

Many artist-led groups, events and intentional interactions are constructed to be informal, convivial and discursive social spaces.

I look at participation in these dedicated social spaces, as well as at the role of informal public arenas such as the pub. I consider the centrality of the informal conversation for learning between artists, for accessing their peers both individually and in collectives, and its importance for exploring and developing practice.

To extend the focus upon informal conversation between

artists I consider the role of art events, events that are discursive but also practice-centered. I look at the private view and other discrete events as a forum for knowledge exchange, community cohesion, an 'escape valve' for tension, a celebration and a generative locus for creative energy and dynamism.

I look at the concept and realisation of the 'critical community', and at critique as a significant element of respondents' learning processes, both as convivial and antagonistic experience. I explore forms of democratic exchange that allow for the acknowledgement of difference without its assimilation, through the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 2007) and informed by ideas of democratic forms of pedagogic discourse from Rancière (1991) and Freire (1998). I also examine the place of hospitality and reciprocity as a shared aspiration for artists' peer-led entanglements and encounters.



Part 1. Participation with Artist-Led Groups:  
Gaining Access and Confidence: Friendship, Participation and the  
Social Space

Jack Mezirow described transformative learning as the acquisition of a certain disposition:

to become more critically reflective of our own assumptions and those of others, to seek validation of our transformative insights through more freely and fully participating in discourse and to follow through on our decision to act upon a transformed insight. (Mezirow, 2006, p91).

These elements of free critical reflection and free and full participation in discourse form a large part of artists' engagement and subsequent learning in their entanglements with artist-led groups and projects. In the informal situations that I discuss, participation and the transformation can occur as a result of it, often builds up incrementally, and may not be explicitly recognised until an opportunity for reflection (such as the research interview) presents itself:

Transformations may be *epochal* – sudden major reorientations in habit of mind, often associated with significant life crises – or *cumulative*, a progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in point of view and leading to a transformation in habits of mind. Most transformative learning takes place outside of awareness. (Mezirow, 2006, p94).

Moreover, it is more often a desire for social and practice-orientated participation with a group, rather than a conscious desire to acquire knowledge or information that inspires initial engagement; groups and initiatives establish themselves as social hubs to encourage participation.

In their gravitation towards an artist-led group, friends and acquaintances who are already engaged with that group often provide the initial excuse for respondents' entanglement, as do

private views and events. Patrick, committee member at Transmission, Glasgow describes his first encounters with the group:

*It's intimidating at first because all of these people know each other very well. You'd come to an opening and there would be like 200 people there and people would be in these tight groups, so it was kind of frightening to begin with, but then ...that was two years of architecture, but then I did my first year of fine art but I felt a bit more relaxed about things. I think I just started to invigilate and then collected my membership.*

*I was keen to do that. I knew people that were on the committee as well from the early 2000s and friends who graduated at that time who were showing as well so that broke things down a bit. So, it went from being this experimental gallery that was a bit frightening to go to the openings of, because you didn't really know who to speak to just being something that was more accessible and I kind of got, cause you're a member for a start, so you kind of belong to it.*

*(...)*

*I think that's what you do through getting yourself involved. I mean you get yourself involved quite well through invigilating and just being around for openings and so on.*

Ray, a committee member for Outpost also became involved through an acquaintance and through events at the gallery:

*I suppose as a first year student there was a social element. There was someone who was also invigilating leading up to being on the committee and also in a collective and in his third year at the art school. I think, although my conversations with him were probably quite vague in those days there was a social scene in the collective 'Romance Romance', music nights that were attached to the art school. I remember that being the first sort of access point into a social scene that existed around this gallery.*

*(...)*

*I was very loosely attached to Outpost socially.*

Tara, committee member at Catalyst in Belfast also had a 'way in' through friends and social events:

*(...) my housemate, she's an artist, she's a friend and she's on the board and she said, "Catalyst are looking for board members and you should go and check it out". I knew Catalyst from the parties they used to have ...I never came to the gallery or anything when it was a gallery space and then well I just came along and did a trial for a month and thought this is actually time well spent.*

Although Tara was not a graduate of the University of Ulster many of her fellow board members were. Sean states:

*With our group, a lot of them actually did the degree together and came in ...so there's that kind of bond that just moved from university into Catalyst. And then I know Andrew who I did the degree with. He joined and I was here anyway.*

Both Patrick at Transmission and Ray at Outpost mention the need for confidence when initially participating with an established group and the potentially intimidating social scene that surrounds it. For both, a build-up of confidence and increasing participation have gone hand-in-hand and formed an integrated and protracted process. Patrick comments:

*After art school I was just doing that typical thing of trying to earn a living, still being a member and still going to lots of openings and things and by that stage I think I would have amazed myself before going to art school. I could come to openings by myself.  
(...) I think the more you engage yourself with the gallery, that barrier keeps on shifting. Then it doesn't feel so unnatural to join the committee...it's something that kind of happens.*

Ray adds:

*It took me – to start volunteering and to be more actively involved – it took me maybe two years. So to be able to approach it more confidently I suppose.*

Because many artists initially access these groups through friends and *with* friends through social events, an assumption can prevail that the groups are 'cliquey' or exclusive. Andrew, one of the nine committee members for Catalyst eventually joined this group after some years outside the Belfast art scene. He recalls that his initial impressions were not favourable:

*I wasn't really involved in Catalyst until I started. I was aware of it and I came in once or twice but I didn't really like the place to be honest when I was at art college.  
(...)  
It felt from the outside like it was a group of mates just having a laugh, and I didn't really feel a part of that so I didn't enjoy coming.  
And then if you did want to volunteer at the start you do get a bunch of shit jobs to do so if you do come and volunteer you're going to clean that floor out there (...) I just didn't have a good feeling about the place.*

So friendships and acquaintances provide an important access point for artist-led groups. However, groups also capitalise on their status as social hubs to encourage participation in general and once artists have found a way in, both their engagement and confidence increase proportionally to one another.

There is, therefore a need for artists to cultivate tacit skills based on forming relationships, as well as a need to maintain an overview of existing relationships in order to increase their chances of accessing resources in art worlds.

Sarah Pierce argues for the informal convivial exchange as a site for tacit learning processes between artists in a way that emphasises the interdependency of individuals in a collective:

When we discharge education as a curatorial 'trope' or aesthetic, we begin to understand the relevance of projects in contemporary art that are serious about the types of exchanges that are not possible, are effectively unavailable, through art's dominant mechanisms of 'display' (...) projects that resist institutionalisation, whose emphasis (..) "lies in discourse and exchange rather than presentation."

The very behaviours by which we come to 'know' education begin to shift away from institutionalised notions of pedagogy and instruction towards something more convivial and expansive. It is perhaps useful to consider 'conviviality' as set forth by Ivan Illich, the Austrian thinker known for his polemical work on informal education, who enlists the term 'conviviality' to describe *a range of autonomous and creative exchanges among people*. For Illich conviviality is the opposite of manipulation, which is the dominant type of institutional treatment. Conviviality is humble and spontaneous, interpersonal and facilitating. It is here, in a distilling of the institutional impulse into something more mutual, reciprocal and interdependent that we can recognise the productive potential of an educational turn in contemporary art. (Pierce, 2008 - online)

Pierce's description of convivial exchange presents an image of the artist as not solely motivated by institutional legitimation.

Artist-led groups and projects provide social hubs around which artists can become part of a scene, attending private views, talks, peer critique sessions and participating in projects and events. This

is a significant way for them to explore ideas about potential directions and assess information about opportunities (e.g. what competitions or residencies are worth applying for), whilst also interacting around art practices<sup>28</sup>.

For many artist-led groups, research into other groups whom they regard as their peers is an important part of their formation and development. Respondents often hear about a group's reputation through word-of-mouth or a face-to-face meeting via one of its members. A mutual acquaintance of a one member may have worked with another. The group's website, blog and social networks can make these face-to-face connections explicit through links, references, 'friends' on Facebook and 'followers' on Twitter. These platforms can also act as an important supplement to, and extension of face-to-face meetings. For example, Rowan, working with the temporary artist-led initiative Central Reservation in Bristol was aware of Moot artist-led gallery in Nottingham, and although she had not witnessed these projects in-situ, she referred to the documentation of past projects on their website:

*I think I was telling you that I was looking at Moot's website and they had archived all of their...because they turned their gallery into a bar towards the end. I thought, that sounds rubbish, but I looked and it was actually really interesting and they did lots of different events. Like they literally built a big square bar and they had pumps and everything and they had themed food and then they broadcast the election and they had a night where they just showed slides (...) that idea of an event that we were interested in and I would be really interested in looking at that idea again, of what it is to have an event as opposed to just a private view.*

This event-based way of working resonated with practices Rowan was exploring at Central Reservation.

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<sup>28</sup> Mutual awareness of other artists practice is in itself a form of engagement that affects practice, and I explore learning through the effects of proximity more closely in Chapter 4.

Ray from Outpost group in Norwich talks about the knowledge that arises from ongoing engagement with an artist-led group. Experiential knowledge about practice and the connections and relationships between groups and individuals is something that cannot be transmitted by passive engagement alone (e.g. on the periphery of a group or through observation online):

*I feel like I've learnt much more about the mood of contemporary art from Outpost, and its placement in the activity of contemporary art than I did as an undergraduate (...) just a better idea of the workings of artist-led practice especially, how small that network feels as you step into it and strong ideas about peer-based learning. I've just made a trip to Bristol and that really came out of relationships formed through Outpost originally. That happens with different cities and you see what other cities are doing and you start to have a clearer idea of what the nation's doing, or the nation outside London's doing.*

In November 2009 I chaired a seminar about artists' exchange projects, involving several artists who had worked collectively in Gronigen, Holland and in Bristol. Here, participating artist Philippa voices her reluctance to make learning from such experiences explicit:

*It's really subtle and I think trying to put words on it...I think this thing about trying to know and own and say this is what's happened and justify it...somehow it spoils it for me sometimes, because it's the personal relationships. I look around at these new people I've been working with and it's very human. It's very basic. It's about friends, meeting new friends and people don't really talk about that underneath shows, the relationships. In this kind of project I think a lot of the time they're fixated on institutions or whatever and there's an expectation that the work is the end product. It's the process and the friendships to me that make me feel like it's worth making the work with people and... and just understanding new things about myself and about the world. It's research.*

Here the specific relationships that develop between individuals create parameters for the learning situation and the unique mixture of tacit and explicit processes in each circumstance mitigate against its simple expression.

I liken the forms of knowledge that artists gain through their increasing engagement with groups to Clémentine Deliss's notion of "initiate knowledge":

(...) it is selective and accessible only unto a few. It takes time to find out where it lies and who holds the key to it. It is encoded in such a way as to prevent easy reading, and it contradicts or aggravates the production and consumption of art practice as part of a cultural and educational industry, be this through the standardization of certain theoretical tendencies, topical concepts of artistic research, or frameworks for artistic visibility. (Deliss, 2008, p51)

Less explicit or easily verbalised forms of communication can be realised during face-to-face meetings.

For many respondents regular online interaction about practice is often supplementary to face-to-face interaction, with the exception of promotional activity on Facebook and Twitter. Spike Associate member Rowan talks about the merits of face-to-face meeting as opposed to online communication:

*I've spoken to people via email but it's quite hard to get beyond any sort of politeness. I think when you meet someone in person it's completely different and I think there's a lot to be said for... you can meet someone online and say, "I'm really interested in your practice". You can have that level of conversation, but then if you meet and then you actually also get on personality-wise I think suddenly it becomes something quite different.*

Often practice-led collaborations entail a build-up of momentum that enfolds within it an embodied awareness of one another, fed by impromptu exchanges and mutual readings of non-verbal codes<sup>29</sup>. Audio artist Theo puts it thus:

*They're just two opposites of communication. With emails I suppose there is much more consideration. You have time to prepare your thoughts, think things through. I suppose, in person ... you're feeding off each other in person.*

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<sup>29</sup> I discuss in greater detail the 'charge' that can be generated during collaborations in Chapter 4.

Access to and participation with artist-led groups pivots upon relationships and entails the kind of tacit, situated knowledge that can only develop sufficiently through face-to-face meetings, albeit with supplementary interactions online. Learning in an entanglement of such relationships relies on the group as a social platform, developing confidence, helping decision-making and engendering practice.

### Discovering Competencies<sup>30</sup>

Because of the lack of formal role assignments in artist-led groups, and because of what are often short time frames for the realisation of projects, as well as financial constraints, an attitude of 'pitching in' rather than protracted reflection acquires greater urgency.

Experimentation with roles is an important developmental opportunity in these contexts and can lead to the discovery of previously unacknowledged competencies. At Catalyst tasks are differentiated into sub-groups (i.e. Sponsorship & Funding, PR, Web, Finance etc.), but members have the flexibility to try out a variety of roles:

*You don't want to be treading on anybody else's toes, and if you come in and you're like, well I could do the PR bit and try that out and if it doesn't suit you, you can move. It's not really set in stone (...) you're definitely free to have a go, and see what each of the sub-committees function as and what tasks are required. It's basically, for everything that needs doing in the gallery week to week. Three sub-committees cover everything and it's just a matter of applying your personal skills to an area that kind of needs addressing.*

Although the sub-committees are named, each specific context (exhibition, project, exchange, funding bid etc.) will demand

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<sup>30</sup> See section: 'Continuity of Learning in Groups' for a discussion of informal 'work-shadowing'.



particular competencies. So, in actuality the roles are adapted to particular individuals, rather than vice versa. As Ray says of the Outpost committee:

*The idea of roles comes in waves. I think they build up depending upon people's experiences or interests.*

Respondents report that the competencies developed through direct experience in such a group context become entangled with a sense of personal discovery and ownership, even though the ultimate goal might be a shared one. Guy of the Royal Standard group in Liverpool comments:

*That's quite nice defining what you're good [at] and finding what you're good at cause you're building it cause its yours, cause you're making it up, so that sort of professional side, it's been a lot about the development of that.*

Guy also claims that he had benefitted from having a greater level of responsibility working with an artist-led group than he might otherwise have done working for an arts institution with the same particular qualifications and experience. Tara at Catalyst had sought out internships at many arts organisations before getting involved with the group. As opposed to being given tasks that she felt were menial, she talked of “*time well spent*” at Catalyst:

*The responsibility that you have allows you a lot of ownership, and the responsibility for all these things when you volunteer that are worthwhile.*

The willingness to negotiate roles between peers and the ability to experiment with a variety of roles can mean that artists become exposed to potential new identities, other than, and in addition to that of visual artist, but still within the visual arts realm. It is also probable that the practicing of competencies through experimentation, and the collective or individual sense of authoring of those practices helps to form what Wenger refers to as “*identities of participation*”:

What makes information knowledge – what makes it empowering – is the way in which it can be integrated within an identity of participation. When information does not build up to an identity of participation, it remains alien, literal, fragmented, unnegotiable (..) to know in practice is to have a certain identity so that information gains the coherence of a form of participation. (Wenger, 1998, p220)

Spike Associate, Sarah describes such an exploratory phase during which she engaged with and initiated various self-organised projects:

*I spent a long time just trying to figure out my place in the kind of broader circle (...) the other roles that existed in art, because being an artist, you know, being a full-time practising artist isn't the only way to exist in that world and for that whole thing to keep moving there's a lot of roles that need to be filled.*

### Collective Decision-Making, Responsibility & and Risk

Respondents also spoke of the necessity of remaining flexible and relinquishing control when making collective decisions, particularly within the strict time constraints that artist-led projects often necessitate. Members of the New Bristol Diving School discuss decision-making:

*Keira: I think it's good that we all know each other so well now that we kind of just have to let happen I suppose. It's got to the point where we're just 'right just let it be and go with it'. There's no point in dwelling on it or getting angry because it would just cause more tension.*

*Murray: Also, nine people trying to agree on one subject, it doesn't happen so you just have to let go. That's the freedom, because in your own practice you can make every decision, but in this kind of collective you've just got to trust in other people and then hope for the best (...)*

I wondered about the extent to which there was a desire to avoid conflict and maintain group cohesion by reaching a consensus wherever possible. However, the production timescales within which respondents often work also called for rapid consensus forming as a pragmatic decision.

Rowan speaks about the Central Reservation artist-led space in Bristol. Her fellow collaborators both worked for art galleries, and she described how their 'professionalism' in dealing with such timescales had affected her. She compares this to a previous collaborative space she had been involved with:

*I think I learned a completely new set of skills really (...) I could definitely recognise a different approach from their jobs. There are ways of doing things which are really useful to know that me and John just guessed at. Marketing in particular, there's a whole set of time scales that are just in your brain, because you obviously do that week-in, week-out, whereas for me and John it was always - oh man we were supposed to do that 2 weeks ago, oh and we haven't done that either. You know, not necessarily everything went out on time but we kind of knew we had a looming deadline. So there was that professionalism, which was kind of good to just know in a way and to see how things can be done, but then also because of lack of time you just have to bend and fit really.*

Members of Central Reservation also speak about the sense of freedom that comes from individual anonymity in a collective and the resulting 'diffusion of responsibility.' The shared responsibility in these situations of collective realisation, and the need to compromise on a 'vision' and adapt ones usual way of working means that, intentionally or not, respondents can feel like they are taking risks with practice.

John had collaborated with Rowan to create an artist-led space in Bristol (active January – December, 2008). John describes the effect of their combined approaches on the project:

*Rowan's objectives, if we'd done it on our own, probably would have been polar opposites and that's what made it work I think. Because she was much more concerned with other people's models. (...) With every decision she was asking peoples advice all the time, whereas I was just like - we are in charge we can do whatever we want - and had it just been me I would have run out of money long before and probably got thrown out actually, and I think if just she had done it, it would have been too safe, so with me taking too many risks and her not enough meant that it took just enough and survived that whole thing. So it was quite a good combo.*

In a subsequent section on Critique and Ethics of Interaction, I address the tensions that can arise between friendship and dissensus. The desire to both maintain group cohesion, but also let in unfamiliar influences is partially resolved through the deliberate structuring of groups and events that allow this.

### Group Structure, Private Views and Events: Sustaining and Generating Energy

The majority of artist-led groups I spoke to had adopted a structure modelled on the Transmission gallery committee: a group of directors forming a voluntary committee represent the wider membership. Each of the directors serves for two years before standing down to allow another director to begin their tenure. Other than Transmission, Catalyst in Belfast, Outpost in Norwich and Royal Standard in Liverpool each follow this model.

The New Bristol Diving School also renewed itself regularly, in that the space and identity of the group operated as if it were a franchise that changed hands annually from cohort to cohort of recent graduates.

Becky at Royal Standard explains the benefits of this model, as she sees them:

*You feel it's quite important to renew the directors just to keep it a bit more fresh and it's a really good idea and good opportunity for directors themselves to develop themselves, but it gives the opportunity to other studio members who are also artists.*

This desire to keep things 'fresh' also extends to the Royal Standard studios. Three of the committee members discuss:

*Becky: I think there's something we mentioned which is not written on paper yet, but we would like the studio members to rotate as well. I don't think we want the studio to be there for twenty years and we talked about maybe setting a time limit to be in the building, again to keep it fresh.*

*Lucy: I think it depends on the individual though, or we decided that it did I think didn't we? We do have a little contract that says that everything will be reviewed every 12 months.*

*Guy: Yeah, we didn't decide to go any further with that did we – it's almost enough to review every 12 months. It's going to take some ballsy new directors to kick this lot out. (Laughs).*

Purely from a knowledge-sharing point of view this movement of participants makes sense, in that new ideas and influences come into the community. Discussing “small-world networks” in Hollywood, sociologist Brian Uzzi (2005) describes how in dense creative networks, where many of the actors have collaborated with one another or are known to be connected to previous collaborators, what Uzzi terms “creative material” circulates rapidly and effectively from cluster to cluster because of its mutual validation. However, the more cohesive the group becomes, eventually the material will lose its novelty value and this in turn will affect the homogeneity of what is produced. Evidently Uzzi is discussing an industry that relies on teams of specialists to work with sets of ideas or concepts. In the case of artist-led groups and other contemporary art collectives, given that each individual's art practice is unique, one could think of the “creative material” as individual perspectives, attitudes or value-systems as well as practices.

In Uzzi's model, the more people have collaborators in common and repeatedly collaborate between themselves, the more likely people are to trust and share information within a network. By repeating these ties innovation becomes less risky as it is disseminated further into the network. Actors start to expect paybacks or favours in kind for creative material they have shared or ways in which they have helped one another, and begin to trust

their immediate relations in the network. This trust and reciprocity in turn affects third parties who observe it and then expect similar levels of trust and reciprocity from those actors. Hence actors in the network are more likely to swap ‘conventions’ as well as take risks because of the expectations of them that develop.

In exclusive ongoing relationships where friends are friends of friends, feelings of obligation and camaraderie may be so great between past collaborators that they risk becoming an “assistance club” for ineffectual members of their network. Preserving a space for “friends” can further hamper the recruitment of outsiders that possess fresh talent into a cluster. (Uzzi, 1997, p464).

The rolling committee structure as a way of bringing new voices into the group is reflected by Outpost and Catalyst committee members.

Ray, from Outpost, mentions the constant compromise required by committee decision-making as the “most challenging thing” about the structure. However, he also says:

*I think if you have less voices it could potentially accelerate, but then for the very reason that we have a rotating committee here, it's so that there never is too many of the same voices and the space always refreshes itself.*

Ciaran, at Catalyst, says of his committee structure:

*...it's good that because then you know that everyone is starting and everyone is finishing at a different stage. There's never more than a period of 6 months where there's never a new member or new blood on board, getting involved.*

Yet if, as we have seen, people often begin to participate with artist-led groups through friends, how can groups avoid the risk of too much mutual familiarity with one another’s ideas and practices, which, according to Uzzi, leads to homogeneity and subsequent stultification within networks? In the section on Critique, I address some of the tensions that arise from the desire for honest critique of practice within friendship clusters.

In their work, *Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Lave and Wenger, 1991), Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger describe how

important the relationship of the newcomer and the “old timer” is to one another for the mutual learning of both. Elsewhere in this chapter, I have explored the process of ‘shadowing’ that some artist-led groups employ in order to achieve continuity of knowledge transfer. Lave’s research is based on relationships closest to apprenticeships, (Midwives, Tailors, Quartermasters, Butchers, Nondrinking Alcoholics). Rather than presenting these relationships as simple dyadic partnerships, Lave concentrates on the social production at work, of which the novice and the expert are a part. This process of social production and reproduction, according to Lave & Wenger is necessarily tied up with conflict:

One implication of the inherently problematic character of the social reproduction of communities of practice is that the sustained participation of newcomers, becoming old-timers, must involve conflict between the forces that support processes of learning and those that work against them. Another related implication is that learning is never simply a process of transfer or assimilation: Learning, transformation, and change are always implicated in one another, and the status quo needs as much explanation as change. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p57)

Change in artist-led group practices and prejudices over time seems to be an inherent part of the reproduction of these groups, and not without controversy. However, because decisions potentially affecting change are distributed across a group – be it a committee or a group of friends – *debate* seems to be far more common than antagonistic conflict. This could be because within artist-led groups there is generally an assumption that all committee members or organising members have equal status and that the wider membership needs to have their view represented by these core members. This is very different from the gradations of asymmetrical power relationships and differentiated professional roles that Lave and Wenger explore.

With participation in artist-led groups, I could see two forms of learning at work almost simultaneously: both learning about the status quo as it stands – the ways things are already done - and also learning through the construction of new practices. Differences or potential conflicts during these processes can be absorbed incrementally by the group. For example, Ray, on the Outpost committee, describes how his dissatisfaction with certain group processes before he became a committee member were noted and folded into the group, without the need for a showdown scenario. Indeed the act of voicing his disagreement aided his acceptance onto the committee. Here he reflects with fellow a committee member:

*Ray: (...) So there was a point where we had been trying to organise this event and there was some difficulty, and the way I voiced my frustrations made the committee realise how interested in the space I was. This is what I've heard recently. So maybe that was a way of showing that I, or may be I should say we, could manage a project.*

*Collette: No but you did make an impact. You were quite dissatisfied with what was going on here perhaps and you voiced it and said what you thought – in a constructive way - and we had the event and it went really well and it obviously stayed in people's minds.*

For all that, Tegan, from Moot gallery, believes that this group structure, rather than re-energising a space and the practices within it, can engender a kind of dilution of purpose:

*(...) a lot of people take on the Transmission Gallery model, which is to take on a rolling committee and to change it every two years. A lot of people do that and you just lose your focus and you lose your integrity when you change people all the time, I believe.*

As I will explore, a sense of the group's 'integrity' may come from its reputation both within the group, but also through interactions with interested parties outside the group, with its extended



communities of ex-members. Moreover, shared goals in the form of event organisation can produce collective focus.

Events are often structured with a view to keeping things 'fresh' and maintaining or generating a sense of energy and dynamism that will be carried on into the group's practices. I see these attempts at open structures to be key to the forms of participation and subsequent peer learning that entanglements with these groups allow.

A fundamental part of maintaining energy levels, keeping things 'fresh' and working within an 'open' structure is the strategic conflation of social events and practice.

The event may be comprised of multi-disciplinary creative practices. Experiences of reception and participation will therefore differ, ranging from the visceral to the intellectual and the breadth of these experiences feeds back into the initiating community. Events can be a way of folding difference into the existing artists' community by constructing encounters with unfamiliar ideas and experiences.

Simon O' Sullivan , informed by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "schiz" (O'Sullivan, 2006) speaks of the encounter as a kind of rupture. Rather than meeting with a representation of the world as we know it, the experience of encounter can be a generative one, both ontologically and epistemologically:

*With a genuine encounter (...) our typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems of knowledge disrupted. We are forced to thought. The encounter operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities. It produces a cut, a crack. However, this is not the end of the story, for the rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, in fact a way of seeing and thinking this world differently. This is the creative moment of the encounter that obliges us to think otherwise. Life, when it truly is lived, is a history of these encounters, which will always necessarily occur beyond representation. (O'Sullivan, 2006, p1)*

Mutual enjoyment and the intense experiences of participants create a 'buzz' connected with a specific event and its initiating community. This acts as a motivating catalyst for future practice-oriented projects. It sustains community energy, consolidates and increases confidence in the group's abilities and therefore raises aspirations for future practice.

Artists from Outpost describe one of their events in terms of an encounter in the sense that O'Sullivan has it, as a rupture of the group's norms of practice. They invited the artists, Ultra Red to bring *Rural Racism*, a participatory dialogic event to the Outpost space. Ray outlines the subsequent event:

*It was an event in two parts. The event was the core for the whole show. There were tables down the space and in the first section was the audience recording their response to sound pieces. And then the second section was the responses by table, so groups by table were hung and then it led on from the soundworks and from those responses to a discussion about anti-racism, which was a very specific, quite loaded place for conversation.*

Fellow Outpost member, Colette, pointed out that to have an overtly political event in the space was "something different to things that Outpost had ever been part of (...) It was quite a big change", and Ray again stressed the different kind of focus that emerged out of such events, as opposed to a private view:

*it can lead to more of a formal dialogue than you would get at an opening for example. I think there's always a slightly different mood with events.*

There had been a different kind of audience at the event alongside the regular extended Outpost community, and the resulting debate had impressed both committee members. Ray comments:

*[It] opened up avenues for discussion that wouldn't otherwise happen, even in a more formal artist's talk with questions and answers. It helped to bleed out a bit of the personal – somehow people seemed to really bring these quite direct responses.*

The “*different kind of energy*” produced by the event then carried into the aspirations for the group, allowing them to imagine how events could be considered to be *as* important as exhibitions. Ray continues:

*I think since then there's been more of an effort to really allow the events programme to be a programme.*

Through conversations between peers the resulting event ‘buzz’ becomes entangled with geographically distributed individuals and clusters, and experiential and conceptual knowledge and influence spreads outwards. The event becomes for the initiating community a self-congratulatory *episode*. The artists in their shared role as hosts construct a space to disseminate this celebration and through the sense of mutual inclusion and occasion collective communal cohesion is strengthened.

This is particularly the case with private views, which have often been framed as ‘events’ or ‘openings’ by groups in a deliberate effort to avoid the connotations of exclusivity related to the term ‘private view’<sup>31</sup>. Ray at Outpost talks about the group’s openings, “*the most challenging, and the most exciting day*”:

*There's all these checklist things. The many things that need doing before the show opens. That kind of deadline. And I work on the design work at the moment so there's always inevitably the last minute tweaking of that. And then there's this release, the social engagement of the opening. The relationship with the artists is usually quite close by that stage, so there's usually a good bond and an inclusion in the social circle that exists around the space. So you have someone entering into that and possibly their friends or whoever they've invited coming into the space. It's fairly inclusive really, quite celebratory.*

Private views remain a forum in which artists’ professional and social spheres collide, in that they are nominally about the artwork

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<sup>31</sup> Louise, D (2012), Why are Openings Still Called Private Views?. Axis Web rant no. 76. Available at: <<http://www.axisweb.org/dlForum.aspx?ESSAYID=18216>> [accessed 21.05.12]

on show, but also present opportunities for networking, to see and be seen, to mix with powerful agents such as curators and commissioners. They are a space where differences in age, experience and status coincide. They are not only indicative of the blurring of social and professional boundaries in the contemporary art world, but, because of their regularity, also act as a way of staying in touch with people and events, as well as providing a stage to perform a sense of belonging to those worlds. In many ways the conventional private view is a performative event.

Sandy, a Spike Associate, talks about openings she attended while she was an artist in Cardiff. Her comments speak of the significance of the private view in terms of being connected to a particular arts scene and her ambivalence about their function in terms of professional networking:

*I'm enjoying going to openings again now and I had really not liked them for a long time. When I lived in Cardiff, I did it all the time. I was at openings and they would function very well in terms of - what's happening in the area? Where am I? Let people know what I'm doing - and all that stuff, which is sort of horrible, but really important as well and I was very connected up to people when I was in Cardiff.*

By contrast, artists' initiatives that are built around the idea of a primarily social event often allow artists to make contacts and discuss practice in a particularly uninhibited and less performative way, unimpeded by a hyper awareness of professional codes. The event creates a meeting and 'checking in' opportunity, a social hub in a network for different clusters and individual artists to come together. Rowan, co-organiser of the artist-led space Rhys & Hannah Present (active in Bristol January-December 2008) recalls their openings as events on which the entire project pivoted:

*I think Rhys & Hannah Present was all about the openings, you know we had so many people come to openings that I don't really know who was left in Bristol to come out to it. They got a really good reputation for being really fun, which was really good, that was a really good part of it. Everybody knew, every two or three weeks there'd be a chance to meet up with everybody. That was really one of the best things about it.*

At a later date Rowan collaborated with two other members of the Spike Associates to form the artist-led space Central Reservation (active March-July 2010), taking over an old motorcycle showroom in the Stokes Croft area of the city. The three curated their own exhibition and events in the space, invited others to run workshops and events there and established temporary studio-based residencies. She and her collaborators had carried the idea of the artist-led space as a powerful social platform into this more recent project. Here they reflect on the project:

*Fiona: In terms of the Bristol arts scene I think the biggest way that it got people together was because so many events that we did were really about a social setup. It wasn't necessarily a private view. That really meant that people would have it as a sort of destination rather than a pop-in kind of thing and we had really good nights there and it was really, really social and it was great because that kind of got people to come to our other things as well.*

*Anita: I think it was the variation in what we hosted. You know that it naturally sort of swept over a varied mass of people, but I agree with that completely. I don't know if it is really that easy to socialise in terms of art communities. I think Plan 9 did it to a certain extent, but they were very much attached to openings. The private views were quite successful in terms of private views but they were private views. They weren't a good night out, and we did do quite a good job of that in the end.*

*Rowan: I think having a big enough space as well and the fact that we have barbeques, we could have people sitting outside. At one point it was quite funny because we were like I feel like I'm running a bar. I wanted to run a gallery. A landlady and a barbeque landlady. You just sort of feel like a host.*

Rowan mentions *Cornuto*, her curatorial project in the space - a collaborative event involving live music, installation and text. She again emphasises the novelty of the format:

*I suppose that's what Cornuto was trying to do in a very different way, but y'know engaging people in a different way. I think not just using that format which people get a bit bored of I think coming to a private view.*

The event shifts focus away from *art practice appreciation* to a more generalised pleasurable experience that happens to involve art

practice. This potentially opens it up to audiences previously unconnected to that particular contemporary art practice community of interest.

Rowan and her collaborators at Central Reservation discussed the ways in which hosting a variety of events in the space (barbeques, gigs, talks, markets, etc.) in the heart of the city had attracted people from outside of their artistic 'scene':

*Fiona: We can talk about the Bristol arts scene in terms of what we - 'cause I take it we all have a fairly similar view of what that is - but I think Central Reservation attracted all the people we were thinking about but also it was totally visible to other people as well and that came out in other people's feedback that those were things that they wouldn't normally have done and it was really important to put things there that wouldn't normally get seen.*

*Rowan: I think a lot of people did just come in. Some people would come back as well. One guy I met was just kind of in his 40's. He came on his own and I told him what the space was about and stuff and he seemed interested and I saw him come back a few times. He was obviously looking at our blog or something and finding out when things were on and that was really nice. He obviously just appreciated the fact that the space was being used. I don't know if he particularly liked every show, but he came back.*

Because the social and pleasurable aspects are foregrounded, the event is seen less as an opportunity created explicitly to encourage 'networking' or knowledge exchange in a goal-oriented way, and more as situation in which, as an incidental result of the gathering, connections may potentially be made or built upon and ideas and practice explored.

Sound artist and Spike Associate, Theo, volunteers as a music co-ordinator at the Cube Microplex, Bristol, programming audio artists for this volunteer-run cooperative, which is part cinema, part performance venue and exhibition space. He uses his position at the Cube to meet practitioners and to discuss practice. These interactions then feed back into his practice:

*meeting face-to-face, you get to discuss ideas which you probably wouldn't be able to discuss online for some reason and yes, you just learn about their*

*practice much more through being with them and also seeing them on stage I suppose, or seeing them produce an installation.*

He describes how an informal social event, such as a shared meal allows for exchanges that are neither completely incidental nor completely intentional. The situation, as well as being pleasurable, creates the possibility for exchange that holds potential for his practice development:

*I suppose there's an element of being relaxed in conversation. It's like when you eat...if you have a formal meeting and you discuss ideas, there's a kind of element of these things having to be forced out, squeezed out but if you just sit down – I think food's pretty important – it naturally relaxes you when you're having a meal. I think it's cause there's no focus on talking trying to come up with an idea or having a discussion. The focus is on eating your food. Then anything else is sort of like secondary. And so conversations will start up and it may lead to something you hadn't thought about talking about before.*

After completing a residency in a Bristol church, Theo proposed a second residency to his original commissioners:

*I said, well I'd like to work with three other artists and we can live together and we can eat together, but we work very much on our own practice, not collaboratively I suppose. I was interested in how these ideas would go off from each other, by that meeting point.*

Theo's proposal reflects a desire to construct a situation where chance and social design encourage alchemy between practitioners: artist-teacher Rainer Ganahl conceptualises contemporary art education in a similar way:

*(...) you provide a social context where people can develop, where people can learn habitus, where they can network, where they can get to know people and learn how to start to self-organise and have an exchange, it's a Borse, like a stock market. (...) It's a place for the exchange of information, of people, of affections, of affinities, of ideas. (Ganahl, 2008, p163)*



**Fig 7. *Cornuto*, Central Reservation, Bristol, 2010, Image courtesy of: Hannah James. Artist-led groups often foreground the social, event-based nature of exhibition openings. They serve to generate collective energy, motivate future practice, and raise group aspirations.**



## Extended Communities

The relationship between the organising members of an artist-led group and its former committee (or organising) members is particularly important in terms of the transfer of knowledge and distribution of opportunities for the group. It is also a significant relationship in terms of the way the group is imagined, the mythology that surrounds it, the legacy that it trails and its conception of itself as a confident and dynamic entity.

Ex-committee members will often have moved on to work for arts organisations around the UK and can be an important source of practical expertise. At Catalyst, for example, present committee members sought out the advice of their predecessors when it came to making decisions about relocating the Catalyst building:

*There's ex-directors and people that sympathise with Catalyst and take an interest in it. (...) they tend to be people with a wealth of experience and a wealth of knowledge that we can tap into if need be for something large like relocation or if there was an ultimate crisis.*

*We did (..) talk to them about what we should do. They gave us their advice, which is why we're sitting on it now, because they said that there's no real rush, the prices are not going to go up dramatically in the near future, don't rush into somewhere just for the sake of it, so they were there and they want to be kept in touch.*

Many former committee members remain entangled with artist-led groups in various ways other than through simply offering advice and information. For example, through visible interest in the group's activities, turning up to support them at private views, through letting their opinions be known about the group's practices and by letting their emotional investment in the group's fortunes and history be known.

The presence of this extended community has an impact on the currently active members of a group. Etienne Wenger writes

about how a sense of continuity and shared history can be socially constructed:

The way nations use history to define a sense of common roots is a social process through and through, one that calls upon imagination to see the present as a continuation of a shared heritage. The creative character of imagination is anchored in social interactions and communal experiences. Imagination in this sense is not just the production of personal fantasies. Far from an individual withdrawal from reality, it is a mode of belonging that always involves the social world to expand the scope of reality and identity. (Wenger, 1999, p. 178).

Two Catalyst directors, Tara and Andrew, in describing this extended community suggest how the relationships, the personal interests that remain entangled with Catalyst on the part of ex-committee members, help to anchor the group in the core community's imagination and to position it in a municipal, national and international sense:

*Tara: (...) historically in Belfast Catalyst is almost like the centre of everything. Like one of the most important things about this place is your ability to meet people from pretty much every artist that's been resident since Catalyst's inception or had some sort of relationship with the people who started it who were on the board in Catalyst. It's really really important in terms of the cultural backdrop of Northern Ireland.*

*Andrew: A lot of the places in Belfast actually have ex-Catalyst directors and they're still into it an awful lot more than you think, so we have strong ties within Belfast abroad.*

This sense of history and legacy, and a subsequent value placed on the continuing existence of the group is both learned and constructed through contemporary meetings, conversations, relationships and even rumour, gossip and hearsay.

Here, Tara tells me about the different modes of communication the Catalyst committee has with its wider membership and in her reference to the group's participation in an exhibition in Scotland, it is clear that the extended community still exerts an influence on present decision-making:

*Tara : So you've got the AGM and you have the informal... and the first thing that comes into my head is that there were a lot of issues that came up with the artists who went to Embassy in Edinburgh and I don't know, people made their opinions known. I don't know how, but I know that certain people weren't happy with that....so that was kind of, like you definitely get to know what...*

*MW: It comes back to you somehow?*

*Tara: Yeah. And then ultimately if your aim is to establish yourself in the scene, and considering that a lot of people in the scene are members...you kind of have to...it's kind of like you're a credit union or something. You kind of have to keep them sweet...I think I'm saying too much.*

*Andrew: We're due a crisis. Don't say that, (all laugh).*

There is respect shown to the wider membership (including ex-committee members) in the desire to appease them, but also a suggestion here that compromises may be made in order to avoid conflict and protect current committee members' interests.

Patrick and Ben, committee members at Transmission gallery describe a similar sense of wider influence and interest on the part of ex-committee members. Rather than feeling a weight of expectation in a negative sense or seeing the ex-committee members as a barrier to change, they present this extended community as the embodiment of a system of checks and balances, whereby the present committee is guided by the extended community's investment in the fate of the group and its expectations of the present committee, expectations they are periodically called upon to justify. Patrick comments:

*I think there are a lot of people who are amazingly fearful for Transmission because they really believe it's a very important thing and sometimes people say it in a slightly sympathetic way like "Transmission has to be different" and you think they don't know how that's possible but they're telling you that's what they want from you. But it does change. It definitely changes, but I guess it depends on what's been done in the gallery and what's seen as needing to be done. People are very frank as well. People go, "oh, I don't think that'll work". Like, a good example was the proposed change to the constitution at the AGM last year. It was pretty heated, and you*

*had people who'd been on the committee twenty years ago there. They were quite like, "What? We should have been told about this a month ago." They know the constitution. They know the protocol. They know how things are meant to be done, but I think it's quite good that they are put in that position where they feel that they need to fight a corner I suppose and they need to remind us of what we're supposed to be doing. People react in that way, like "what, what, what are people trying to do?" It's quite nice cause you see that people care. They want to see things done properly.*

The influence of the extended community is also felt through its reputation. Because Transmission, like Catalyst, is a long-established group, the sense of the 'reach' of the group, its alumni, can be initially intimidating for present members and committee members. Patrick confides that, as a new graduate, he found the *idea* of Transmission intimidating and a potential barrier to participation:

*I think it's a danger because Transmission – it gets it's own history at some point and somewhere along the line it started to become that wheel, and actually if you look at all the people who've been on the committee, they went on to become Douglas Gordon or whatever and successful artists or successful curators or whatever and I think, at least from my personal point of view I would feel like you knew that those people were somehow involved in that circle and it becomes kind of frightening in terms of the star quality of it.*

However, he also sees this perception of the group as belonging to a specific era on the Glasgow arts scene. With the success of other galleries since then (The Modern Institute and various temporary spaces), he believes the position of Transmission has shifted in present graduate's minds. Ultimately this sense of being the bearer of a 'legacy' has to be an enabling force and something to trade off. Patrick says:

*Well, just maybe seeing the art world as being less intimidating. Having to do things like going to a gallery, maybe quite a flash gallery and speak to the director about one of their artists, and that's a far cry from the world that I live in. Just to demonstrate that because you need to do that you can do that, and actually quite often you're surprised because people say, "oh Transmission, that would be great!" You realise that Transmission is in a fortunate position and you're occupying this strange position where*

*you've been given responsibility and you're entrusted with the legacy of sorts and ...that gives you a lot of agency.*

A healthy cynicism about the enduring mythology of Transmission to some extent forces the group to re-define the present day committee, and motivates it to work differently according to it's specific social, political and creative context. According to Patrick:

*If you speak to G you'd think that was the halcyon days of Transmission and that it was the kind of creeping gentrification of the Merchant City, and that Transmission lost it's heart and soul that very day, (all laugh). Whereas you can see that things were done differently and that Glasgow was different then, it's not to say that it can't be different, that Transmission can't change things. You certainly can't turn the clock back. I think it's interesting to know about what people did, 10, 15, 20 years ago and to know about that change.*

The current committee at Outpost in Norwich have a similar 'extended community'. Although the group was established more recently than either Catalyst or Transmission, in 2004, they often turn to former committee members for practical advice, and a similar respect is extended to them. Current committee member, Collette comments:

*They're known as the elders and they kind of feel like that. Cause we are a very young group at the moment. And the first committee were more sort of mid-thirties weren't they? At a different stage perhaps in their life and in their career and all sorts of things. So yeah they're kind of older than us and they feel like that. They're amazing.*

There is a similar sense of shared legacy and loyalty at play here. In this case the gallery design branding is a source of pride and seen as something to be protected, along with the reputation of ex-committee members. Current Outpost committee member Ray says:

*There are three consistent roles that are mandatory: the chairman, or chairperson, sorry, treasurer and secretary, as a charity. But then a large role that has to be maintained is the design role, because all that's done in-house. And the format for design was established by (names ex-member) originally. I*

*always think that's really important, because the way the gallery's packaged has been passed down between three people. But in the earliest days of the gallery it became acclaimed in certain design circles, so I always think it's important that he gets credited for that*

Calling on knowledge that is distributed across a range of organisations with the wider membership and former committee-members is a valued way of seeking practical advice, but it also strengthens existing bonds between those institutions and the group. What is more, it creates a sense of continuity between the past members and the present.

### Continuity of Learning in Groups

Because a community of practice is a system of interrelated forms of participation, discontinuities propagate through it. (Wenger, 1998, p90)

Extended communities comprising ex-members and ex-committee members can provide a sense of continuity for present members through intermittent help and advice and a continuing investment and interest in the group. However, there is also a need for a day-to-day continuous learning processes to occur in order that new committee members become confident in their roles.

Outpost adopts an informal 'work-shadowing' approach where artists who have shown an interest in becoming more involved with the group are invited to shadow the committee, but not to have a vote. Ray describes this as a "*more formal and a more inclusive stage of membership*", while the 'shadowing' member, Collette, refers to this role as going "*up a gear*" in her involvement with the group.

As I have discussed above, the fact that group processes are not often formalised in terms of written job descriptions is advantageous, in that groups can adapt flexibly to changes.

However, there can be a danger of 'reinventing the wheel' and tacit knowledge about a network of relationships can seem to disappear when a member leaves, or prove difficult to pass on, because it pivots on particular interactions formed over a period of time. This 'shadowing' stage was introduced at Outpost to try to address such potential gaps. Ray says:

*There's always this worry, because it's a two-year cycle, and lots of contacts that have been built up and even relationships with artists need to be maintained for the expansion for the membership and the gallery spaces.*

Ongoing relationships formed with the group and with others in the contemporary art world outside the group may have consequences for positions, reputations, gatekeepers and holders of information that could facilitate the running of the group or its creative projects.

Members of the Catalyst committee in Belfast spoke about knowledge that was lost through gaps in committee membership continuity and committee-member, Andrew admitted that after eight months he was still finding his feet as a director:

*I am getting to grips with it, but you still don't feel like you know it well enough to make changes. I'm still trying to understand how it works, because we've gone through one round of funding and that was a bit over my head to be honest... and then we have to realise that and it's our job to do that and I think by the time you kind of get the hang of it you leave.*

While Ray at Outpost had been able to get actively involved with the space, programming shows as an undergraduate student, volunteering to install shows and having discussions with committee members, Andrew's comments suggest that his main concern is the feeling that the committee cannot effect any real changes during their directorship. At Catalyst members describe a process of learning on the job, but not being able to leave their mark on production. At the same time they are pragmatic about

the lack of individual control inherent in collective realisation.

Committee members, Tara and Andrew explain:

*Tara: Someone said the ideal – though this never really happened – was that you come in, you shadow project-manage a show which was someone else's idea then you project manage another show that was someone else's idea and then you leave a show, so when you're programming you leave a show and the idea is whatever director coming after you would do it. You could potentially change it a little bit (...) So you learn as you go. The reality is, I don't think that really happens.*

*Andrew: If you're leaving a show, the idea you have in your head is not going to be once it's realised. It's just impossible when two or three other people realise it for you. You could try and push them in a direction, but then they could take it any way they want.*

Because their directorship only lasts two years, there is a need to compromise on any 'vision' they may have for the space and its endeavours.

Directors from Royal Standard comment upon the difficulty of taking on a space with no prior experience. The previous committee had stepped down in its entirety all at once, and the present committee members felt they had "*struggled with*" a lack of support from their predecessors. They therefore intend to stagger the appointment of new directors in future.

Where such discontinuities in immediate communities become apparent, the present committee members' reliance upon one another *and* their extended communities can become intense. The group's distributed knowledge acquires value:

*The diversified field of relations among old-timers and new-comers within and across the various cycles, and the importance of near-peers in the circulation of knowledgeable skill, both recommend against assimilating relations of learning to the dyadic form characteristic of conventional learning studies. (Lave, 1991, p57).*

At Catalyst committee members also said they felt unable to develop future strategies for the group as a whole, because of



these discontinuities. There is a desire for every incarnation of a group to experience the organisation in their own way and to make it anew. I see this as indicative of the radical roots of artist-led culture that thrive off a sense of autonomy, 'alternative' forms of practice and self-determination, as well as the experiential learning common to self-organisation. When the committee is staggered, and where there is an influential extended community, these effects are mitigated, as previously imposed structures can prevail.

The Bristol Diving School model manages to do both. Between 2009 and 2012 the Bristol Diving School name and space has been passed between successive graduate cohorts, each group adopting a very different approach to collective practice. As they only have a year's tenure, each group is free to use the space as they see fit and is interested in, but not constrained by its previous tenants' ethos. However, as artists nationwide might not comprehend the differences between the successive groups and they are often placed under the same 'umbrella' identity, each group also benefits from the accrued wider reputation and connections of the others.

## Part 2: Participation with Organisationally-Facilitated Membership Groups

### The Group and the Wider Organisation

The Associates programme at Spike Island and the Extra Special People programme at Eastside Projects in Birmingham, as well as the East Street Arts membership group in Leeds, are groups that have been intentionally constructed in part to facilitate peer learning between artists. The idea of the network and the community underpins all groups. However, because of their organisationally led and facilitated bases, the ways in which artists entangle themselves with these groups differs in some respects to participation with artist-led groups. The Spike Associates, Extra Special People and the East Street Arts 'Artisans' and 'Socialites' did not emerge organically, but were constructed with the intention of building an artistic community or scene around an organisation. The processes whereby the groups have been constructed are significant in that peer learning and peer influence has been encouraged as a form of social production, and, I will argue, the resulting groups suggest a particular approach to peer learning and a particular view of the role of the arts organisation.

Claire Doherty in a commentary on the term 'New Institutionalism' describes it thus:

New Institutionalism is characterised by the rhetoric of temporary/transient encounters, states of flux and open-endedness. It embraces a dominant strand of contemporary art practice – namely that which employs dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption. New Institutionalism responds to (some might even say assimilates) the working methods of artistic practice and furthermore, artist-run initiatives, whilst maintaining a belief in the gallery, museum or arts centre, and by association their buildings, as a necessary locus of, or platform for, art. (Doherty, 2004, p1).

Two key points emerge here: the idea of the open-ended, transient encounter and the potential assimilation of the working methods of artist-run initiatives. The resulting tension between the idea of a network and the idea of a community may impact upon the nature of artists' entanglements with these groups.

For each of these organisationally facilitated groups, the artist-led scene has been an important source of foundational peer learning. Caroline, one of the principal initiators of the Spike Associates, applied for Arts Council funding to pay artists to participate in two consecutive groups named the Interpretation Groups. Members of these groups later went on to become members of the Spike Associates in 2007. In many ways the 'Interp Groups', as they became known, acted as a precursor to the Associates, and a loose model for the development of the subsequent Associates programme. Caroline explains how the groups functioned:

*We got £25,000 to run this first 18 month scheme and the idea was that we would meet once a month and people would get paid to attend and we would have a structure where we would have some meetings and discussions and then we had one trip where we would go over two nights away somewhere, (...) That was to create this gelling of the group.*

With Spike Associates, Extra Special People and East Street Arts membership scheme the principal initial facilitators recognised that the 'holding' organisations (Spike Island, Eastside Projects and East Street Arts respectively) would directly benefit from the production of such groups. This symbiosis between artists and arts organisations is explored below, a relational reciprocity that is

indicative of artist-led culture, but takes on a slightly different tone in these larger organisational settings.<sup>32</sup>

With each of these organisations, the membership groups represented an extension of the organisation and a simultaneous revelation of the organisation and its facilities to local artists, and recent graduates. This unfolding of the organisation to the outside is indicative of the New Institutional models of which Doherty writes, and can be represented physically by the glass-walled Associates 'Space' at the heart of the Spike Island building or of the Eastside Projects office, library and meeting place: *Pleasure Island*, 2008, by artists Heather and Ivan Morrison (see Figs. 8 and 9).

These are semi-public, semi-autonomous zones within the organisation that lend themselves to dialogic or event-based practices. Doherty quotes Charles Esche (former director of Roosmuseum Centre for Contemporary Art, Malmo – now director of Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven) – upon the re-launch of the Roosmuseum in 2001:

Now, the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore, the institutions to foster it have to be part-community centre, part-laboratory and part-academy, with less need for the established showroom function. (Esche 2001 cited in Doherty, 2004, p2)

By engaging contemporary practitioners in the city, beyond the studio holders using the building day to day, these organisations are also building an audience for their own activities and accessing

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<sup>32</sup> Eastside Projects, it must be noted, is not an institution in the sense that Spike Island is, but it does have some paid staff, a directorship that does not change cyclically, as with the Transmission model and a definite status asymmetry between its membership and its directorship, in that the directorship consists of more established artists than the membership. It is artist-led, but differs in these significant ways from other artist-led groups I have interviewed.

culturally relevant networks further afield through these artists, thereby legitimising further funding for their own programmes. The groups also serve to retain graduates for future investment in the regional arts scene and affect the aspirations of those graduates in a variety of ways. These notions of extending or networking the organisation and accessing new constituents is expressed by Eve at East Street Arts:

*It doesn't particularly have a base because the whole point of the membership was to open up access to the organisation for people who weren't studio holders because we are seen sometimes as a studio holder group and actually East Street Arts is much more complex than that, and so part of making sure that people could communicate with us even if they didn't need or ever would need a studio, that was one of the points of the membership. But after saying that there are some definite physical facilities that we can offer to members (...). There might be other physical aspects as we move forward and develop our other sites but also it's about accessing a community in which more than it is a space really.  
(...)*

*we wanted to know more about the people we were talking to so that was one of the real key motivations with setting up a membership because people that then were willing to become a member would be a much tighter group than our huge database that was growing all the time.*

Sally at Extra Special People has the same 'we-need-them-as-much-as-they-need-us' attitude towards this East Street Arts membership scheme:

*It's turned out it's absolutely crucial for Eastside Projects because the space wouldn't be able to run without their input in a sense, they kind of feed into each other and support each other.*

Caroline, initiator of the Interp Groups and later the Spike Associates puts it even more directly. As with East Street Arts she was keen to find out more about the artists already gravitating around, and in some cases, working for the organisation, with a view to how they and their networks could positively affect the complexity of that organisation:

*The Interp Group kind of happened very distinctly from the studios because I was aware that a lot of younger artists were gathering around the public programme, they had an interest in that, but in the city the reputation of the studios was very poor, and if my job was to raise all this money we had to have links in the city if the institution was really to survive and really to raise this money and persuade people that it had a life ahead of it. It had to really interrogate how it could invest in future generations and be a dynamic place.*



**Fig 8. Spike Island Associate Space, 2010.**  
Photo courtesy of: Lucy Drane



**Fig 9. *Pleasure Island*, Heather and Ivan Morrison, 2008,**  
Eastside Projects, Birmingham. Photo courtesy of:  
Heather and Ivan Morrison.

**These spaces for organisationally facilitated membership groups to meet represent semi-autonomous zones within the organisation.**

## Membership Groups and the Influence of Artist-Led Activity

In researching the formation of these membership groups, initiators mirrored methods of learning in artist-led groups, in that they made informal visits to their organisational 'peers' as well as doing research online. Indeed, artist-led activity was often a significant influence on the subsequent group activities, intended ethos and structures.

Prior to the Associates being established a steering group was set up comprising representatives of South West Arts organisations, universities and independent artists. One of the artists, Glen, recalls his involvement:

*My involvement with the steering group was 'cause of those experiences of being in an artist-led organisation, which is coming from the bottom-up so to speak. Coming from artists and trying to maybe learn that lesson from them to plant that within an institution and maybe try to learn to nurture those networks and peer-to-peer learning.*

In the case of the Interp Groups (precursors to the Spike Associates), artists were directly and deliberately introduced to groups around the country with the intention of setting aspirations, inspiring and fostering peer-led activity by example. Caroline had taken several artists from Spike Island on trips to Glasgow, and Rowan, who subsequently co-initiated several artist-led projects in Bristol, reflects on the effect these meetings had on her:

*I think she was definitely trying to sow the seeds of trying to get us to do something and it really worked. We were completely inspired by the people we met there and talking to them about the power of artist-led activity and how important it is to have your own direction and make your own opportunities rather than just being driven by the market and, going in and out of fashion and all that kind of stuff. It's really fickle. So sort of building some kind of network for yourself that's not just suddenly going to disappear, because it's*



*built on friendship and being interested in each other's work and taking time to get to know people and their practice, all that kind of stuff.*

The learning of self-determination by example is reflected by other respondents. Fay, who later went on to co-initiate the Bristol-based artist-led space, Plan 9 (active 2005 to 2010), had also been taken by Caroline on a collective trip with the Interp group (precursor to the Spike Associates) to visit a series of art spaces:

*Newcastle/Gateshead was probably the most interesting, just seeing what was going on in one city. The commissioning agency, Locus + had a massive, interesting back catalogue that they were just developing. That was fascinating. (...) and actually one of the guys, he works with them in their archive. I now see him quite regularly through my other job so ...we met up with each other at some workshop at the Arnolfini and I was like "I recognise you. It was when we were in that tiny little office, years ago". So it was really nice...that was like a half hour meeting and obviously that's when you start to find connectivity.*

*I think that maybe was an agenda that was there. I had been to Glasgow and I guess there was always the comparison between the lack of things in Bristol and the obviously great plethora of things in Glasgow. I think it obviously inspired people. Otherwise they wouldn't be doing the things they're doing now.*

For Fay, the group trip meant she formed closer bonds artists from Bristol with whom she later went on to work at Plan 9 artist-led space. Indeed, group research trips to other regional cities has been one of the main ways that members of the Spike Associates have achieved greater social cohesion.

The Interp Groups became a kind of hothouse for training artists to make links with other artists, to collectively self-organise, but also to establish the potential usefulness (in terms of material, social and cultural capital) of the 'mothership' organisation within this equation. The groups were encouraged to initiate several projects of their own devising. One was a conference about the role of the institution, so institutional critique supported by the institution. Caroline said of the project:

*Will Bradley came and sat up all night with them getting drunk and talked about art really passionately and inspired, and that event was really, really good but as they had worked on that and became more familiar with the organisation they became aware of how getting involved with the organisation could support them and that was really valuable because we needed them and they needed us and we could find the reciprocity with the intention that...and then they would tell other people and so gradually the porosity or the idea of the organisation started to shift because they were involved with all these other places and they gradually gained confidence in how they could organise so you'd find them getting much more active within the Cube or starting to apply for things at Picture This, so suddenly this group of people were being invested in, they were training themselves and through just a real generous experience of sharing knowledge and phone numbers and things to do (...) just that kind of passing, and the expectation, my expectation that they were going to do stuff and then gradually everybody's expectation and then Anne by that time had set up LOT with a group of people slightly as a kind of push against the mothership if you like of Spike, but that's exactly how it should be and how ecologies start.*

Hence, the potential for symbiosis between artists and organisations is established.

Sally at Extra Special People had experienced a similar situation in that funding had been provided to activate artists' activity in the northwest region through attempts to produce a 'community' or scene by constructing reasons to instigate peer relationships:

*I had a peer group at University. Perhaps one of the things that ESP aims to do is make more of a link between people who are studying here and retaining those people who are studying here.*

*(...)*

*I then went on to join a group called Self Service which kind of came out of some activity that Arts Council West Midlands had funded, which was run by an organisation called Mid West and it was, I think the funding was for three years in the first instance, and it was really about promoting artist led activity in the region, so right from the start this kind of this top down thing going on.*

*(...)*

*Mid West (...) have histories of working in cities like Manchester and Glasgow where they've got very positive artist-led structures going on and they were asked by Arts Council West Midlands to act as a catalyst for similar sorts of activity here. One of the things that came out of it was a group of people came together and called they themselves Self Service and they sort of continued the work that Mid West had started in a sense, which was I suppose about building intimacy, so getting to know what was actually going on here, getting to know each other and what each other did. And also it was about promoting critical dialogue.*

*(...)*

*From what I've heard one of the key activities they did was set of trips and visits called 'Casino' - where they took people to Glasgow and Manchester and they were overnight trips and they took them round cities and introduced them to people, and that has had a legacy because with the ESP programme, even though I didn't go on the Casino trips, I have used that as a model for how we operate now as well.*

### Weak Ties: Flexibility & Transience

Despite the artist-led influences, the idea of community promoted in the organisationally facilitated membership groups is one of partial ownership without responsibility, of the network or community as resource, which the membership of the organisation can pull on or exploit. Caroline expands on the ethos behind the Spike Associates, as she saw it:

*And it's not about self-organising, it's about a hybrid and also it was always going to be an organisation that has a very low staff team and so therefore having a community like the Associates to draw in and to do work and to deliver a show and to constantly give them that space to fill, all the time in between some of the more structured programming.*

It could be argued that the groups provide a way of optimising and making visible 'social capital', as Robert Putnam's definition suggests:

Features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions. (Putnam 1993a in Field, 2003, p4)

Following Tönnies's differentiation of "Gesellschaft", (societies based on instrumental associations) from "Gemeinschaft", (communities based on mutual purpose and kinship) (Tönnies, 1887: 1988) and Durkheim's work on the move from "organic" to "mechanical" solidarity (Durkheim, 1893), sociologists, including Putnam, have explored to what extent the "weak ties"

(Granovetter, 1983) between people bind us to one another and why.

In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam mourns the decline in associational life in America, so that rather than joining with relative strangers to pursue an interest, modern Americans will, he claims, remain within friendship groups to pursue such hobbies, and the associations that they do join allow flexible membership with no strong obligations on the individual.

A group such as the Spike Associates can be seen as a flexible community of interest in the sense that Putnam has it, one which allows members to participate with different levels of intensity; there may be a high degree of trust between members, but levels of regular participation are reserved to around a third of members while others simply 'dip in', observe via an online newsletter or website, or simply *belong*, without active engagement. This is not, as Coleman has termed it a network with a high degree of "closure" (Coleman in Field, 2003, p25)<sup>33</sup>

As part of my research into the background of the scheme I convened a panel of some of the original steering group members<sup>34</sup>. Philippa, a member of the Bristol artist-led group Plan 9, who formed part of this original committee made the following point:

*with the Associates Scheme, a lot more people can get involved. It's not such a commitment.*

Rather than encouraging embeddedness and dependency upon the organisation and the group, both Caroline, and Sally at Extra Special People speak about encouraging more of a transient

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<sup>33</sup> Network Closure: "the existence of mutually reinforcing relations between different actors and institutions." (Field, 2003, pp24-5).

<sup>34</sup> Membership Groups Debate, held at Spike Island, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2009. See 'Methodology' section for details.

relationship, one which will serve its purpose as the members “graduate through” the group, moving from support in a time of transition (e.g. graduation, changing location, making changes in practice) to raised confidence and aspirations. Sally says:

*I suppose the idea for me with ESP is that it's a starting point for people that hopefully, looking back to what happened with things like Self Service or Mid West, it kind of activates an initial kind of relationship that then actually groups of people, they go off and they don't need us any more and they go and start their own thing going on.*

Her colleague and fellow director, Kathy expanded on this view:

*I think we'll end up with another core group. It might be a question of people moving through. Going out and setting up their publications or setting up their studio. Actually it's supposed to bring them together and then they go off. For us it's about making Birmingham more interesting so that's ideal. (...)*

*You wouldn't want it to stagnate. That would go with talking about how we can move volunteers in and obviously you can't rely always on the same people turning up every week cause peoples' lives change. They get jobs and they move on. They get busier. You need it to have that kind of natural flow.*

So the learning that can occur in these organisations is seen by facilitators as having it's own limited time period, which is both ‘natural’, but also contrived; the idea of non-permanence or not embedding underpins the ethos of the group and is potentially implicit in the group's structure.

Caroline, primary initiator of the Spike Associates, talks about how she sees the role of the organisation in terms of the artists who have studios there:

*The issue really is whether that charity continues to invest in the same artists forever or whether it feels that it is a facility for artists forever to move through, to gain from, whether those arteries are clogged with the same people all the time or whether there's an idea that you graduate through whether you get something from it and then move on and leave that for the next generation and so on (...)*

She relates this to the models that she employed to develop Spike Island, (and ultimately the Associates) and her experience of artist-led groups:

*Some of them are still involved with it (the groups) all these years later. And I must say that I cannot understand that. I cannot understand why thirty years you would want to be connected (...) I cannot understand that. And I think that it's not good for a vibrant institution and I think if it's an institution that's having millions of pounds of public money, that it's not right.*

As I have explored in a previous section, the “Transmission model” is basically a group managed constitutionally by a rolling voluntary committee that changes every two years and is a model adopted by many other artist-led groups. I have discussed ways in which artist-led groups attempt to inject the group with a sense of difference, dynamism and unfamiliarity on a regular basis, both with structural decisions and through events. The need for this input of energy is something that membership group facilitators speak about, as well as the need for someone to act as kind of social broker, as Sally puts it, someone to “activate” relationships.

### Membership Groups as a Social Hub and Social Brokering

One of the ways in which these groups affect their ‘holding’ organisation is to provide a social hub alongside the more tangible professional practice skills that can be learnt under their auspices<sup>35</sup>. A significant amount of less tangible ‘professional practice’ in the contemporary art world consists of learning about the dynamic social landscapes of that world and such skills are

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<sup>35</sup> The Spike Associates hosts workshops on subjects such as online profiles, tax returns etc. I have not chosen to discuss these, as they do not fall under the remit of peer learning, but they are instead more formalised, asymmetrical models of professional-practice instruction.

often accessed through one's social networks. Indeed, one of the main elements of the membership programme for East Street Arts was the Social Club, launched in May 2007. Organiser, Eve states:

*Social Club was a lot more confident in what it was about and it is about where artists, social and space meet and we've looked at what social clubs, working men's clubs, what other kinds of social gatherings were for people in the past and where it's got to now, because they are suffering alongside everything else that's part of that change. We also looked at social networking sites and what the Internet and other kind of ways of communicating have done to that kind of social space.*

So the social aspect of membership becomes a platform for practice in itself. Sally at Eastside Projects describes the Extra Special People group as primarily a professional development programme with access to resources and expertise, but also to a peer group: “a place that you might just want to come and work or come down for a cup of tea”.

Similarly, with the Associates, Caroline describes how the physical space was used by artists:

*It became somewhere to look at Frieze or if you feel particularly lonely that day it was a place to go and be so that you could bump into somebody and have that conversation that made you do something on the next day. So it's that sort of serendipity.*

Caroline had looked at models like The Hub in Sao Paulo where staff as 'hosts' have the role of introducing users to one another in what the website terms “engineered serendipity” (The Hub, 2012). This, she sees as part of role of the art institution for artists, as partly pedagogical, partly pastoral. She says:

*So there's a very small percentage of people who stay being artists, but how does an institution take a responsibility to move them on into the thing that they want to do, the studio being an incredibly potent model for unhappy people who get stuck, so how does the institution really take the responsibility to get people to move on to the things that they're good at?*

Alison, a tutor from University of the West of England who was on the original steering group for the Spike Associates, saw the group as somewhere where graduates could make effective connections with other artists, graduates who needed specific help and advice but could also access, *“spaces that weren’t so formal, that didn’t just put them in touch with their ex-tutors, but also with each other.”*

She and other tutors would take students to visit artist-led groups active at the time in Bristol (e.g. LOT and Plan 9) and they noticed that friendships would develop from these introductions. They carried this knowledge into the Associates model:

*(We were) just trying to make – even if this actual physical space wasn’t here - a kind of virtual space where we could put people in touch with other in a kind of easier, better, more fruitful way.*

In her vision for the Spike Associates, Caroline extended this idea of the social broker between members to be a figure who could also make connections between visiting resident artists and local practitioners, so making the resources of the institution available to members:

*...so when they go to the pub they might have similar networks and know similar people and might be in shows together or might just have an opportunity to talk to an artist they’ve read about, and for that post to be somebody who would broker those relationships, to constantly be feeding that host community and inspiring and creating a knowledge network within that host community and also curating these artists coming in through the residency programme to produce new work.*

The current Associates Co-ordinator, Anita, identifies the success of the programme in providing access for artists to meet more established artists, hear them speak, show their work and feed into an institutional programme. However, regarding networking, she says:



*I think cross-networking is one of the biggest issues within the group. Although it might not be something that a lot of members might prioritise as being very important, standing back from it or being in the middle of it, it's something that would improve a lot of different areas.*

So the 'broker' in this sense attempts to increase "bonding social capital" (Putnam, 2000) within the group, encouraging social bonds between people who are alike (i.e. contemporary artists). However, the ways in which this match-making is approached depends upon several things: what the facilitator or other agents of the organisation see as a useful connection, which practices or individuals the facilitator views worthy of focus in this way, to what extent the members make themselves visible to the facilitator and to one another, how willing members are to be connected, what the existing levels of trust and reciprocity are within the group and how much control the facilitator feels able to exercise in relation to the group.

According to Bourdieu (1993) the strategic way in which one uses one's economic, social or cultural capital (or all three) determines one's position in the social field. Different individuals may not be able to reap the same return from the same network of people and to make durable connections necessitates effort as social investment. To garner the support of powerful organisational agents in this process is particularly valuable in a non-regulated field like the contemporary art world where informal social connections can facilitate important practice opportunities.

In the Associates, both Anita and I would target specific artists to meet a visiting curator or to take part in a group critique, simply because we found that when we advertised these opportunities to the group as a whole, take-up could be slow or

minimal. Members responded more readily to personal emails. However, the same people would repeatedly take up opportunities. Sally at Extra Special People describes a similar strategy:

*When there's maybe a particularly good opportunity coming up, I will target specific individuals and say look, this is a really great opportunity, this is a fantastic time for you to join and showcase your work to some people.*

There is a difficult balance to strike in these groups between direct intervention and fostering the conditions for spontaneous connections to occur. Although I have noted that groups like the Associates feed the holding organisation with additional fresh networks of graduates, an audience and access to the influence, knowledge and practice they bring with them, there is simultaneously, I argue, a tension that arises from the proximity and interdependence of two organisational models. Eastside Projects, for example, is managed by a board of directors and Spike Island by a team of staff. The membership schemes are, however, partially representative of the membership's desires, and partially facilitated according to what the co-ordinating management see as a valuable and stimulating programme in which the membership fees can be invested. This is not, I stress, as a result of the staff failing to consult the membership. The Spike Associates holds an annual AGM and Extra Special People hold a six-monthly review. However, both schemes struggle to get members to give unsolicited input into the programmes. Anita notes:

*I think a lot of people use it or would like to imagine it as a networking opportunity or a support group, ...but I think often people don't actually utilise that very well so I think almost that they think that's what they want*

*but they don't then input or access it very often, almost that they like the idea of it more than they do physically engaging with it.*

## Formal Structures, Clusters and Participation in Membership Groups

I believe the reasons for low levels of participation lie in this structural tension where the group is not entirely member-run, but neither is it strictly managed by an institutional hierarchy. In Chapter 3, I discuss the benefits of affiliation with an institution via such a group and in Chapter 5, I explore how the different levels of engagement that the Associates programme model allows means that it is difficult to create an image of 'community' to which members can relate. As Anita says:

*I think it's always had quite an independent presence within the building, and I think quite a lot of that is to do with almost how it started as something quite unstructured.*

*I suppose it's always felt like it's in flux, so people dip into it and dip out of it. It's not kind of like a set group all the time.*

A consideration of relationships between members and entanglements between organisations and artists raises several issues that might explain how fuller participation is precluded.

These issues include perceptions of the group as a networking service and resource with a certain formality or lack of spontaneity. This perception of the group is also a result of it having a fee-paying membership. The group is not seen as a 'community' or informal social space, so can appear to lack the levels of mutual trust, reciprocity and support that an artist-led group might offer. The onus is therefore on members to exercise strategic confidence in order to negotiate the group. Another issue

is *clustering* within the group: smaller clusters of friends can be intimidating to access and on the outside of these clusters members can feel (because of the size and 'low-density network' nature of the group), a lack of ownership of and responsibility towards the wider group. Members can feel disempowered because they cannot see *how* to engage with these clusters or with the group as a whole.

It appears to be important to many of the people who coordinated or initiated these schemes that, like an online forum, the groups are administered and hosted rather than explicitly led or directed. Heather, former director of the continuing professional development organisation, Arts Matrix and member of the original Associates steering committee posed the question that seems to concern all those invested in the organisation of membership schemes: "*How do you facilitate that in a very light touch way?*"

The size of the group, according to Anita, will also affect how members interact with one another:

*Now that the group has grown to 90 people, I think we're up to now, it's quite a different place to be because I think that I'm trying to connect with members now. Trying to kind of organize things without being sort of like a dominant figure trying to get people together, and that balance is quite a difficult one - trying to initialize a few different trips and things like that, but I also I don't want to be too much for people.*

Anita describes how some members find the group difficult to engage with because they are not familiar with fellow members. For her, pulling members in with a lightness of touch and a greater informality would help to solve these access issues:

*I think there are lots of things that could be improved. I think that sometimes we go about things in an unnecessarily formal way, which could kind of break those barriers down again. And I think actually in improving those things it's about involving as many people as possible so that you get like how a young*

*graduate would go in and do that, like quite young and freely and in a kind of exciting and punchy way.*

*(...)*

*And I think actually that's where things like social events need to happen a bit more regularly and a little bit more lightly as well. Sort of a bit more spontaneously really, which I don't think happens at all.*

There is a desire voiced for less controlled, more informal social events to be programmed, spaces in which members can mix and get to know one another. Speaking about Extra Special People, Sally describes how members requested more opportunity for face-to-face contact:

*People wanted a much more regular meeting, so since that time we've been doing our once a week slot, so there's a time when you always know something's always going to be going on here.*

Amongst its members that I spoke to the Spike Associates was far more often referred to as a resource or a network to make use of, than a 'community' to socialise with or depend upon. For example, Spike Associate, Thalia, had travelled to the Falmouth Convention, a conference in Cornwall and subsequently volunteered to give a talk to fellow members about the event. She says of the group:

*I think you can share something that you've gone and done (like this thing next week). I think that's really helpful. I think they're probably the main reasons that I'm still a member. (...)*

*I think something I've seen which has been really useful recently is that getting advice from other people and being able to have that group of people that you don't use on an everyday basis but that you kind of tap into or use when you want to.*

Gary had also given a talk about his practice to fellow members and had valued this experience. He had joined the Associates for access to more structured peer dialogue than the conversations he took part in his studio environment. In this sense the group as a framework for more formalised peer interaction appears to serve a

valuable purpose. He describes the specific qualities of dialogue the group allows for him:

*I think presenting yourself in a more formal situation, rather than just having a chat with a mate, having people that you may not necessarily know particularly well, but won't be that bothered about talking directly. I think just having a wider circle of influence really.*

Associates member, Diane consciously uses the symbolic power of the 'group-as-community' as an amenity with which to support a funding application and she was one amongst several members to use the group to fulfil funding criteria necessitating wider dissemination of practice:

*I organised myself and used the Associates as a kind of resource for my proposal (...) Through the Associates I would organise some talks and meetings and studio visits (...) It was also a way to make the application stronger 'cause you have the context. Whatever the application is I'm making you have the context of Spike Island and the Associate group. You can always say that it is very, very easy to disseminate your research and get feedback and present the work and so it is a kind of very useful thing in that sense.*

Associate member Sarah voices disappointment about the lack of more informal interaction:

*I thought that I'd go and meet people and that there would be lots of opportunity for sort of talking and for discussing and for finding out about each other's practice, but the actual sort of social...by that I mean getting together in the same group sort of thing – were really, really sporadic. The reading group was good but then it, I had other commitments...I've been meaning to get back in and the crits again are brilliant. I kind of joined it thinking that there would be a kind of monthly meeting or just meet in the pub or that sort of thing, but I guess it's never been as self-organising as it was meant to be, which was a fear I had from the beginning that this group, because it was set up by an institution rather than something like...is it Transmission in Glasgow?...that that was set up by artists because they wanted to have a network, so this, because it was top-down, so to speak that Spike always has that role that it organised things.*

It appears as if, by having a structure whereby regular face-to-face contact is possible, social engagement may become less awkward

or contrived, and more spontaneous. Levels of mutual trust and familiarity about one another's practices in the group increase. Hence, members become more likely to initiate peer exchanges beyond those events that are programmed. Unspoken knowledge about one another's practices and preoccupations has time to accumulate. According to Field:

The key point is that tacit knowledge in particular appears to be created on a shared basis, and transmitted most efficiently when people know, and trust, one another. (Field, 2005, p14)

Although the conditions for collaboration had been engineered to some extent with the Interp Groups and these groups did lead to further collaborations, these were quite closely managed situations. They were groups that already contained certain bonds of friendship and were small enough to nurture trust and reciprocity within a shorter time frame.

Apart from explicitly evident ways of engaging with the group - attending talks, participating in peer critiques, going to workshops etc. - there are also important modes of engagement that require tacit learning and skills: ways of speaking about practice, what practices may be valued by group members or the organisation, how to have the confidence to make connections with new people, the best ways in which to participate in a social group or collaborative project or which of your skills may be valued in a collective practice-based situation. As Caroline says of the Associates:

*I really see it as a facility to be used and exploited. Spike Island should be exploited by people who have a clarity about what they want out of it. Not to just sit in it and hope that it's going to do something to them, cast some light...and it's a means for people to invent it and reinvent it.*

However, these groups are comprised of members who engage in many different ways and with different levels of intensity.

Caroline implies that there is a type of confident member who will benefit more effectively from the social resources of the institution.

I believe that some members anticipate leadership to prompt or empower this peer interaction. As one of the original members of the Associates puts it:

*I felt quite frustrated that we were just left with something that was totally ephemeral and what are we gonna do with it? Who's gonna tell us what to do?*

*I felt very often that we just lacked, we were just left with something that we didn't know each other well enough for someone to say ok let's do this, but that did happen gradually, and I think over the few months and then into the Autumn it started to happen organically.*

In my experience, it has often been the meetings that occur with any regularity - for example a group of artists taking a series of short research trips to different cities or attending the Reading Group or peer critiques on a regular basis – that have contributed to pockets of greater social cohesion within the group. Nina is an example of an Associates member who has felt confident enough to take advantage of the connections that became possible in different group situations, viewing these as opportunities that would ultimately help her practice. Having interviewed her individually, I knew that she had initiated her own residencies and apprenticeships from an early age and I believe that the Associates model stood to benefit her greatly because of this assertive attitude:

*It just seems like having the bursaries makes for a dynamism because you can have an idea and you can actually do it. Trips. I've been to Cardiff, Birmingham twice and met artists in those places. It's not just the money but that day in Birmingham was organised. To meet that many different artists and to see that many different venues. It would take a bit of effort.*

*And so, even that fact that we walked from one to the other, on the way I met artists and when I was back in Birmingham on my own, I got in touch with one of them. Then I started learning about the Thursday night thing (Extra Special People's Salon). So, I found it incredibly helpful. (...). It seems like if*



*people have ideas here there's this sense of possibility, at least that's my impression.*

This vision of the group as (necessarily) having a lack of cohesion and the resulting need for the individual to pursue their own agenda vis-à-vis the group, is echoed by another Associate member, Diane:

*There's no kind of clear coherence, but I don't think it's a bad thing because of the nature of what the Associates are, being a diverse group, it's just a series of different types of events. I think people have to be proactive to navigate, to find their way of using Associates for what they want. I'm not sure if people do that, so that may be the critique.*

So, it is not always obvious how members should benefit most from such a group. They require a regular forum for informal social interaction and a certain level of assertiveness to be able to draw out the more intangible resources from the group<sup>36</sup>, such as the ability to understand and form relationships that will support them, inspire them and further their practice. For many, such groups are simply a valuable resource rather than a 'community' and can be exploited as such.

### Clustering

Apart from bonding social capital, Putnam (2000) also speaks of "bridging social capital": connections made between people who regard themselves as different from one another. In the context of artists' groups and networks it may be more helpful to think of weak and strong ties (Granovetter, 1983) between individuals, and clusters that develop within the membership group, and between

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<sup>36</sup> In Chapter 5 I discuss ways in which respondents make tacit knowledge and practices in such groups visible.

individual artists, groups and networks externally. I see groups such as the Spike Associates or Extra Special People as a decentralized, low-density network of mainly weak ties, which features temporary close configurations or member clustering (for example, when members collaborate on a project together or become involved in the same artist-led group). In these cases the bonds between the active members will often be strong. Hughes, Jewson and Unwin clarify these terms:

Low-density networks (...) are those in which associates of individual members are not in contact with, or possibly not even aware of, others. Some networks may be neither centralized nor decentralized but rather composed of a series of cliques or clusters, each of which is relatively centralized but none of which dominates the network as a whole. Here bridging points and connections that link the clusters may be particularly powerful and influential. (Hughes, Jewson & Unwin, 2007, p74)

This differs from the artist-led groups I met where ties between members were usually based on friendship and / or mutual collaboration and were strong ties, forming smaller, higher density clusters. According to Granovetter:

Weak ties provide the bridges over which innovations cross the boundaries of social groups; the decision making, however, is influenced mainly by the strong-ties network in each group. (Granovetter, 1983, p219).

The “weak ties” aspect of social networking is also potentially one of the strengths of membership groups in that the low-density nature of them allows smaller clusters to develop within the wider group through collaborations and friendships, should members have the skills, confidence and desire and forum to make such links. Therefore, artist-led groups like Central Reservation occurred as a result of artists meeting one another through the Associates Programme, and Extra Special People has also been the site of artists meeting then going on to initiate projects with their

peers. As one members of the Birmingham-based group, The Lombard Method puts it:

*There's definitely groups forming out of the Eastside thing that have come through Eastside, 'cause all the things that happen on Thursday, while we can choose them, they're still run through Eastside place and people. There are separate things that have really obviously come through people meeting through Eastside.*

Philippa, a former member of Plan 9 artist led group, sees the Associates as a sort of focal point for clusters of activity in the city:

*It's about seeing who's around and who's in the city. Obviously there's little cliques in every city so that's one way of bringing those cliques together that might not see themselves as cliques.*

At the same time, this clustering can also be a barrier to participation. Associates Co-ordinator, Anita says:

*I think a lot of people use it or would like to imagine it as a networking opportunity or a support group, but I think often people don't actually utilise that very well so I think almost that they think that's what they want but they don't then input or access it very often, almost that they like the idea of it more than they do physically engaging with it.*

*Something like coming to talks is quite a tangible thing for people...an open door in a way, but aside from that I don't know what the easiest way to do it otherwise would be. Again I think it is that kind of networking thing that is a bit of a barrier. I mean it's much easier for those people who are already embedded in that culture in Bristol to access those things and I think that's why we see that recurring activity from the same people, but if you're not part of that network already...I could imagine it would be quite a hard thing to suddenly kind of step into.*

The presence of existing networks of members who are already familiar with one another, with one another's practice, as well as with the contemporary art landscape of Bristol can be intimidating for new members, particularly if these clusters do not communicate with one another.

There can also be an issue of age here, in that both Caroline (speaking of Spike Island and the background to the Associates) and Sally (speaking about Extra Special People) refer to the

dynamism of youth as a particularly engaging and generative force. Sally comments:

*In terms of an aesthetic or just kind of what's happening, there's a core group of younger people, probably recent, maybe they've graduated in the last two years and they kind of are quite a driving force in terms of the content and opportunities that come up and then I have a larger, much more diverse group of people who just like to dip in and out of stuff as and when they wish. So I have this core group of people who are very involved in helping me to run this space.*

Most members of these groups are recent graduates in their twenties, a fact that may discourage participation from older members. Anita makes the point that engagement with the group (and subsequent learning and development as a result of this participation) may become problematic in some cases because of the perception of 'cliquishness' from outside.

However, the fact that the Associates group is decentralised, a group of clusters and individuals, rather than a single friendship group means its potential to be more accessible to a wider membership may in fact be greater than an artist-led group.

Hilary, a committee member from Transmission reveals that the strong sense of community and belonging fostered in an artist-led group can nurture an identity strong enough to sometimes inhibit a more outward-looking stance:

*Transmission (...) because it's just a gallery without studios it's different because the networking's maybe not so strong. More in that kind of clique thing of people that you see at openings. It's a sense of belonging to our community. Like the Associates Scheme sounds brilliant because it's a bit more of a way into things and making things easier for new graduates and stuff.*

This idea of breadth was something, according to Associates steering group member Alison that would hopefully distinguish it from the artist-led model. Members could potentially have access

to a wider set of references and practices. Speaking of the smaller Interp groups she comments:

*I think you all had more in common as a group, but with the Associates it was envisaged that there would be different types of membership, different types of people, different practices completely and that there would be a kind of broader discussion maybe.*

### Conflict and Change in Membership Groups

Caroline's vision for the Associates was for a body that would remain in flux, and with the encouragement of the institution would 'renew' itself on a periodic basis:

*You think, actually let them constantly reinvent these models and let it be a kind of shapeless, it should be shapeless so that people keep on coming through it and do something with it and every so often, in order to force that you're going to have to put a firework in the room or raise the money to have a really special residency that's going to capture everybody's imagination, or threaten to close it down and hope to incite some kind of...so every so often you'll have to incite new energy or give new ownership but on the whole you want it to be something that constantly shifts (...) you'd want to imagine that it could change considerably but it will need some discreet leading from behind to energise and fan the flames.*

This attitude was reflected by Elliot, the succeeding director of Spike Island:

*There's political questions about how a loose affiliation like this can sit within an institution. (...) The more volatility there is and the more people are keen to challenge what this place will be then the more interesting it becomes.*

In the debate about Membership Groups that I convened at Spike Island, this idea of the membership disrupting or seizing control of the group came up again. One member raised the point that the Associates was not managed by a renewable committee, as with Transmission gallery. They received the following response from fellow member, Fay:

*I think the Associates themselves can organise themselves to change that. There is an argument that the Associates should run the budget from the Associates themselves. But it's just a case of people activating themselves to position that.*

In terms of ways of accommodating antagonistic disruption or conflict, Ned Rossiter distinguishes between the organised network and the networked organisation:

Conflicting, non-assimilable hierarchies distinguish organised networks from networked organisations (...). My argument is that such organisational systems do not suit the logic of information economies and network cultures. (...) The political concept of organised networks, however, understands conflict as a generative force in need of both collaborative methodologies and transdisciplinary frameworks. (Rossiter, 2006, p35)

In this sense, Spike Island can be seen as a networked organisation, accommodating and coordinating a body with some features of an organised network, but with its own particular hierarchy, both in terms of its staffing and in terms of its distributed “knots of aborescence” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p22), its clusters of influence and power. Social capital is not distributed evenly across the group because of the necessarily partisan nature of friendships and collaborations. Conflict, according to the Deleuzian rhizomatic model that informs Rossiter here, in order to be a “generative” force, requires the infection or assimilation of one body by another. I perceive this process occurring in the ways in which artist-led groups learn from one another, or in the influence of changes in a committee of an artist-led group on the larger membership’s knowledge and practices. The ability of the self-organised event to affect the programme and practice of a group and the ability of group participation to shape that event is one example.

With the Associates model, however, or with Extra Special People or East Street Arts membership scheme, while the group dynamism may be affected by a particularly stimulating programme or the input of a particularly confident member(s), the sense of members having greater sense of ownership - a full stake in the group - needs to be felt before a greater sense of community can be achieved, or indeed for some members to feel that it is worth their while to initiate events, let alone challenge the status quo.

Associate member, Fay, raised this point in the Membership Group Debate:

*I think this is the nature of an autonomous group within the confines of an institution, so it's about ownership of your ideas I think, within the group, and maybe that's the issue. It's about how much people feel they own the Associates.*

There is also the question of what is at stake. Many artists would not feel comfortable with challenging an institution that represents gatekeeper connections that could, at some future time, have an influential affect upon their professional progress.

### Part 3: Conversation as a Site of Peer Learning

Boris Groys, writing about contemporary art education discusses the artists' self-infection by the market, politics and globalisation as being fundamental to the continued flourishing of exciting art practice:

(...) the artist's body undergoes within the academy all the stages of the bacilli's intrusion: shock to the system, weakness, resistance, adaptation, renewal. (Groys, 2009, p 32)

Groys's image of the artist's body being constantly open to this invading "bacilli" can also be applied to the artist's entanglement in her/his post-education social and artistic milieu. The artist is anything but autonomous. She/he exposes themselves to a cycle of peer interaction that includes not only the incremental increase in confidence and identity formation through ongoing dialogue, collaboration and exposure to practices, but also the rigorous jolts of critique to which she/he must react.

Throughout my research *conversation*, the simple informal exchange of ideas through the spoken word recurred as a highly significant site for peer learning. I began to see conversation as a form of active participation; through conversations artists could begin to participate in the activities of artist-led groups, moving from a marginal position of interested observer to more active, involved roles.

Conversation provides artists with access to potential peers and enables them to begin to form relationships that may lead to future collaborations or other practice-oriented engagements. Through conversations knowledge can be distributed, while at the same time social cohesion is augmented.



Through informal conversation artists can allow a space for difference: previously unfamiliar or uncomfortable concepts can be explored. It is also a vehicle for the imagination, a site for testing out possibilities and exploring alternative points of view and is the connecting medium that builds bridges between practices.

Conversation holds a particularly valuable role in creative practice, and one that respondents describe using language that holds more visceral connotations than cerebral: it can be a 'third space' where not only ideas arise, but also where a mutual generation of energy occurs, gains momentum and can then *activate* collaborative practice. I do not use the term "third space" in the spirit of Ray Oldenburg's "Third Place" (Oldenburg, 1989, 1991, 2000) as an environment that is social, but is neither the workplace nor the home. Neither do I directly cite Oldenburg or other theorists who refer to "Third Places" or "Third Spaces" in this thesis. The "third space" here is not a virtual or physical environment or even a location, but depicts, rather this force or momentum generated between artists that instigates further practice.

### Conversation, Access and Participation

As previously discussed, friendships often provide access points to artist-led groups, through conversation. Ray talks about conversations as being the site of pivotal points in his growing engagement with Outpost artist-led group in Norwich, starting as a student and then as graduate:

*(...) my first relationship of involvement with it was coming to see shows really and my first instinctive reaction was an element of confusion, and with*

*hindsight I feel that conversation, loose conversation that happened outside of the space about the shows that I saw here, were maybe my first real lessons in what contemporary art was in ... 2005.*

During these early stages of engagement with the group, as Ray became more interested he also tested out ideas through conversations on the periphery of the organisation. As a committee member he has eventually helped instigate the group's participation in art fairs, an idea he traces back to these early discussions:

*But then I was volunteering on installs and having discussions with committee members about ideas about art. I remember being in a conversation very early, way before I was even shadowing the committee where I think I started a conversation with the volunteer and the chair there about ideas about art fairs and why Outpost have never been involved in art fairs, if it had ever been considered, and I just think some of those conversations about aspirations for the space probably have carried through.*

These conversations were also a visible sign to others more engaged with the organisation that Ray was interested in and potentially committed to its concerns. Participation through these informal conversations can send out signals about willingness to become further involved. Iris, now a Spike Associate, had moved to Bristol from Sheffield where she had worked voluntarily as part of the studio recruitment team for S1 Artspace. She spoke about looking for artists who were both “active” and “engaged”:

*(...) we kind of thought about it in terms of active, as in they be in the studios, they'd be quite happy to chat about their practice. They might not necessarily have had to have had loads of shows under their belt, but that never really seemed to be an issue. It was just more to do with a kind of openness (...)*

For Iris after, after making her work, she sees her involvement in a wider, ongoing conversation with her fellow artists as a valuable contribution to what she refers to as her “community”:

*That's why I wanted to be part of a studio group, because that keeps me interested a lot of the time and ...just to have that kind of conversation with people and to be sociable like that and to make sure that other people are benefitting from stuff too, and that always, inevitably helps you with your own stuff, or work things out that you weren't quite sure how to work out...being active and making.*

Discussion around practice can be something of value that can be offered by an artist-led collective or from artist to artist, in lieu of material or economic remuneration. In such gift economies 'conversation', referred to in the singular often denotes an ongoing dialogue where artists are supplying one another's need for feedback, affirmation and stimulation. This seems to be the most basic and most important form of communal participation for most respondents. Tegan, from Moot artist-run gallery stresses the power of ongoing dialogue to entangle an artist-in-residence with their host community to the extent that the host community feeds into the resident's work:

*(...) Well we always wanted artists to make new work so we would never sort of just pick something and put it in a gallery. It would always be a dialogue. It would always be this relationship. They would create a whole new body of work that would then be exhibited in the gallery, so we were involved in their process of creativity as well.*

Conversation is a way that artists both access one another's practices and build bridges between practices. Moreover, in this realm of informal learning it is important to stress that active engagement in discourse is something that is more often than not motivated by genuine spontaneous enthusiasm or interest. The pleasure taken in this kind of participation can be overlooked in learning literature, but is significant and is predicated on the ability to enjoy the conversation for its own sake, irrespective of the many other outcomes that may be contingent upon it. Theo, a Spike Associate encapsulates this attitude when he describes his email correspondence with a fellow sound artist he admires:

*I started researching (him), his projects and things, and that's when I felt compelled to email him and getting into this correspondence and we've been exchanging recordings and correspondence...maybe he'll come to England and put a show on – I don't know what it leads to...it's just that fascination with someone else's work and that exchange of ideas that you have. I'm not doing it so that maybe we can do a project in a sense. It's just a way of talking it through and maybe something comes of it.*

The reflexive processes inherent in conversational exchange often gives artists an alternative relationship to practice, one that helps them reflect upon their own work.

Spike Associate, Ros describes a feedback loop that occurs when she is able to access dialogue with an artist about their work. The sharing of “*motives and ideas*” behind another artist’s practice leads automatically to her reflecting upon her own:

*Talking about other people's work is always really good and I find that it really helps you see the work in lots of different lights. 'Cause obviously when you see a piece yourself – even if you read a summary of it or a blurb or literature on it – when you actually speak to the artist, you see it in all these different lights that you might not have seen otherwise, and that can be really good for understanding thoughts behind work, and then obviously leading to ideas of your own. So yeah, I always try to speak to the artist about the work if I can.*

(...)

*So the conversation's important, I think it's easier to be critical of work when you're quite separate from it, but as soon as you understand the motives behind it and the ideas behind it then you can engage with it a bit more – it's a bit more accessible maybe, and then obviously those kind of ideas will develop your own practice, in a sense.*

It is telling here that Ros mentions that with distance one can be critical. The desire for a more detached relationship or formalised framework that *enables* critique between peers is explored in a section below.

## Conversation, The Pub and Group Cohesion

Sally, Co-ordinator of Extra Special People at Eastside Projects talks about ways in which she evaluates the programme. Beyond a formal six-monthly review she also talks about ongoing discussions in the pub:

*I suppose coming back to how things are evaluated, it is very informal, but I do a lot of reflective thinking about it, but then also I talk about it with other people who were there, in particular the directors. We'll discuss what's going well and what isn't going so well and how we can move it forward and sometimes this happens in a pub after a crit or after another opening, so there are other associates around to feed into that discussion as well, so that's quite interesting.*

In a similar way, Caroline in her plans for the Associates at Spike Island saw the pub as an equally important learning space for artists as any other. She speaks here of her original concepts for the Associates scheme in relation to artists-in-residence at Spike Island:

*One has a host community that (..) is active, that are around, that are learning, so when they go to the pub they might have similar networks and know similar people and might be in shows together or might just have an opportunity to talk to an artist they've read about.*

The pub is an important site for reflective discussion on art events not only because of the disinhibiting effects of alcohol (although that is a factor!), but because it is an informal public space that everyone has an equal right to inhabit. Although artists are often still aware of status differences between them (often based on levels of professional success) there is a tacit acceptance that such hierarchies should not be explicitly respected in the pub. So, Extra Special People members can participate in discussions about the development of their programme and also meet artists they

otherwise might be nervous about approaching, or voice things they might otherwise feel shy in voicing. In my experience, after an artist's talk at Spike Island, the post-talk pub session was not only the place where the most interesting discussions would happen, but the tacit assumption of those present being *as* peers seemed to increase the general sense of the group as a cohesive body.

This change of location from a purpose-led practice oriented event to the pub can also serve to diffuse any tensions that may have built up in the preceding period, so the pub discussion can be a site for allaying concerns, smoothing over or addressing conflicts. For Royal Standard, Liverpool, the pub is part of their regular itinerary. Committee member, Lucy says:

*One thing is we try to have a regular meeting with the studio members. Usually when we do that it's like an hour meeting and then all go to the pub.*

This location shift also provides a boundary beyond which discussions related to the artist-led space, although they may not be abandoned, can lose some of their intensity. Again, by allowing this diffusion period, artists can experiment with the boundaries and nature of debate with greater focus. Ray at Outpost says of their committee meetings:

*I suppose the different ideas about the way things should be run and the decisions that should be made (...) debate can be extremely challenging. There are occasions where it might have felt like...the debate that is had here is left here and we might go to the pub afterwards for a drink, but I suppose the challenge is judging that debate well enough, not allowing it to become anything more than a debate as it sometimes does.*

*(...)*

*Maybe you've seen it overspill into the pub a couple of times. But I think everyone has a slightly different ambition for the space so there's probably always an element of personal compromise, which is probably the most challenging thing.*

In contrast to the space dedicated and *intended* for creative exchange the pub is the space where a spillover of energy, a diffused and diluted energy from a prior, more focussed exchange, can occur. These conversations in transitional spaces are often particularly important because they can sow the seeds for future projects, without imposing the potentially inhibiting pressure of a formal plan.

### Conversation, Collaboration and Stimulation

The aspiration to create a platform for exchange with an emphasis on open, informal conversation recurs in relation to many of the artist-led initiatives. The artists' group Format, formed in January 2007 is a Bristol based collective for artists working in lens-based media. One of the founder members, Spike Associate Stephen, describes the motivation for the group as primarily to construct social connections between practitioners. After coming to Bristol from Ireland, he felt that there was little happening in the city in terms of discursive events:

*We were just a loose collection of people who wanted to create this sort of discursive process.*

As a group they hold regular meetings, consisting of peer critiques for members and presentations from invited speakers.

The informality of the group and the kind of exchanges this allows distinguishes it in terms of tone from other discursive situations in the lives of the members. Stephen says:

*I think for me and for the other people who started it, it was really important that it didn't become sort of another form of external research group. I'm already in a research group so I do not need that academic atmosphere that can be slightly stifling at times so it's something that's I think far more round the idea of an exploratory, open, conversation.*

There is a sense that these situations are important because the participants have nothing to lose by engaging with them. They are pleasurable *and* they may potentially lead to a practice opportunity, (a collaboration, a project or a show). Equally important is the discursive exchange and the *unforeseen* and unintended implications this may have for practice, when one's focus on one's individual practice has been temporarily adjusted. Looking beyond the rhetoric of groups, the sense of identity and belonging, I could see that this mutuality was also a way of maintaining what one respondent has referred to as "*fertile ground*". Being in a situation where conversations about practice and interactions around practice is possible is a significant motivating factor for joining groups, organising collective initiatives or forming affiliations with groups, because of the dynamism it seems to generate. Part of constructing practice situations with ones peers is to create the conditions that Stephen describes to maintain levels of interest and motivation for oneself. I asked Stephen to describe most important thing(s) for the development of his practice:

*I think it's the process of discovery and learning actually and not feeling stagnant or unmotivated or something. They're the most important things, to feel like you are somewhere or that you could create conditions somewhere or that you have the tools to exist and to develop I think, and I think it's got to be interesting for you.*

There is something revivifying or enlivening about being amongst these peer entanglements for artists' practice and respondents often talk about interactions using visceral or somatic terms. Lewis, a Spike Associate with a studio at Spike Island had worked with a collaborator for several years, and was about to embark on a group show with fellow studio holders. He pinpoints 'dialogue' as being very important to the development of his practice as a galvanising force:



*I think when I'm engaged with it. Like other artists, shows or projects...that's when for me, I come alive a bit more and the work comes alive a bit more. I seem to go only so far in the studio on my own.*

Jorella Andrews talks of learning by “rubbing up against”, interactions that are not cumulative or transfer-oriented but require listening and dwelling with both objects and others, “entanglements” that may challenge, excite or provoke us (Andrews, 2006, p182). Such effects of *dwelling-with* can be seen across networks, in studio complexes, institutional affiliation groups, artist-led groups and any number of collaborative and participatory projects.

Ideas and momentum can accrue as conversations occur over time, like the warming up suggested by the Joseph Beuys piece *Honeypump in the Workplace* (1977), where liquid honey pumped through tubes became a metaphor for the energy produced by discussions at Documenta VI in Kassel.

Here, the educationalist, Engestrom refers to his theories of collective action:

Expansive swarming is not just hectic active movement. It has multiple rhythms of improvisation and persistence that correspond to the dual dynamics of swift situational concerted action and pursuit of a repeatedly reconfigured long-term perspective in knotworking. (...) Persistence refers to patient dwelling in the object over long periods of time, alternating between intense action and more detached observation or even partial withdrawal. (Engestrom, Y, 2007, p49)

Engestrom refers to the “swarming” social production of open source software developers as “mycorrhizae” (Engestrom, 2007), where engagement is multi-directional and symbiotic, coordinated by peer review. The ‘object’ of participation is emergent and uncontrollable, such as the waves of popular protests in the Arab Spring (Dec 2010 onwards).

Social production in contemporary art collectives does not quite fit with any of these models, although each of them,

(particularly the concepts of participation and reification suggested by Wenger) are relevant in certain respects. The landscape of participation, as I see it, *does* constitute these flowerings of multi-directional and symbiotic relationships from Engestrom's "mycorrhizae" model, yet it also includes engagements with structures and relationships that hold stable over time.

I liken this to a process that relies on the incremental growth in familiarity through repeated exchanges between practitioners, alongside more focussed episodic project-working.

"Knotworking" (Engestrom, 2007) is exemplified in repeated discourse between artists, who build up momentum in this way with the potential for collaborative projects arising from this.

Rowan, reflecting on her involvement with the artist-led spaces Rhys & Hannah Present and Central Reservation, highlights how this dialogue does not happen simply by dint of being an artist with access to a network of artists, but comes about when one embeds oneself within an active artistic community through participating in self-organised projects and other initiatives:

*When I finished Rhys & Hannah, I thought I would be like ah, thank God for that, but after a few months I really missed meeting people, talking to people, thinking about shows, thinking about collaborations and ...not even if you're involved in it necessarily, but just having the chance to discuss things with people. I think even if it's on quite an informal basis you don't realise how much that's engaging your brain. In a way that if you are just going to work then going to your studio then you don't necessarily have those conversations.*

This opportunity for dialogue happened for Rowan as a result of both projects, but she distinguishes her involvement with artist-led initiatives from being part of the Associates, as an institutionally-initiated membership scheme. As co-creator of an artist-led

project, her situation guaranteed her a more regular and reliable social and practice-orientated interaction with fellow artists.

*(...) it's not like we were necessarily having critical discussions about art all the time, but I think it does still, for me to be in that kind of environment, to be around shows and to be around artists, it does definitely feed in, even if not in a direct way. It's not like I'd make a piece of work as a response to it or anything like that. (...) I mean even though the Associates and things like that happen, they're kind of occasional things you would go to. It's not like a regular social if that makes sense.*

The buzz or excitement generated through conversations between collaborating artists is an unquantifiable dynamic force that is the impetus for many of the projects produced between peers.

Philippa, one of the founder members of Plan 9 artist-led space in Bristol (active 2005 - 2010) spoke about this and another project she initiated, *Girl Gang*<sup>37</sup>:

*I guess Plan 9 was gathering people together, people who were interested and engaged to do interesting and engaging things. You could say that maybe Girl Gang has a lineage to that as well. I've been expanding my collaborative way of working, because I would say that was one of the best things about being involved in artist-led activity, is just that sitting around with like-minded people talking an idea through, bouncing it around. That's some of the most exciting times.*

There is a strong sense of mutual pleasure and the notion of the idea being bounced around as if it were a toy or an autonomous object with it's own kinetic energy.

The ball metaphor comes up again in the following example. In August 2009 I facilitated a discussion on collaboration for an exhibition at an artist-led space in Cornwall (*Two Is One, One is None*, Back Lane West, Redruth, August 31<sup>st</sup> 2009). The artists were three collaborating pairs, one of each pair being Cornwall-based and the other Bristol or London based. The Bristol-based artists

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<sup>37</sup> *Girl Gang* investigates a range strategies for moving through the social and built environment, delighting in taking up space and reinterpreting the lay of the land in order to gain economic freedom, mobility and social space. [<http://www.girlgang.net/about> accessed 11.06.12].

were also members of the Spike Associates. Mark (from Cornwall) and Nadine (from Bristol) exchanged ideas and objects online and by mail before meeting up. I was interested in how Mark described their 'dialogue'. It appeared as a gathering of momentum, a warming up or a kind of courtship that served to activate the work when the artists met:

*What we were literally working on together were different ideas which still can be put together, but when we got together we realised we were much more interested in the space between us and how do we somehow make that coalesce into a piece of work, because we were really interested in the fact that we were similar yet different and we approached things in a way similarly yet differently, and then we started talking about motifs...so even when we warmed up through the dialogues and through the objects and through this shared interest, when we were together it changed quite radically and the ball started rolling and that was that.*

Through dialogue over time a shared language or "shorthand" (as Nadine refers to it at one point) can develop, a mutual comprehension of tone, proving expedient if and when participants do engage in practice together. As Wenger puts it:

Shared histories of engagement can become resources for negotiating meaning without the constant need to compare notes. (Wenger, 1999, p. 84).

Or, as Nadine describes of her collaboration with Mark:

*The conversational energy just suddenly kicked in so smoothly that (...) that it was about the energy was so on the button that a lot of it didn't need to be said – that's the practice of collaboration though.*

Developing a language together is not simply about expediency due to project-based or compartmentalised working in constrained timeframes. It also has a renegade aspect; it is a way of protecting a shared process and developing it in a safe space between peers, rather than, at the other end of the spectrum, distributing knowledge through discourse. Because this is a process of informal learning or development, beyond the legitimising frame of 'experts', and because of the mutual excitement that can build up

in such collaborative dyads, this sense can be exaggerated. Farrell points to the appeal of creating a sub-culture that this engenders and the choices that creative people make to work with their peers when access to expertise or other forms of asymmetrical mentoring is cut off or limited (Farrell, 2003). I accept that both of these are reasons for developing a shared language, but I find Florian Schneider's comments about collaboration more pertinent to the situations I have experienced and discussed:

Collaborations are the black holes of knowledge regimes. They willingly produce nothingness, opulence and ill-behaviour. And it is their very vacuity which is their strength. (Schneider, 2006, p251).

Here practice, entangled with an ongoing dialogue, generating a sense of purposeless play that holds artists together, informs them and motivates them to continue to collaborate, whether these experiments have institutional legitimacy or not.

Spike Associate Lewis has a sculpture and installation practice and told me about some of the collaborations that had been important to the development of his work. He had started to work with a performance artist on an installation he had developed for a festival in Bristol. The two artists took the piece *Storehouse* to Bath festival. Lewis had also done some performance in the early days of his practice, but recognized that his collaborator and he had very different performance styles and approaches, because of their differing education (in theatre and fine art respectively):

*In a way the visual element of it became just the thing we were hanging it on. The real dialogue that happened - because we disagreed a lot as well, but in a very positive way, and I think that was the strength of what it eventually grew into, because I suppose what we did was we ended up developing a very clear language between us what it was about. (...). For both of us it became quite a major thing that we were involved in.*

The two experimented with one another's approaches:

*And interestingly enough I think we learnt from each other in a way. I mean I learned to perform in a way that I couldn't do before. (...) She taught me how to subtly play with an audience, where equally I taught her how to manipulate objects (...) so we found lots of points where there was a lot of exchange.*

The piece developed into a touring event, which they took abroad, and they were subsequently invited to make a new piece at the ICA on the strength of the same work. Lewis talked about what they had learned from their collaboration as something they could then apply in different contexts because of the “*shared language*” they had developed. Although both artists eventually ceased collaborating, Lewis says that they still retain a link and that he had called upon his former collaborator more recently to discuss his practice.

In his theory of “instrumental intimacy” (Farrell, 2003, p23), Michael Farrell contrives various stages for such collaborative processes. He begins with this assumption of equality, but in his interpretation equality refers to the actual ideas that are exchanged:

Creative innovations are most likely to occur after a pair of collaborators has gone through a series of exchanges of ideas that each views as relatively equal in value. (Farrell, 2003, p157).

The assumption of equality is not necessarily reserved to the value of the material being exchanged as Farrell has it, but (as I shall explore below and in a separate section on ethics), it forms part of a code of conduct of exchange that is often tacit.

Mark and Nadine’s exchange happened over a contained period of time. They did not know one another beforehand and they made the work *about* this experience: *Expedient Exchange*, 2009. In the discussion on collaboration they made explicit some of these normally unspoken processes. To return to the idea of a code

of conduct, the assumption of equality is also the assumption of equal status, sensitivity and respect. Mark says:

*We found that what was really interesting was that without much preamble but with maybe some hints because of the dialogues we had up to the point where we were physically in the same space, was that physically as well as intellectually we were like right we're going to now have our time and I suppose that mutual approach about, right we're gonna be peers. We're gonna be generous, we're emotionally committed to it. We're gonna be sensitive. We're gonna be quite relaxed.*

There is also often a meeting of dispositions that is more difficult to describe. Both Mark and Nadine had similar concerns in their practice about working with participants, but dealt with these in different ways. However, they were attuned to one another's values and recognised one another's tone of practice. According to Mark:

*We were coming at it on the same sort of frequency.*

Colm, a Spike Associate, distinguishes the collaborations he became involved with during his MA in Falmouth from those cross-disciplinary creative collaborations (involving VJing and music) he engaged with as a recent graduate in Glasgow<sup>38</sup>:

*I guess a lot of it stems from the friendships that you're drawn to other people's spirit or playfulness so...and then I guess the good thing for me at that time not over-theorising or over thinking about it was when you just fall into doing things or you're just having a conversation over a beer and its like let's go and do that. It's not formalised in any particular way and so I guess that's how those collaborations start and we did start to formalise some things and came up with some terrible names for collaborations and logos and this, that and the other, and looking at it now, we'd be focussed enough to then build on what we had - as a kind of skill-base it was a bit more haphazard so we wouldn't have thought of getting funding for a lot of things. It was kind of I guess in the spirit of doing free parties or something like that...not structured.*

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<sup>38</sup> In Chapter 3, I discuss the different approaches Colm had to his various practice(s) in relation to practice identities.

This suggests that conversation is a space that allows ideas to come together with few constraints or boundaries and these conditions then give birth to action.

With Colm, as with Mark and Nadine it is also necessary that there is a tacit sense of equality between artists, that their status as peers, at least within the framework and time span of that particular collaborative exchange, is accepted and that the “*space between*” as Mark puts it, is a co-authored space.

Michael Farrell continues:

As the level of risk in the exchange escalates, as they begin to exchange less finished work, they set the stage for instrumental intimacy. (Farrell, 2003, p157).

According to Farrell a meeting of minds between collaborators is eventually achieved where the emergence of ideas cannot necessarily be traced back to any one individual:

Instrumental intimacy occurs when each begins to use the mind of the other as if it were an extension of his own (...) The boundaries between the self and other diminish until the members are able to think out loud together as if they were one person. During the stage of greatest instrumental intimacy, when merger is at its highest point, in their dialogues with one another it is common for the participants to find their ideas emerging in a cascading flow, such that neither one knows or cares who thought of the ideas first. In this stage of the relationship, ideas emerge through combinations of thoughts derived from each of the separate members, but the emerging ideas are sometimes experienced as coming from a third source. (Farrell, 2003, p158).

This idea of material emerging from a third space is echoed by Sandy, a Spike Associate, whose practice is largely commissioned socially-engaged and ‘relational’ work. She works with constituent communities, alongside a more personal exhibition or event-oriented practice. Sandy describes several collaborative relationships that have been important to her, including a project



whereby she trains, commissions and otherwise works with artists in early-years settings, *Five by Five by Five*:

*I've collaborated with an artist in that two years on the trot. So two dialogues that are really important. One is with an educator/mentor, and we've had that throughout because we've worked together as consultants and trainers now and that's really interesting in terms of ...it's thinking that comes out of ...it doesn't come out from either one of us but it definitely comes out between in the relationship between us.*

*(...) We've described as being something to do with fertile ground. We know each other so well and we trust that it's safe to make mistakes. We've enjoyed each other's thinking and ideas I think, over the years.*

This relationship grew out of working together closely for several years....a development that Sandy describes as “*very, very gradual*”. This is a relationship based on trust and mutual interest that cannot happen immediately through gaining access to a particular network. As I have explored above, having access to an ongoing reflexive relationship is particularly important for artists, and in particular as so many artists are working as sole traders. In Sandy's case the time she devotes to her paid employment with socially-engaged projects means that she is unable to regularly have face-to-face contact with a wider community of contemporary artists practicing in different spheres. As I have explored in Chapter 3, contact with other artist-collaborators and artists' groups helps freelance artists to maintain an artistic identity and at times an identity connected with their own individual practice, as well as the creative work they may get paid for. Equally relevant to this is the maintenance of an ongoing dialogue around practice to maintain 'fertile ground' for practice development, so that the 'artist' part of the employed 'artist-educator' is nourished.

## Conversation and Connections: Opening Up

Whether working in a declared collaboration or not, most of the artists I spoke to were looking for situations where dialogue about their practice was possible. I mention Colm's views on progress elsewhere in this thesis, in relation to the importance he places on his work being visible to his peers. Accompanying this is the desire to be "open to discussions", which he relates to his lack of confidence and tendency to self-edit:

*I have a sense of failure in that I have a failure in testing out a lot of possibilities, cause I self-edit in my mind, which is a really bad process that I kind of got out of on the MA...*

MW: *Rather than externalising them?*

*Yeah. Externalising and opening up to discussion a lot of things.*

And later

*So it's just reversing that negative cycle or gaining confidence through doing projects or exhibiting and then that would get your confidence up and be much more visible and more open to discussions and just be more out there...I don't know...that's so vague. I guess I can be quite private about my own activity or secretive I guess. I'd almost like to come out after a year of being away with something amazing and be like "ta-dah!". That is kind of a weird trait I've always had and I can see that's very, very unhelpful in that it is like a weird secretive thing that ...I don't want to pull a rabbit out of a hat, but have a discussion about the rabbit before hand.*

Colm reflects a common desire to expose work to outside input, meanings and perspectives. Perhaps there is also an issue of practice identity here in that, in an extract above, Colm had talked enthusiastically about the discussions that had started with a friend in the pub that had later developed into more formalised creative collaborations. He mentions in the same interview (see Chapter 3) how he had distinguished between his Fine Art practice and those creative projects featuring VJing in clubs and other

‘expanded cinema’ methods. It seems that more informal conversation in an informal location has led to fluid and enjoyable collaboration, whereas there is a struggle to achieve this level of informality around his Fine Art practice. In earlier sections of this chapter, I looked at the efforts of artist-led groups and facilitated membership schemes to also act as a social hub, and one of the principal reasons for this seems to be to foster the conditions for informal conversation out of which collaborations might occur.

However, this becomes difficult once a space is *dedicated* to creative exchanges. Gary, an Associate and studio holder at Spike Island distinguishes between informal conversations that occur due to peer’s proximity and mutual interest, and slightly more focussed and structured exchanges. He describes coming to Spike Island after working in shared studios in London and getting involved in the studio culture and local artist-led groups:

*I think that for the first time there was a supportive structure around the studio. Artists were more readily accessible really. Obviously Bristol’s a smaller place and was less going by a cliquey attitude. It was a more supportive, less self-interested attitude.*

*(...) You know there was more of a social scene that was linked to the studio. Rather than having friends outside the studio, friends were created inside the studio. There were associated events. Obviously having a gallery here would pull artists into a social event...would promote discussion. It was kind of like a hub of like-minded people being discursive.*

In a previous section I discussed the theme of levels of formality in membership groups and the Spike Associates as a resource, rather than a ‘community’. This relates to Gary’s need for a different kind of dialogue, “*rather than just having a chat with a mate*”:

*Because I think there was, amongst the studio holders, although people would talk about their work (...) it was too informal I think. I wanted something that was a little bit more organised*

Casual conversations are much valued because of all the reasons explored above. The fact that they often occur between friends and acquaintances indicates that they signal support, access, an initial stage in collaboration, a platform to test potentialities and a medium for greater social cohesion. However, many respondents echo Gary, in that at certain important stages in their practice development they desire a more challenging or potentially uncomfortable exchange, with relative strangers as well as friends. This takes us into the realm of critique.

## Part 4. Peer Critique

### Peer Critique and Disrupting the Status Quo

Of the informal peer critiques in which I have participated for this study, each varies marginally in the details of structure and tone, but most share the same basic format.

The peer critique (or 'crit', as I will refer to it here), is a model borrowed from art college, where it is one of the main ways in which students and tutors interact around practice, and most artist-led groups I visited initiated peer crits on a regular basis. I helped to organise and attend several peer crits with the Spike Associates, as well as attending crits organised by Associate member Carl for a network of artists working in and around the Arnolfini gallery.

Art historian, James Elkins has described the form as "a general activity that embraces analyzing, inquiring, debating, finding fault, and giving praise." (Elkins, 2001, p112).

Rather dismissively he adds: "the critique is really only a collection of people in a room speaking without order or coherence." (Elkins, 2001, p121).

I recorded several of the critique sessions I attended and with a number of these I interviewed participants about their experience afterwards. All the sessions I attended followed a similar format, in that there was a facilitator (an artist), usually two to three artists who had requested to have their work discussed, and a group of participants - anything from around 6 to 13 other artists - who would take part in the discussion. The session was generally held in the artist's studio with the work to be discussed clearly on display or work would be brought to a

shared space, such as the Associates Space at Spike Island or the Reading Room at the Arnolfini. Generally, after the artist had spoken about their work for a short time, participants would ask questions of them, make comments and collectively explore possibilities for the work's development.

There is an important distinction between a critique coordinated loosely by an artist-facilitator, whose experience is not necessarily greater than that of the other participants, and a critique held in a formal academic setting where the tutor is the facilitator. More recently, at Spike Island, the Associates programme has started to invite more established artists and curators to lead crit sessions and these, I believe, also revolve around an asymmetrical relationship between the participants and the facilitator. Although I attended sessions constructed along these lines, I was particularly interested in the sessions where most participants - including the facilitator - might have considered themselves as peers.

There is also a sense of the peer critique being a step up in terms of intensity, from the incidental and other informal exchanges that artists might experience in the studio. Crits provide a personalised and fairly intensive focus on an individual's work in a way that the artist might previously have only received in their formal education. Although artists may feed off their studio communities, artistic networks and groups where they are more likely to be exposed to contemporary art practice and related conversations, this closer focus appears to occur through deliberately constructed critique, rather than conversation. For this reason many respondents spoke of 'critical engagement' as if it were a fairly rare and valuable process. For

example, Sheila talks about the situation in her shared studio prior to the crit:

*The crit was really useful because – I think it was a few weeks before the crit, before I had the work really finalised, I was just feeding off anyone who was around. People were wandering around and I was like, “come in here and have a look at this. What do you think about this edge or what do you think about this colour” and things like that, just because sometimes it is good to have another opinion to consolidate your own idea I suppose.*

*(...)*

*Someone just passing by...or me just picking on people as they come in. They're not necessarily looking to give critical feedback even if what they say is helpful to me. They're not necessarily going to be that engaged with it.*

The idea of consolidation or affirmation is distinguished here from “critical feedback”, which requires an artist’s peers to give closer dedicated attention to practice.

For Bourdieu, however, criticism is another reflexive process internal to a field of restricted production whereby artworks are attributed with specialist terminologies and defined according to taxonomies that legitimate and position them within that field. The field community, with regular processes of critique, controls the “dialectic of cultural distinction,” (Bourdieu, 1993, p117):

*The incessant explication and redefinition of the foundations of his work provoked by criticism or the work of others determines a decisive transformation of the relation between the producer and his work, which reacts, in turn, on the work itself. (Bourdieu, 1993, p118).*

According to this mode of thinking, the art world legitimises itself and shapes its practices through specialist self-reflexive discourse, the performance of which is as important as the content. Engaging with Bourdieu led me to look at the incidences where artists would invite other voices into these dialogic situations, voices from outside of contemporary art practice. I found several situations where artists would invite arts practitioners from outside groups, organisations or networks to attend peer critiques (see below), but only a single incidence of a crit opened up to non-

artists. Kathleen, at Motorcade FlashParade gallery in Bristol opened up the *MotorMouth* crits “to anyone who might turn up”, other than the studio artists in the building. She had set these crits up as a recent graduate, in recognition of a need for a peer ‘circle’ that could help people legitimise their practice. In Chapter 2, I have looked at how she sees engagement with non-artists as contributing to artists’ self-belief. However, more often I encountered artists who desired or appreciated the presence of other specialists in their peer critiques. In another Associates crit Spike Associate, Sarah discussed an inter-disciplinary event she has co-curated:

*I think it’s really good to get a range of feedback from different people but I do also think it’s really important to get feedback from people that do have similar practices to yours.*

Despite some respondents’ need to stay within their practice ‘circles’, I still agree with JJ Charlesworth’s *refutation* of the belief that criticism in the artworld has been neutered. In a recent Art Monthly article Charlesworth countered the view that criticism is “subordinated to the market, the culture industry, the society of the spectacle, the biopolitical” (Charlesworth, 2011, p346) and suggested that such thinking denies the artist and the critic agency. He responds to various recent symposia on the theme of judgment and contemporary art criticism contesting the view that critical judgment is negated because the art world does not value judgment itself, but the publicity and ongoing discourse it extends:

That would be to submit to those critiques’ assertion that the art world is now so utterly instrumentalised and co-opted by power that any act of art criticism which plays the game of evaluation or judgment of the work-at-hand merely drives the economy of discourse that the art market still seems to require. (Charlesworth, 2011, p9)



Charlesworth is talking primarily about published art criticism and I can see that artists, by their participation in critical discourses around practice *are* affirming a sense of their community and affiliations. This does not mean that the peer critique space is not one of potential antagonism and affect, that critique is a performance or simply a tool in a game of positioning amongst artists. As I explore below, artists can perceive ‘rigorous’ critique as rare and socially risky, but all the more valuable because of that.

Moot studios selected tutors from a local college to join some of their crits, otherwise comprised of their own studio holders and artists from local studios. Part of the reason for inviting unfamiliar participants comes from a recognition, voiced by several respondents that familiarity built up between peers can be detrimental to critique, linked to the idea of critique as something that is ‘rigorous’ and potentially uncomfortable, rather than simply affirmative. Tegan at Moot comments:

*We even invite tutors from the university to come and be involved in the dialogue, so that you don't become too insular because when you work with people – and we've been working together for such a long time now – you can kind of pre-empt what someone's going to say or what their opinion is going to be – because you know what art work they like and they don't like – so you need to have other people infiltrating into the conversation.*

Edward, a graduate of University College, Falmouth was completing a residency at Spike Island. I spoke to him about the experience of showing his work at a Spike Associates crit. He welcomed having previously unfamiliar people to talk to about his work, saying that he felt “*more independent*” in this situation as opposed to the university crit sessions he had recently left behind. There was a sense of liberation from the influence of his former tutor:

*He did try to tease other ideas out of you or put you on the spot, but it's quite nice not having that looming over you in the crit.*

Similarly Sheila, a graduate of Bath Spa University noted the lack of tutor input:

*Crits inside Uni, I found were a bit more led by the tutors sometimes, so sometimes the tutor would really impose their particular view on things. That's only my experience from a couple of different crits where the tutor has been quite overbearing with their opinion, rather than everyone else discussing (...)*

Sheila was also pleased that many of the participants were not known to her personally before the session, and believed that they might be able to offer a novel perspective on her work. However, a complaint recurs amongst respondents that a need for rigorous *enough* critique is difficult to meet. Confidence to critique may require a familiarity with the context or community, but too much familiarity can be stultifying:

*I think it was better that I don't really know the people. I felt a bit more like if you get to know people around talking about your work, you become quite comfortable with their opinions and you can predict what they'll say, because the more you talk about it with certain people you become very familiar, so I know they hadn't necessarily seen my work, so that was really useful. I think because they were maybe a new set of people, maybe they held back from asking questions that could be seen as being sort of aggressive.*

Some of the crit participants were new to Associates gatherings and were relative strangers, although others were friends and acquaintances. Still, collective politeness seemed to prevent participants questioning Sheila with the directness she would have liked. I wondered to what extent participants feared being more critical because they were concerned about disrupting the social status quo and concerned about how they might be perceived by fellow members.

I facilitated a crit at a local gallery in Bristol and during the session one participant said that he did not like some of the work, then preceded to coherently justify his opinion. I noticed that other

participants immediately began to defend the work and the critic later posted a tentative apology on the gallery Facebook page expressing his fears that he may have been too outspoken. I wondered to what degree the post betrayed a concern about the consequences of having temporarily disrupted the social status - quo in the room and the potential consequences of that action.

In her writing about “agonistic space” Chantal Mouffe has discussed what the role of the artist might be within a post-Fordist networked economy where autonomy, self-actualisation and the negotiation of non-hierarchical systems is the norm for cultural workers, and no longer a series of “aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture” (Mouffe, 2007, p1). Mouffe concentrates on “artístico-activist practices” such as *Reclaim the Streets* in the UK or *The Yes Men* in the US, but, it seems that her description of discourse in agonistic space could be equally applicable to artists’ dialogic practice as well as their creative practice. To some extent, her portrayal of “agonistic space” responds to this desire for disruption and encounter with difference that many respondents report. The disruptive and potentially transformational encounter can be read as an “agonistic struggle” that arises through the opposition of different “sedimented social practices” configured according to certain power relations. Consensus need not be a necessary prerequisite for democracy. She describes the “agonistic model” thus:

The public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation. (Mouffe, 2007, p3)

Applied to a group critique, Laclau & Mouffe’s emphasis on the power of “dispersion, detotalization and decentring” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p115) can be read as strategies that may challenge

knots of authority in these spaces, and hence a reliance on harmonious consensus. By constructing a space from opposing points of view, *and* opposing value systems, the structure of those values can begin to be contested:

An agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed as a result of the agonistic struggle among the adversaries. Contrary to the various liberal models, the agonistic approach that I am advocating recognizes that society is always politically instituted and never forgets that the terrain in which hegemonic interventions take place is always the outcome of previous hegemonic practices and that it is never a neutral one. (Mouffe, 2007, p3)

Using Mouffe's model of collective interaction, critique can allow for the co-existence of different meanings (in this case, relating to artwork) and potentially hold off the desire to articulate a 'summing up' as a single authoritative interpretation.

In peer critique, a challenging approach is often respected, and the desire to both critique with honesty to be able to defend one's practice in the face of critique is seen as a mark of prestige.

However, as I have discussed, those who engage in critique also run the risk of potentially disrupting the group or community conviviality that may have built up over time.

How do respondents push into this unknown territory to create space for their practice and how do they push for honest critique? Moving away from the notion of reflexivity, mirroring or resonance, this is a space where learning can be the result of a deliberate desire to be open to the unknown, to make oneself vulnerable, to be open to incidental and affective encounters and to seek challenge.

Both Colm and Rowan talk about the need for 'rigorous' communication, in the form of exchange that reflects a seriousness,

commitment or intensity. Colm had returned to Bristol after studying for an MA in Falmouth. I asked him about the year or so that had elapsed since his graduation, his decision to apply for residencies outside Bristol and join the Spike Associates:

*I think because I was so flat for a year I was really craving more face-to-face time and just to be stirred up or challenged, you know. Even on the MA I felt a real lack of critical...critique and judgement...not judgement but you know, feedback that was rigorous, because it was quite nicey-nicey down there and because I'm quite critical in my own mind I'd quite like that to be vocalised by people and discussed, that is, actually moved on and finalised instead of it being questions that are up in the air.*

Colm's comments reveal what he means by 'rigorous'. In this sense it appears to be, being able to follow a point to its conclusion. By simply posing rhetorical questions, his MA cohort was not committing to the articulation of potentially differing opinions or interpretations and there was no sense of risk in the exchange. Mouffe sees this reluctance to commit to difference of opinion as akin to a reluctance to acknowledge the reality of dissensus:

Liberalism has to negate antagonism since, by bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision - in the strong sense of having to decide in an undecidable terrain - antagonism reveals the very limit of any rational consensus. (Mouffe, 2007, p2)

Affirming and enabling conviviality is extremely valuable for nurturing practitioners in early or transitional stages of their careers, or when establishing new projects, but has its limits if not combined with critique.

To return to Edward and Sheila's critique with the Spike Associates, this was the first peer critique that Edward had taken part in since leaving college, whereas Sheila had already attended informal crits with fellow stewards at the Arnolfini and with the Spike Associates. I believe that, because of her greater level of experience and confidence in her practice, Sheila, like several other

respondents had a greater desire for a more uncomfortable or challenging crit experience, akin to those that she had experienced at university.

*I felt it was quite (...) polite still. No-one kind of goes on the attack and says anything that really harsh and critical, which I was kind of gearing myself up for a little bit.*

(...)

*Maybe people just need to feel comfortable with it or that they're not going to offend you or upset you maybe. I know I've had some quite harsh crits before at university, where someone has just gone on the attack and just laid down their opinion and said "I don't like this", "I don't like what you're doing with this".*

There is a sense that in particularly convivial spaces, such as the artist-led or membership group these situations of rigorous critique might be rare, and more highly valued as a result. Rowan, one of the three artists who had set up Central Reservation (active March-July 2010, Bristol) suggests as much in relation to artist-led projects. She had invited an artist-led group from Edinburgh to come and exhibit in the space and was impressed with the way they worked together and interacted with local artists:

*I mean you meet people and they say, yeah, I'm really interested in critical discussion, blah, blah, blah, but T, his approach was just really honest...maybe being outside of England helped. I don't know. He just seemed to have this kind of ...he was just interested in being quite rigorous, which I think in artist-led stuff can just go by the wayside a bit. You know, people talk about wanting to do that, but actually getting involved and being honest about what you think about work and being critical about it and I just thought, y'know I was really impressed with his kind of approach and the stuff that they'd done.*

### Peer Critique & Meeting as Peers

I have discussed the importance of the social hub for artists' peer learning: a site of free-flowing conversation and friendship clusters

with high levels of trust, reciprocity, affirmation of identity and support. I have looked at the potential importance of a sense of ownership and equal risk or investment of all parties when approaching interactions both with artist-led and membership groups. With this in mind, the importance of assuming a relationship of equal status, being *peers*, is significant when framing a space for effective critique. This recalls Mouffe's statements about the detotalised or decentered position, so that no single meaning, discourse or individual can hold sway.

Spike Associate, Nina made the following comments about an artists' peer group she had been involved with in the US, She did not feel that the group had functioned well and she remarks on the insecurity that can arise from assumptions of unequal status and differing levels of commitment:

*The group didn't really have a clear mission and there were very distinctive differences in the amount of power that people in the group had, so there was one artist who thought very well of herself and other people were kind of under her spell and she was very opinionated and showed her work a lot and did a lot of name-dropping, and it seemed that if that person wanted to talk about something in particular then other people just kind of went along with that. (...)*

*I mean they weren't terrible people but I think there was a lot of lack of discipline and insecurity and disproportionate power relationships, so it didn't work very well and really ended with... (and the other thing was people would have shows and not everybody would go or no-one would go so there was no kind of commitment to) ... and people didn't show their work. That was the biggest thing. Looking back I think people just didn't trust each other and I didn't get the point of it. And people were also variously committed to their practices too. I think that was a problem. (...)*

At one point group discussion, let alone critique, became impossible:

*(...) one of the final bits of that group was that I invited them to come to that show and have a discussion and it was like ...can't do it. The group was there and it was just so clear that the group was not able to function. Even when they're in a gallery with the work on display a lot's been written about. There was a lot of support about...I mean this shouldn't be too hard to talk about.*

*But I think there was so much static...interpersonal static that nothing could happen.*

However, in spaces where it is expected that participants are meeting as peers, collaboration, conversation and critique become more possible.

John, for example had become very frustrated after leaving university. Having been selected for the Bloomberg New Contemporaries exhibition in 2007, and having had many opportunities subsequently to show his work, he felt that there was a constant self-imposed pressure to produce work and no time to concentrate on the quality of the results. Needing space to reflect, he formed the publication *InterCity MainLine (ICML)* with friends and fellow-graduates in Bristol.

John took an obvious leadership role here partially out of a sense of frustration. As with other respondents, he knew that focused critical dialogue would not simply happen without him having to direct events -

*I've spent so much time with artists. People never seem to initiate any critical discourse (...)*

- although he admits that this may be because people are nervous of his way of talking:

*They think I'm quite flippant and rude.*

It is largely because of the mutual familiarity, respect and trust that comes with friendship that John can take the risk to be critical. However, it is still a risk, and becomes an internal conflict for him:

*It would kill me if someone said they hated something I did.*

He continues:

*It's so weird because I guess you try to set up a bit of a safety net.*

Then:

*I just tried to be as honest as I can but not say anything bad, which is bad sometimes especially to my really good friends. I really feel like I should be a little more brutal but I always think like "who am I to say that?"*



However, John's discursive style may seem less threatening, because there is an assumption of equal status amongst his friends *and* they are familiar with his behavioural codes:

*It's weird, but with your friends, you don't think you know more than them and it's good to sort of pick their brains. You can add humour and stuff. You can joke around once you know them and stuff.*

Moreover, he has constructed something to bind his peers together other than friendship, a shared project. The ICML project created greater practice-based social cohesion between he and his friends and more opportunities for what Mouffe terms a "configuration of discourses" (Mouffe, 2007, p115). John's presumption that he does not know any more than his friends leads me to recall the equivalence of intelligences discussed by Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a text I discuss below.

John does not want to assume a position of power but still wants to be honest about his reactions to his friends' work, so undercuts this with humour. Humour can be a way of acknowledging conflicting opinions while preventing antagonism from temporarily closing down communication between peers. It transmits the message, "I may not agree with you, but I still respect and like you" and, as humour invites a response in the same tone, it is also a way of sustaining the energy or momentum that the collaborative process may have generated.

Spike Associate, Fiona had not known her two collaborators personally before initiating the Central Reservation space with them, but did know them 'professionally' as part of the Spike Associates group. In this case, the artists had come to the table with three separate projects that each one wanted to curate in the space. Once these projects had been agreed, conversations revolved around the presentation of the work and the collective management of the space. Mutual respect and trust had developed

between the women, facilitated by the fact that they were all coming from a similar position. Fiona, who initiated the project, had approached her collaborators based on the fact that all three were interested in artist-led activity and also worked within the creative industries professionally, but did not have the opportunity to programme events in their day jobs. Again, the construction of a space where power differences are not acutely felt seemed important for critical exchanges, during which the women were able to give one another challenging feedback.

*I think because we're running the space together, it's basic marketing and how we want people to see us and how well we want people to understand what we're doing. And I think that by talking to them, you know something can come out of my head and be on paper and they'll say, "but you haven't brought that out and it doesn't explain this."*

*Quite often we'll say to each other, "you should say more about it because it's a more exciting project than what you've described here." So that's really good to have that kind of feedback and quite rigorous thinking. I think sometimes, in writing funding applications and writing a press release, it actually helps you plan your project better.*

It is also significant that the three have become, or were becoming, friends through this process. They were invested in the project, and in one another, so were willing to critique one another's ideas as a form of support.

Jacques Rancière has been increasingly asked to speak in contemporary art contexts<sup>39</sup> and referenced in such over the last few years, particularly in relation to contemporary art's concern with democratic educational models. Both Rancière and radical learning theorists such as Paulo Freire are relevant to informal learning in art, and particularly peer critique situations, in several

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<sup>39</sup> 'The State of Things', Office for Contemporary Art Norway, inaugural lecture by Jacques Rancière, 1.06.11

'The Autonomy Project' symposium, "with contributions by a.o. Thomas Hirschhorn, Tania Bruguera, Peter Osborne and Jacques Rancière", Van Abbemuseum, Netherlands, 7.10.11 – 9.10.11.

'Regime Change: Jacques Rancière and Contemporary Art', *Artforum*, March 2007.

'Jacques Rancière: Misadventures of Universality', 2<sup>nd</sup> Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art, 1.03.07 – 1.04.07.

respects. While artists in peer critiques may explain their use of various materials or the thinking and research that has preceded a certain piece, peer crits tend to consist of interrogation and interpretation rather than achieving an all-encapsulating explanation. In informal situations between peers the questioning can come from all sides, as can the interpretation, rather than from a single authority figure. Of course, there may be one participant who facilitates or who, for whatever reason, has more influence over proceedings than another. There may also be a power differential in that some participants may be more articulate than others, or particularly versed in specialist art theoretical or historical discourses. However, there is often a collective aspiration to holding a space open in which multiple interpretations can cohabit, with the proviso that each participant encounters the artwork in their own way.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), Rancière refers to the story of the teacher Joseph Jacotot who gave his Flemish students a book written in French and asked them to use the book to learn the French language. The book became a kind of mediator between what Rancière refers to as “intelligences”, the intelligence of the book, the intelligence of the students and that of the master:

A pure relationship of will had been established between master and student: a relationship wherein the master’s domination resulted in an entirely liberated relationship between the intelligence of the student and that of the book - the intelligence of the book that was also the thing in common, the egalitarian intellectual link between master and student. This device allowed the jumbled categories of the pedagogical approach to be sorted out, and explicative stultification to be precisely defined. There is stultification whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another. (Rancière, 1991, p13)

By placing the book between them the master is not “explicating” the text, (explication suggests that the master comprehends the

text more than the students), but is setting up the conditions for the students to encounter this intelligence using whatever means are available to them. The relationship between the pupils and Jacotot is more akin to a relationship of peers than that of master and student. There is resistance to a traditional pedagogical tendency to cohere or resolve several discourses in one explication. The book, in this situation, can be read as *art practice* or *art work*, a process or product that asserts its own position and can be deployed as an 'intelligence' in a configuration of artists.

Critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire has also been referred to as an inspiration for recent contemporary art education-oriented debates<sup>40</sup> and experiments. The development of a 'critical consciousness' was central to his radical learning methods while teaching adult workers in Brazil. He promoted the democratization of the learning situation by constructing dialogues between "participants" and "coordinators" (Freire, 1973). Moreover, he foregrounded the emotional dimension of learning in relation to cognitive development, and in particular, as a motivator and catalyst. I see his work as relevant to the peer critique in close entanglements of artists, because of the importance he placed on bonds of mutual care and mutual trust as a foundation for critique:

When the two "poles" of the dialogue are linked by love, hope and mutual trust, they can join in a critical search for something. (Freire, 1973, p45)

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<sup>40</sup> 'Focus Brazil: International Museum Education Institute' symposium, MoMA, New York, 21.07.11 – 22.07.11

## Peer Critique Punctuating Practice

Freire often engaged in problem-oriented learning through critical reflection and “praxis” (Freire, 1998). The functionality of outcomes is not something that artists’ reflection necessarily concerns itself with as a primary goal, but there is a concern with resulting action from learning. Critical reflection in art always punctuates practice, but the effects of reflective periods may be incremental and may sediment over time, so the links between action and reflection are not always explicit.

After his peer critique, Edward spoke about how he had gained reflective distance on his work and how the crit had subsequently catalysed new ideas; he had set forth on new ways of practicing to realize these ideas. Here he talks about the presentation of his work:

*I think with the ideas that were put forward - it was said about the structure that I was making - how unsure they, (the structures), were. That was kind of what I was after, some sort of instability, and pulling these structures - it's almost like architectural models - pulling these things apart.*

*It was said in some cases that it perhaps wasn't, which I could agree with, and I'm going to try - (which is what I've been doing recently actually) - to resolve that or push that idea, that thing forward, the way I'm thinking and sort of practically in the workshop. I've taken a step back, I suppose and been able to make more things, and draw, make things quite quickly from cardboard and things, which is something that came from the crit.*

Sheila, a painter, had shown her work in the same session, and has subsequently made adaptations to her practice, acting upon suggestions that emerged from the crit:

*I think one of the responses that I hadn't anticipated was when I shone the light on the paintings.*

*(...)*

*That was something that actually came out of - because I feel like a broken record sometimes. I'm constantly telling people, there's colours under the surface, and people are aware of that, but until they actually see it they don't understand what that is, so that's come out of it, the idea of actually lighting it differently.*

The experiences described above suggest that this crit provided affirmation for practice decisions, as well as exposing the artists to opinions that conflicted with their own, questioning the way objects functioned in their practice and offering alternative perspectives. Collective reflection provided, in Edward's case, a catalyst for action and a shift in approach to his practice. In Sheila's case she made subsequent formal adjustments to her work. The role of the crit as a marker in order to structure practice is important. Edward mentions how it established a deadline to think about certain issues in his practice, how it provided a framework to organise his thoughts and clarify them through articulating them to others:

*Because they haven't seen it before, you have to summarise it in some sense to get your point across. I think that's quite good because often it can just become this jumble in your head or in your drawings and journals and things, so it's quite nice to pin it down, quite loosely, but give it some sort of structure.*

Respondents can see their practice as a durational process made up of a progression of 'events' and speak about wanting feedback from their peers to construct reflective distance, at certain points, perhaps when they feel they have resolved a piece of work or when they would like feedback on a problem they need to address, or when have just exhibited or are just about to exhibit a body of work. The exposure artwork receives in a crit can be an important marker to help chart the *development* of the work. Sheila was also using the crit to punctuate her practice:

*I put myself forward for it because it timed quite well with BV studios (BV Open Studios) ... So it seemed to be a logical thing timing wise. I actually had some work finished. Yes, I felt the need for some feedback.*

There is desire voiced here that at certain stages practice wants to be tested and that this testing process through peer critique is an important staging post in the development of the work, but also in the development of the artist's confidence in their position.

Spike Associate, Nina had been living and practicing in Boston in the USA before coming to Bristol. I, myself had been part of a peer critique group with her in Bristol, and I was interested to ask her about a similar group she had been a part of in the US:

*It was a time when I was starting to show more and I really needed the support of respected colleagues to look at the work and ask difficult questions. (...)*

*So it affected my practice technically and I took myself more seriously because I have to say all of them, I have such respect for them.*

There is a sense of a process that requires (to varying degrees, according to the artist) a mixture of personal and collective input. Over the period of my research I often heard people saying that they would not volunteer for a crit because they weren't ready for one, their work was not at the right stage, it was not the right time. Here, Sheila expresses a kind of tacit code, whereby artists appear to respect one another's sensitivity about when and how they should expose their practice to others:

*I think that as you're doing something you might not be necessarily – well, I know I'm not necessarily 100% sure how it's going to end up so you don't want to question other people as they're going along necessarily, for fearing of terrifying them and coming across as aggressive maybe.*

By the same token, because respondents are often moving from project to project according to a highly individualised rhythm of studio practice and exhibiting opportunities, what they may have learned in a peer critique may not be realised or externally evidenced for some time. Sheila describes how a shift in thinking, prompted by the crit group would lead incrementally towards explicit developments in practice:

*It can take a long time for things to filter in. I think it will eventually, definitely. Things like the lighting and the format of how I'm making pieces. It's definitely made quite an impact on me, but it's just going to take me gearing up to making new work again, you know for it to actually be visible,*

*what the impact of that is. No, I can definitely say that psychologically I'm thinking slightly differently about my practice.*

Peer critiques also give artists the chance to see how people will react to their work physically, how they will move around the space that their work inhabits, how close they will come to the work, what aspects they will seem to attend to more than others. All of this is an invaluable form of experimentation before exposing work to a wider audience or adapting it in the light of peer commentary and reaction. Sheila commented upon people's initial physical movement in her studio:

*It was good to get people actually in the space with my work. I don't know if you noticed, when everyone came in, they initially stood outside my space behind my shelving unit and I thought, they can't just all stay there. They have to come and peer at it. That's one aspect of my work that you can actually look at it quite closely, and I'm quite glad everyone actually came into my space and came up a bit closer, but I think one of the responses that I hadn't anticipated was when I shone the light on the paintings.*

Peer critique is a highly valued interaction between artists, one that demands honesty and a 'rigorous' approach and as such, is rare. It can help artists to realise practice trajectories and cohesion, yet it also requires a space where it is agreed that challenge of dissensus will not upset social cohesion.



## Part 5: Entanglement Ethics: Hospitality, Generosity, Reciprocity

As I have explored in discussions about conversation and critique between artist peers, starting out from a position where equality of status is assumed for the space of the project or situation is paramount to effective peer learning. Assuming equal status can mitigate any perceived element of risk attached to full and free exchange with fellow artists. It can also be seen as an ethical choice.

When chairing a discussion on collaboration involving artists from Bristol, London and Cornwall, I asked the artists about how they thought about this word 'peer' in collaborative contexts. Pat answered:

*I think the thing for me that's really important is that whenever you're doing anything like this, that you do take that person to be your peer, and I think that inevitably in the art world, it completely corrodes the core of it, this idea of a hierarchy and you're always pinning yourself up against what point in your career you are at compared to someone else and I think whenever you're working with someone you have to really consciously abandon that notion. Even if I'm working with the biggest mega-star in the art world, it is going to be a free-form collaboration and not just somebody telling me what to do. You have to take this person to be your peer and it has to be one where you have a symmetrical relationship. Even though of course there are power struggles and people do argue about things and some sort of negotiation is arrived at.*

MW: *How does that come out? Is that an attitude? How do you take someone to be your peer?*

*I think it's practical. I think you have to really consciously...I think it can't just be something that just organically...I think you have to really consciously decide: we are doing this. I think with Renee it was quite straightforward because we do think of each other as equivalent and equal, but I was thinking of it more in a abstract sense, that you have to and you have to just sit down and say, 'this is the deal'. We are both doing this. We are both equal. We are both deciding where we go from hereon in.*

His collaborator was not able to feel as if she was Pat's peer with so much confidence, particularly as she was less adept with the medium that he was using (film). She felt more 'equal' when she deployed a different practice medium (writing). The two responded to one another's work in a collaborative practice-led 'conversation', and the need was paramount for both to feel that they were equally confident with their chosen media as a foundation for their collaborative practice.

Other ethical choices that help to maintain peer status between artists are an aspiration to generosity, to reciprocal exchange and to hospitality.

The ethics around inter-subjective encounters, and notions of community and being-together are a logical extension of contemporary art world discussions since the 1990s and early millennium about the politics of participatory art practice, (Bourriaud, 2002, Bishop, 2004, Kester, 2004). They may also take on added urgency in the context of a search for alternative forms of exchange<sup>41</sup> in a time of particular economic hardship. Partly out of financial necessity, partly as a way of maintaining informal systems of peer support, many respondents set up situations that fall within the realm of the gift economy and are driven by a gift-giving discourse, one in which it is perceived to be a choice and pleasure to participate and in which these values of hospitality, generosity and reciprocity are central tenets.

Whether in an artist-led environment or in an organisationally-facilitated membership group, the generous exchange of knowledge and practice is invariably seen as a good

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<sup>41</sup> Recent contemporary projects and that have responded to a sense of urgency about artists ways of surviving in the current economic climate include:  
Leeds Creative Timebank [<http://leedscreativetimebank.blogspot.com/p/about.html> accessed 03.09.11]  
E-flux Timebank  
[<http://www.e-flux.com/timebank/> accesses 03.09.11]

thing by participants. I have already discussed how in the symbiotic relationships between artists and organisations it becomes important to make sure that a 'fair' exchange is taking place, e.g. when the organisation hosts an artist-led event. In terms of some of the activities that I co-initiated, this need for equivalence applies to *Tertulia*<sup>42</sup> the "salon" to which we invite creative practitioners with a concern with language to discuss their practice with an audience.

*Tertulia* is either held at Spike Island Associates Space or the Arnolfini Reading Room. We benefit from the physical space, the publicity platform for the event, the cultural kudos that association with these organisations accrued when inviting guest speakers, and we received some travel expenses. In return, the organisations benefit from the form and content of the event as part of their programme. It is important that the exchange *feels* reciprocal to us, particularly as no-one is being paid a fee for their time or contribution.

It is also important that institutions such as Spike Island or Arnolfini can have affiliations with this project, but that it remains owned and controlled by my collaborator and myself, and indeed *Tertulia* has become an umbrella for many language-related events hosted by my collaborator in venues other than these.

This word, 'host' has been appropriated by organisations such as The Hub [www.the-hub.net] – an inspiration for Caroline when establishing The Spike Associates - to describe a paid social and professional match-maker. This is someone who can link artists and networks of artists with one another for the mutual

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<sup>42</sup> *Tertulia* (April 2010 – ongoing) www.tertuliablog.com. See 'Methodology' chapter for more details.

creative and professional benefit of both. (See Chapter Four: Membership Groups), Caroline explains:

*The people that are paid to run it (The Hub), the staff, are called hosts, and their job is not to sweep the floor and so on but to introduce people to each other and get to know what they're doing and what their interests are and say "have you met so and so?" (...) I think I was really interested, much more so in these social structures and how you could generate exchange of information and knowledge and skills (...)*

As I have discussed in Chapters Three and Five, larger arts organisations can offer support to artist-led activity via affiliation, promotion, advocacy and occasionally funding, and in return they gain links to human, social and cultural capital in the form of the knowledge, practices, networks and reputation that artist-led activity brings with it. However, does this exchange of information, knowledge and skills still constitute a gift economy or is it a simple exchange of commodities? Lewis Hyde makes the distinction that in a gift society one is, "motivated by feeling but nonetheless marked by structure" (Hyde, 1983, p92):

*There are many connections between anarchist theory and gift exchange as an economy – both assume that man is generous, or at least cooperative, "in nature"; both shun centralized power; both are best fitted to small groups and loose federations; both rely on contracts of the heart over codified contract, and so on. But, above all, it seems correct to speak of the gift as an anarchist property because both anarchism and gift exchange share the assumption that it is not when a part of the self is inhibited and restrained, but when a part of the self that is given away, that community appears. (Hyde, 1983, p92)*

The word 'host' also implies a domestic situation whereby the guest is invited into a home, even a family circle. Rather than managing you or providing you with a service, the host is sharing with you something that is dear to them. The idea of hosting in artist-led situations also positions events within this social, intimate realm. I have explored earlier in this chapter how artist-led groups can sustain dynamic energy and entanglements built

up through ongoing conversation with their hosts, but accompanying this is the intimacy and familiarity of being in the host's otherwise 'private' life and space. Tegan from Moot talks about artists they have invited to exhibit in the gallery since it's inception:

*We've always asked artists to make new work and to use the gallery as an experimental tool for testing out your ideas. So that hasn't really changed and (...), only very recently, have we had enough money to put people up in hotels, but up until January of this year they've always stayed with me and Henry in our flat cause we've had a spare room, so we've always had a really close relationship with the people that we've worked with. We cook them breakfast in the morning. We say goodnight to them when they go to bed. They become friends and it's not just work. It's a friendship, it's a relationship.*

The sharing of private and public space increases trust and can strengthen relationships and help with both the incremental sharing of knowledge about an artist's 'professional' paths and their practice, but also with tacit understandings about the ways in which particular artists think about their practice and how they communicate. This level of intimacy can establish the basis of a relationship for potential future collaborations and opportunities with a new peer network.

Perhaps the terms of the reciprocal relationship do not become apparent until they are broken or thwarted in some way. It is my assertion that a form of tacit learning in art communities is learning about relationships of equivalence when engaging in some sort of project, the realisation of which assumes some kind of reciprocal exchange.

Derrida writes about the ambiguity of hospitality. One is invited in, yet there is a tacit acceptance that one will abide by the house rules while under the host's roof. When being invited into a situation it helps to respect the sovereignty and understand the

limitations of the host. The threshold of the home remains in sight, circumscribing the behaviour of the guest:

Hospitality gives and takes more than once in its own home. It gives, it offers, it holds out, but what it gives, offers, holds out, is the greeting which comprehends and makes or lets come into one's home, folding the foreign other into the internal law of the host [hôte(host, Wirt, etc.)] (Derrida, 2000, p6)

As Wenger says of communities of practice:

A joint enterprise can create relations of mutual accountability without ever being reified, discussed, or stated as an enterprise. (Wenger, 1999, p. 84).

The host becomes hostage of the one invited.

(...) it governs the threshold – and hence it forbids in some way even what it seems to allow to cross the threshold to pass across it. (Derrida, 2000, p13)

So the thwarting of the host serves to underline these unspoken rules.

Rowan, Anita and Fiona, the initiators of Central Reservation selected artists to be 'resident' in the space for its duration. All three talked about the gap between their expectations of the artists and what actually transpired. Fiona comments:

*I really felt that in order for them to get the most out of the experience they should completely DIY it. I didn't want to be – I don't know what the word is – but doing everything for them. I thought it was really important that it dawned on them what it takes to put a show on and we just messed up a little bit actually because we obviously facilitated every show that was in the space, and when it came to them we should have discussed it way back in the beginning that we were handing it over to them, but we didn't. (...)*  
*I think that they thought that we were going to sort out all the print and sort out all the invigilators and sort out the bar for the opening and I actually really, really wanted them to do it themselves, but there was a total mismatching of what they thought was right and what we thought was right. At one point, it was quite funny, they thought we should be congratulating them, but we were like, no you should be thanking us. There was this really funny kind of mismatched thing that we really could have sorted out by having planned it but their show was at the end and we had so much stuff before it that we didn't quite work through what they could be perceiving did we?*

Co-organiser Anita attributes part of the resident artists' lack of involvement with other elements of the space to the fact that they were renting their on-site studios:

*I think some of them they just wanted to use it as a studio space. They wanted to pay their rent. They didn't want to have to, every time they came in, shift a load of tables because we had something on or have to work behind the bar. They wanted their space, they wanted to come in, work and go out again and not have that conversation every time I think. I think they kind of used it when they wanted to and when they didn't that was fine.*

Rowan, the third organizer remarks that the artists would have benefitted from the experience alone, and she mentions the peer critiques that the residents took part in with the three organisers:

*It was an opportunity in that it was more than a studio if you know what I mean. It was the show, it was the crit. It was four months of quite an intensive development of their work and I think it did show actually. I think they did get quite a lot out of it.*

Of the three organisers, Rowan is the only practicing artist, whereas her collaborators work more regularly as project-managers and curators. She comments during this conversation that because she is an artist, she might have seen things differently, that artists might have approached the space in a different way from non-artists. Perhaps artists are expected to be able to read these codes of equivalence in terms of reciprocity, particularly when operating in a non-commercial sphere. Rowan's comments suggest that the resident artists had underestimated the value of the opportunity they were getting in terms of non-material benefits: feedback from more experienced practitioners, and the time and space alone to develop their practice.

It is the case that the resident artists were paying a fee for their studio. As I discussed in relation to the Spike Associates scheme, when artists pay a fee for a space or programme there often follows the expectation of a service provision. Therefore, any tacit obligation based on ideas of reciprocal goodwill gestures may

become confused, recognized by some artists and not by others according to their understanding of the situation's codes and familiarity with the "community". There can be an added layer of confusion where the working space is, as I have discussed above, both a social hub and a space for work.

There is an extent to which information exchanged between artist-led groups and initiatives is given generously as a result of their perceived equivalence as peers outside of a commercial arts sector. Many groups rely upon a network of these peer groups as a resource to advise upon anything from buildings insurance and tenancy agreements to organisational structures.

During my research period at Spike Island, the Spike Associates group played host to a number of these groups, including Aid & Abet, (Cambridge), Tether, (Nottingham), PoST, (Deptford) and Outpost, (Norwich), all of whom regarded their visit to Spike Island as both a research visit and as a way of making active face-to-face links between member artists.

A similar level of reciprocity happens when artist-led groups invite one another to exhibit in each other's spaces or carry out residency exchanges. In the case of Rhys & Hannah Present, (active, Bristol January - December 2008), run by two collaborating artists and Associate members, their final show staged in a temporary empty shop space, invited artists from artist-led groups, Eastside Projects (Birmingham), Blackpool Museum of Contemporary Art and Royal Standard (Liverpool). An accompanying publication with contributions from artist-led groups and spaces, Moot (Nottingham), S1 (Sheffield), Form Content (Manchester) and Outpost (Norwich) was also produced. The collectively realised publication as a platform for disseminating practice and forging and maintaining links between



groups is a prevalent idea. It reaches a wide audience by being published online and in print, so information and reputation of groups, group practices and affiliations can spread further. It is also a way of collaborating across distances without confronting financial limitations due to transport.<sup>43</sup>

Following Rhys & Hannah Present, John, one of the collaborators went on to initiate the collaborative publication, *ICML (InterCity MainLine)*. In his view, while groups that came to exhibit at Rhys & Hannah Present intended to be supportive of one another, there were competitive tendencies between groups based on nuances in practice and structure. For example, Moot and Outpost, “*the two more formidable ones*” had both exhibited at Zoo Art Fair in London, and were therefore both peers and potential competitors, whereas Eastside Projects and Royal Standard arranged football tournaments together and seemed to him to be closer. However, all groups were hosted in the same way:

*When people stayed to do a show at Rhys and Hannah’s they literally slept on our sofas and they were just content and happy. You just cover basic train travel or coach and you can do anything, and that kind of by-product of all the things that happen outside of putting actual art-objects in a space or collaborating on some other project, so much happens, and we don’t have expenses and things like that. It’s just loads of really quite skint people enjoying being somewhere new, and being together (...)*

John and his collaborators were hosted by artists in a similar style to the hosting John had provided for artists visiting Rhys & Hannah Present. They travelled to several UK regional cities to research different arts scenes for *ICML* and their project became a way of linking cities and informing the participating artists and

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<sup>43</sup> At the time of writing a joint publication project: *Soon All Your Neighbours Will Be Artists* organised between the Spike Associates, Aid & Abet, (Cambridge), Extra Special People at Eastside Projects, (Birmingham), and WARP, (Cardiff) is about to launch.

extended communities about one another, about forming collaborations and initiating dialogue. John continues:

*We wanted to respond to that in a way and also provide some sort of critical discourse about some of the stuff that's going on, but from an insider point-of-view, rather than, you felt like with a-n and things like that, they hold artist-led initiatives on this pedestal and don't really get involved with it, and are like oh these are what the young people are doing, and we thought it would be fun to be inside that circle and be scrounging for the same sort of money to make the publication to write about people scrounging for money to do other things, in just seemed quite fun to be in the loop, and give us a chance to travel and put that to the test, can we like go all these cities and just sleep on someone's floor, just take a sleeping bag and a notebook and your camera, and that's what we did in Manchester and it was just amazing (...)*

John refers here to the way in which he believes the publication, *a-n magazine* creates a rhetoric around artist-led activity inferring that it is somehow *more* radical, democratic and ethically viable than commercially-orientated art or art for exhibition in publically-funded spaces, because it often depends upon artists' generosity, hospitality and reciprocity to sustain it. I agree that there is a tendency to idealise artist-led culture in published work, due to these aspirations. Other than the Central Reservation experience recounted below, most respondents did not talk to me about more difficult experiences of collective working in terms of a failure in hospitality or reciprocity, and if they did, they would put a positive spin on their experience. I believe that this is because they were working in fairly tight networks and did not want to risk defaming collaborators in a formal interview, and also that the collective effort of self-determination needed to get a project off the ground requires a positive outlook, mutual affirmation and public promotion, so this can become default position for those involved, again, particularly when giving a formal interview.

However, I did on occasion hear informal anecdotes about situations where hospitality had broken down, where groups had

not received the welcome they were expecting, were left to fend for themselves in a strange city, were ignored in a collective social situation or had behaved inappropriately when in a host city. The outrage with which this kind of treatment was met testified to the seriousness of the transgression that had taken place. The result being that the artists said they would think more than twice before working with those groups in the future. Because of the density of the networks linking some of these artist-led groups, this kind of damage to reputation could be potentially debilitating to the offending group and its constituent artists.

Moreover, as I have stated, learning within artists' networks will often include learning about negotiation in terms of what and how much one can be expected to produce for little or no money and what can be fairly exchanged for what. Angela McRobbie has written about what she believes is the artist's tendency to exploit themselves (McRobbie, 2002), in terms of their work and a wider commercial market. However, there is, I believe, a kind of self-policing code in artist-led circles where artists will aspire to greater generosity and reciprocity when both or all parties believe that their projects will sufficiently develop their practice or otherwise engage their attention.

By hosting and sharing knowledge, artist-led groups can act as an inspiration and motivation for other groups. Of course the reverse is also true, in that groups can see how *not* to go about things. When groups have visited Spike Island there is an expectation that they will be forthcoming about their own activities and often give a presentation to the Spike Associates about themselves, as well as receiving hospitality from Spike Island. I noticed this expectation of a sort of reciprocal transparency, particularly when I visited artist-led groups for

research purposes and found that artists who received me were always keen to hear about the Associates scheme and the ways in which this operated and developed. This exchange of information then facilitated my own enquiries.

While an aspiration to generosity, hospitality and reciprocity is not entirely selfless, in peer-led entanglements, there is a tendency to see practice oriented knowledge, if not practice, as what Lazzarato terms “common goods”:

Common goods, the result of unspecified subjectivities’ co-creation and co-realization, are free, as well as undivided and infinite. The inappropriable nature of the common good means that the common good (knowledge, language, work of art, science, etc), assimilated by the one who acquires it, does not become anyone’s ‘exclusive property’, and that it finds its legitimacy by being shared (...) In the ‘exchange’ of common goods (of knowledge, for example), the one who transmits them does not lose them, does not suffer by socializing them, but, on the contrary, their value increases in the organization of their diffusion and sharing. (Lazzarato, 2004, p199)

Another way of conceptualising this knowledge-in-common, might be to borrow Wenger’s concept of a “shared repertoire”. Although the situations I refer to in my study appear to be more generative or formally dynamic in terms of structure than the corporate office situations on which Wenger based his research (1998), the terminology Wenger uses to describe a “community of practice” is also relevant to these more temporary constellations of artists: a joint enterprise featuring mutual engagement and a shared repertoire amongst participants. Although the situations I explore may be distributed, irregular and seemingly random in occurrence, there is a mutual entanglement of artists and therefore a mutual engagement with conversation, critique and practice in terms of events, projects and collectives. These events, projects and collectives constitute joint enterprises and I believe that the

qualities of participation - the ethics and politics of engagement with these situations - betrays a shared repertoire.

Therefore respondents have indicated that there is often an aspiration to an ethics of interaction in collective peer engagement, based upon these shared values. This pivots on ideas of reciprocity, hospitality and generosity as well as starting from a point of equal status. However, it is also often based upon unspoken understandings of equivalence of exchange and herein lies the seed of potential conflict, when one artist or group does not understand or respect the tacit rules of the exchange of another.

## CHAPTER FIVE: VISIBILITY

### Viewing Points and Visibility in Peer Interactions

#### Introduction

An unexpected theme emerging from my research, is the extent to which visibility is valued by artists. Respondents learn from one another how to make their practice visible to their peers and to other actors in contemporary art worlds in order to aid the development of their practice and artistic careers.

Visibility aids peer communication on the most fundamental level. It is through their visibility that artists recognise one another, by visible markers of belonging to the group *artist*. Within this group, they are differentiated according to their practices, affiliations and affinities.

I consider visibility in terms of reputation, how constructing identities through visible affiliations affects symbolic value and the apparent relevance of groups and individual practices to their peers. I examine how group participation and conspicuous activity generates opportunities for artists, and how strategic decision-making can sometimes precede engagement. This leads me to the strategic management of visibility both online and off, visibility in terms of commodification of practice and the tacit and explicit knowledges inherent in positioning and expressivity. With this in mind, I consider the performance anxiety visibility can elicit.

At variance to the above, I explore strategic or conscious opacity, in terms of the interrelation of tacit and explicit knowledges evidenced by respondents. I examine “initiate” knowledge (Deliss, 2008) and discuss how periods of decreased

visibility amongst their peers and wider networks can be advantageous to certain respondents, but also how both tacit and explicit forms of learning are contingent upon one another in this field.

I will discuss online and offline visibility for artists in relation to notions of social capital and the ease or difficulty of making connections, forming networks and building a 'critical community'. I look at how this initial recognition enables the exposition of practice between peers and how respondents create an audience for, or witnesses to, one another's practice development, a reflexive process that feeds back into practice. Online and offline visibility increases access to peers and information about opportunities for practice, while differentiation of online identities allows targeted communication. I look at how inter and intra-group visibility is facilitated and how this benefits learning between members.

I look at ways in which respondents attempt to gain an overview of arts "scenes", networks and groups and how changing perspectives can affect artistic development. It is also important to consider the research process itself and the visibility of the processes I have investigated in terms of the political implications of describing and making explicit informal interactions. According to Bjornavold, when analysing informal learning:

There is a danger that we enter a 'grey zone' of privacy and humanity that should not be measured and assessed. (Bjornavold, J, 2000, p32)

I am aware that much socially-based learning in art communities rests upon invisible phenomena such as trust, affinity, excitement, resonance and discomfort. Experiential and embodied learning

through making is similarly 'invisible'. I have also been made acutely aware that my research processes have been dependent upon the gradual increase in mutual trust and confidence between myself and respondents who were in many cases my peers in practice. This informed the realization of projects, discussions, interviews and events.

Respondents engage with a constant process of action, reflection and realisation through practice, and the sharing and promotion of practice:

(...) such processes as making something explicit, formalizing, or sharing are not merely translations; they are indeed transformations – the production of a new context of both participation and reification, in which the relations between the tacit and the explicit, the formal and the informal, the individual and the collective, are to be renegotiated. (Wenger, 1998, p68)

This thesis is not an attempt to articulate or classify all forms of knowledge that occur between artists. Indeed, I believe that this is an impossible task. However, by looking at specific contexts and responses I am able to reveal the socially-constructed nature of much learning in this field and hopefully go some way to refuting the idea that artists are always operating within an isolated, individualised sphere of innate knowing. The transformation of processes in order to make them explicit, as referred to by Wenger, is often mediated as a result of affiliations, competencies, technologies and social context.



## Online Platforms and Artists: A Note on Recent Developments

Since 2010 there have been significant changes to the landscape of online social networking platforms used by my original respondents; artists have started to use online platforms that they previously ignored, and other platforms have gained in popularity with all Internet users. The almost ubiquitous use of online platforms by artists now means that any discussion of the visibility of artists and their practice must include an exploration of this and an analysis of how online visibility intersects with face-to-face interactions.

Although I have not been able to make a full appraisal of these platforms, as I write this in June 2012 I have attempted to include some additions to the assertions I have made in the thesis, based upon my observations since 2010. I have written about use of these tools informed in part by my own use of them and partly informed by the experiences of respondents. Recent developments include the use of Twitter and although I questioned respondents about their use of online social media, none of them engaged with Twitter in 2009-10. Twitter has grown exponentially in use since 2010 and I have based my few observations of its use on my own use of the platform in 2012 as well as email interviews with certain respondents who regularly 'tweet'.

Most artist-led groups that I interviewed only joined Facebook in 2010 and since then several previous respondents have joined LinkedIn, a professional networking site mentioned by a sole respondent during interviews. The practice of sending out individual email 'update' bulletins about an artist's recent achievements, exhibitions and projects, has proliferated since interviews were conducted.

## Recognition and Legitimation through Visible Affiliations

The extent that one is visible to one's peers and to the wider contemporary artworld declares and affirms professional artistic subjectivities and specific practice identities. It affirms a sense of belonging to specific clusters.

Being acknowledged by other contemporary artists can be the first stage of acquiring a peer group, in practice at least. Visibility also helps to build levels of intra-group trust and mutual familiarity with one another's practices.

According to Bourdieu, the way in which we view and value things in the world constitute our "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1993). This also dictates the polarities which give us meaning and within which we are able to position ourselves, our organization of the world and our placement within it. It demonstrates to us what to aspire to, what we expect to work towards and the possible positions that may be taken in respect of these processes. Bourdieu refers to this process of legitimation as "consecration". As such, it is central to reaffirming the artist's *habitus*, creating demand for the work, reaffirming artists' 'creative' identity, and the symbolic value of their practice.

For Bourdieu, recognition by one's peers, as well as other agents of consecration (e.g. art institutions, curators, the art press), is achieved by multiple acts of competitive position-taking. He sees this as a reflexive process, which acts upon artists so that they adapt the work they produce for the field according to its perceived value in the eyes of their peers:

(...) the more the field is capable of functioning as a field of competition for cultural legitimacy, the more individual production must be oriented towards the search for culturally pertinent features endowed with value in the field's own economy. This confers properly cultural value on the producers by endowing them with marks of distinction (a speciality, a manner, a style) recognized as such within the historically available cultural taxonomies. (Bourdieu, 1993, p117).

In Bourdieu's model the meaning of the artwork produced becomes inextricably linked to recognition within a restricted community and is dependent upon the internal hierarchy of relationships that constitute that community. Work is not only legitmised, it is also named according to a classificatory system for practices within the field.<sup>44</sup>

The last Labour government commissioned several pieces of research on the Creative Industries and on the roles that contemporary art production could play in the economy: For example, the *Taste Buds* report (Hadley, J for Hargreaves, McIntyre & Morris, 2004) and Louisa Buck's report, *Market Matters: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Art Market* (Buck, L, 2004). Rather than referring to 'cultural capital' or 'consecration', the term 'subscription' is employed. The reports suggest a model of the way in which artists or art works accrue value that is resonant of Bourdieu's thinking. According to Hadley, this begins with recognition by one's peers in artist-led initiatives, followed by graduation to exhibitions in publicly-funded spaces and representation by commercial galleries:

'Subscription' is the process by which art is filtered and legitmised. In an otherwise unregulated sector, where anyone can proclaim themselves an artist, and anything be held up as 'art'. The selection of the 'wheat from the chaff' is carried out by artists' peers. Networks of art world professionals, including academics, curators, dealers, critics,

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<sup>44</sup> In Chapter Three: Identities I discuss ways in which respondents attempt to collectively suspend the identity and hence also the easy consumption of practices at certain moments.

artists and buyers, provide advocacy and endorsement for an artist's work through exhibitions, critical appraisal and private and public purchases. (*Taste Buds*, Hadley. J, Oct 2004, p4)

This process of subscription can be seen at work in the affiliations that respondents mention. In the case of the Spike Associates scheme, although artists join with the intention of having greater interaction with peers, another important reason is to form a visible affiliation with a group attached to Spike Island or a well-known contemporary arts institution. To gain visibility within the Spike Island context and to become visible within the networks contingent upon Spike Island is advantageous to artists in a number of ways.

Because of its external links, the scheme can be seen as more of an outward-facing model of peer support, recognised by organisations and artist-led groups across the UK. I found that, irrespective of whether it succeeds as an artists' "community", the Associates *represents* for artists outside the group a successful community of practice and discourse in which members are visible to one another.

I received this impression about the reputation of Spike Associates from conversations with groups when I made research trips to other regional cities. Similarly, while I was based at Spike Island, the Associates played host to a series of groups<sup>45</sup> on their own research trips and these groups regarded the Spike Associates as a respected peer to the extent that some of the visits led to subsequent collaborations between group members and the Associates.

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<sup>45</sup> Visitors included: Aid & Abet from Cambridge (13.12.11), PoST from Deptford (4.2.10), Tether from Nottingham (7.09.09), Outpost from Norwich (25 & 26.02.09), Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop (9.9.09).

Individuals on the original steering group that helped to shape the Associates scheme, acknowledged institutional affiliations as a potential reason for joining the Associates and fully expected artists to make use of the group's affiliations. As Spike Associate, Philippa stated at the Membership Group Debate I organized in September, 2009:

*It's hard if you're an individual and say you want to organize an event, it's hard on your own. If you're just starting out it's hard to make those connections. It's hard to be taken seriously perhaps. As an Associate you can then trade off the name of Spike Island so I think that's really useful.*

Respondents used their affiliations with artist-led groups in a similar way. Sylvie, a graduate from Art & Visual Culture BA at UWE completed an internship at Plan 9 artist-led group in Bristol (active 2005 – 2010) after graduation. Being able to declare her involvement with the group to other people in contemporary arts scenes aided her transition between university and establishment as an independent practitioner:

*I think I owe them a lot for feeling part of something (...) they definitely gave me weight in that if I went around Bristol and told people I was part of Plan 9 people would be like, Oh, okay, and they knew where to place me and I mean still today people will still remember and know Plan 9 and that was very helpful for me as well (...)*

Sylvie's practice consists of very detailed drawing with graphite, ink, paint and airbrush. She says, *I've also felt like I'm floating in between*, in reference to commercial and non-commercial platforms for her work. Her affiliation with a non-commercial gallery with a programme of contemporary practice, considered in conjunction with her internships at the Bristol visual arts agency, *Relational* and her work at Spike Island, anchors her as a practitioner both in a commercial and publically-funded milieu, and exposes her to more interactions with artists in that same milieu. Although she

also has a job at the Royal West of England Academy, an organisation with a more traditional aesthetic bias, by making her many “contemporary art” affiliations visible she has aligned her practice with a range of artist-led, non-institutional and institutional platforms. Because of the flexible, project-based nature of many practices, a large proportion of artists I spoke to worked across a variety of platforms and their multiple affiliations helped to promote their practice more widely, but also to position it.

An online CV can make explicit both the environment in which you practice, and its associations. Having a studio at a reputable hub, a well-respected artist-led group or arts organisation will benefit artists, in that they align their practice with the culture of that site. For example, I spoke to directors at the artist-led group the Royal Standard in Liverpool, a group with which several Associate members had collaborated. One of them commented:

*(...) on your CV when you say you've got a studio at Royal Standard people know of the Royal Standard because we've got a gallery as well as studios, which is important.*

The directors acknowledge this fact, but it is a source of symbolic value, the nuances of which are only fully appreciated within contemporary art circles. I will discuss below how respondents reported looking at one another's CVs online in order to position their own practice.

According to Bourdieu, artists become dependent upon this process of validation from within the field:

*They (artists) cannot ignore the value attributed to them, that is, the position they occupy within the hierarchy of cultural legitimacy, as it is continually brought home by the signs of recognition or exclusion*

appearing in their relations with peers or with institutions of consecration. (Bourdieu, 1993, p136).

These elective affinities on the part of artists can also benefit organisations and Tania, at the artist-led gallery Motorcade FlashParade in Bristol uses Twitter to actively promote the work of artists with which the gallery would like to align themselves:

*We often re-tweet tweets from artists about their projects as a supportive gesture – it shows that we endorse their project.*

Thus, artists' visibility increases exponentially on social media and the gallery is seen to have contemporary relevance for artists and organizations alike.<sup>46</sup>

### Managing Visibility

Gaining visibility through group membership, collaborations, project-initiation and online engagement is then often the first stage in accessing these networks and becoming noticed, while at the same time being able to benefit from a wider perspective.

Visibility is a way of registering specific affiliations and accruing reputation amongst peers.

A significant element of being seen for many artists is that it will also result in being talked about, so they become part of the “buzz” of that scene, which will help to further circulate an awareness of their practice and sow the seeds of a reputation. It forms part of a strategy, learnt in reflexive relation with peers to ‘target’ curators, commissioners, gallerists, funding bodies and other powerful sources of opportunity and endorsement - the

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<sup>46</sup> In Chapter Four I discuss the symbiotic relationships between groups and artists as they relate to programming, reputation and audience development.

people whose gaze will literally 'construct' the artwork. I argue that managing visibility strategically in this way is a skill that is regarded as necessary for career progress and demands aptitudes that are both tacit and explicit. Bourdieu presents this strategising as if it was a series of battle manoeuvres:

(...) the intellectual and artistic position-takings are also always semi-conscious strategies in a game in which the conquest of cultural legitimacy and of the concomitant power of legitimate symbolic violence is at stake. (Bourdieu, 1993, p137).

Respondents report an awareness and, at times, a frustration with this economy of reputation. I maintain that they exercise their agency in conjunction with one another to manage their visibility, whilst constructing spaces for exploration where the idea of position-taking is suspended. Moreover, the 'field' of which Bourdieu speaks is now so differentiated that what appears to be culturally legitimate in one area of practice is less relevant in another. Bourdieu continues:

(...) implicit references allow also the construction of that intellectual space defined by a system of common references appearing so natural, so incontestable that they are never the object of conscious position-takings at all. (Bourdieu, 1993, p137).

Respondents do indeed work with forms of codified tacit knowledge - knowledge about relationships between people, about the locus of power in organisations, knowledge about codes of behaviour in certain groups, but they also work with forms of tacit knowledge drawn from experiences of collaborative and collective practice.

Artists cannot guarantee that they will be noticed by commissioners and curators simply via their website, so face-to-face social networking and the ability to consistently promote



themselves effectively is a valuable skill. The ability to do this in an 'appropriate' way is often learnt through observing and interacting with fellow artists, and less from formal professional practice instruction.

Iris, now a member of the Spike Associates scheme in Bristol talks about formative experiences in Sheffield, where she had previously been practicing and how she benefited from the formation of a city-wide consortium of curators, academics and independent artists called the Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum:<sup>47</sup>

*I think the artists that benefit are the ones that are prepared to go and speak to people and who are prepared to be part of it and be involved and just be visibly active, but that's all that needs to be done.*

Iris deliberately sought out situations where there were opportunities to make her practice more visible, but her insistence that her practice must also stand up for itself implies that once an artist's practice is recognised by the right people, then it will start to generate its own ongoing visibility, without its originator having to constantly promote it. Artists also have to be confident enough to be able to 'trust' the work to hold its own and this confidence can be built up through exposing practice to peers. Artists' peers often act as an initial (potentially critical) audience for work before public exhibition. Several respondents talk of the importance of exposing their practice to their peers before making it visible to others, as if there are concentric 'circles' of visibility

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<sup>47</sup> "Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum is a not-for-profit company working to further the presence and awareness of contemporary art in Sheffield through joint programming, audience development and profile raising activities. The directors of the company are representatives of Bloc, Museums Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University, Site Gallery, S1 Projects, Yorkshire Artspace and independent artists." [http://artsheffield.org/assets/about/, accessed 12.07.12]

beginning with a group of close associates at the centre and culminating in public exhibition.

Gary, a sculptor and Associate member sets himself goals to achieve a sense of progress in his practice:

*(...) I set a goal of a certain number of works, which I think will fulfil criteria that will make the initial idea, not resolved but articulated, and that can vary in size of number of works.*

I asked Gary how he knew it was the right time to show his work:

*I think you know and you immediately want to expose it to an audience, and that is when you're getting somewhere.  
(...) I think initially other artists, and you would get feedback, and then if you think it's worth a wider audience I would either set up my own show or invite other people who I know run spaces to have a look at it.*

Part of what respondents appear to learn in the course of a career in art are strategies to make themselves visible in a targeted way, to the people who interest them, who can respond to their practice, provide them with opportunities and advice or act as conduits to other individuals, networks, groups and scenes. By building a reputation, and making practice affiliations visible to specific people, others start to notice them and the process is perpetuated. This largely incremental (and sometimes sudden) increase in visibility is advantageous in terms of practice and career progression, (e.g. attracting funding) and for some respondents it is one of the ways of gauging their progress, not only in achieving individual bodies of work as part of a practice, but in the sense of tracing an artistic career trajectory.

Iris graduated from an MA at Sheffield Hallam in 2005 and exhibited widely in the UK and internationally, although at the time of interview she says that she feels she is only just starting to have an art practice. Apart from the quantity of pieces she

produces being important, she also talks about the need to consistently make sure her practice is visible:

*I feel like that because when I first started - luckily I got into New Contemporaries in 2005 - and so that meant that after that I bumped into a few people at openings who said "oh, I've seen your work...I saw it at..." and I realised that that was the way it needed to kind of continue, because in order for your work to kind of develop it needs to have that kind of presence, (...) recently with the residency piece, the Commonwealth piece, I have had people say "oh yes I've seen"...if I'm going to apply for something they'll say, "I've seen you're work at...I saw it at this...exhibition or that exhibition (...)" it's great that people have seen it, and that it does have some presence (...) I think it's a combination of people knowing your practice and the practice standing up for itself and so I think it needs those two in combination...and then I think I'd feel a bit more like I was establishing myself (...)*

Diane talks about her success in her native Greece, where she has gallery representation, and the progress of her practice in terms of processes, production and ways of thinking. Despite having an 'international' practice, she still feels she is not visible enough to the right people:

*(...) in terms of art progress and potential visibility, that is happening as well, but it is impossible, it is so, so difficult to...well a milestone for me would be to exhibit more in the UK, so my first solo show here would be (...) with Picture This. I'm still trying to find the funding. That will be a kind of milestone so, I'm very aware of where the work can go.  
(...)  
Exhibiting in the UK, is because I live in this country so I need to have a visibility after living and being educated (here). So it doesn't really make sense, it is disorienting if I don't have a strong presence or engage some type of discussion here. And then how I measure, how you measure things...they are within the specific context you are working in.*

One of the ways she tries to gain visibility within these contexts is by seeing how other artists operate:

*(...) you can see other artists' careers, and there are also either exhibitions and curators and you can see that if you do this, if you are able to work with one of these curators then this will be visible in a specific circle. It depends on your medium, so I can talk about moving image and if you have links through this with the Lux Centre in London then you are already within a specific circle of people that work within moving image and have the sensibilities, and probably it would be easier to get funding to make a project and so it's things like that.*

*...or a specific type of curator, which is interested in the kind of work that I am doing (...) there are specific curators which are interested in this type of work and its making the links with these kind of curators and these curators may in five years time curate this big show and then - I think that's how I - it's an intuitive process with art – and also I look at peoples' CVs and where they exhibit and how they went from this level ...*

## Managing an Online Profile

Respondents use a variety of online profiles to create a distributed web presence relating to personal and professional identities.

Spike Associate Nina uses Facebook to acknowledge more superficial or fleeting connections made with artists or other arts professionals, and to keep those channels of communication open:

*My Facebook page is about my art community so it's been really interesting. Now I kind of understand how it operates. People that I wouldn't for whatever reason Skype with for an hour, people that if I was in Boston, you'd go to the First Friday openings and I'd see 100 people in the evening and I'd chat with all of them. We wouldn't have long conversations but I'd find out about, 'oh you're in that show or you've finally finished that piece', and I can do that on Facebook. It's not as great as being there with people at all, but it has other benefits so now I know. (...)*

*And then I branched out from there and said...B is a really fabulous curator who's got a very global experience. He's got a really bird's eye view of what's going on and he's very familiar with my work and I thought I'll friend B and then - who's B friends with? - and I can start to understand what's going on a sort of micro level in places that I don't have time to or desire to research.*

Facebook enables artists to appraise one another from a distance.

Nina builds up an overview of connections and constellations of relationships and activity in this way. She may not be able to actively engage face-to-face with different areas of activity and artists, but she can keep them in view virtually, while gaining access to information about other's activities via well-connected peers. Tania at Motorcade FlashParade artist-led gallery in Bristol

also mentions the access that social media can give her to discourses she would otherwise find it difficult to follow:

*People often tweet from inside conferences and this can be an interesting way to get an idea of what's happening by following a hashtag from the event.*

Spike Associates Diane and Nina use Skype for sharing their practices with artists and curators in their native country with whom they have stronger ties. These are more protracted and personalised interactions than those that respondents report engaging in on social networking sites:

*It's huge. It's really had a huge effect on my practice. So there's the one colleague I talk with once a week and (...) Usually it's at home but sometimes it's in her studio, but we often send images and discuss them. And that second colleague, it's more like once a month, and the same thing. She'll send me a load of images and then we'll talk about the works and strategise about it and it can be anything from a discussion of what she's doing conceptually to strategising about how to get access to something, and they keep me apprised of shows and sort of significant viewing experiences that they're having and also the arts scene in Boston and who's the new curator and I actually keep up and I appraise them as well.*

This visibility for both Diane and Nina seems particularly important in that both women indicated that they were in a period of transition, during which the links they were establishing with artists in the UK were in development, but were still not as strong as those with fellow artists in their original countries. The maintenance of such online strategising therefore has a grounding, supportive and affirmative effect during this potentially precarious time.

The visibility of other artists' achievements seems to act as a guide and galvanising force as well as instigating subtle, albeit perceived pressure. Each artist's practice is unique, so it is by being aware of a variety of relationships, connections and trajectories that respondents learn from their peers about practice exposure. Because of the specific path that each artist takes, and

their particular way of negotiating art worlds, generic advice on networking is less valued than listening to and observing one another's careers as a series of unique encounters, projects or islands that one moves between. Several respondents spoke about looking at artists' CVs online as an expedient way of assessing both their peers and their own progress and position.

Associate member, Robert, a much more recent graduate than Diane, talks about how seeing the experiences of fellow artists helps to shape his aspirations:

*There's definitely with me uncertainty as to whether I can apply for residencies yet,...within my kind of research, as a fine artist I always look at their CV and work out how old they were when they did certain things and work out how long things take (...)  
I find a website on a gallery or something, just have a look at their images and their CV. I guess there is that subliminal kind of slowly plotting things on a map like - oh okay... he went for that...and he was showing there then. So I guess that's kind of subliminal, not a conscious - oh I'm not showing there yet!  
I guess there is an anxiety about, to have done something quite soon that's quite important.*

This 'checking in' to see what fellow artists are doing as a means of personal orientation is an intermittent habit. A director from the Royal Standard artist-led space in Liverpool talks about the comparisons she makes by looking at the CVs of fellow artists, a process that affirms how she classifies her peers at a given moment, and her sense of her own progress in relation to them:

*(...) it's funny actually because I've been looking myself. I'd really like to have a solo show somewhere and I've been looking at artists that I would categorise as a similar age and practice to me to see where they have shown so I would class them as my peers and they don't even know that I'm looking at where they've shown.*

As CVs can be viewed online, the research can be carried out anonymously. Checking online profiles provides supplementary background information about artists and to some extent this can

inform face-to-face interactions. Face-to-face interactions can then pivot less on eliciting information, as much of the work of ‘framing’ or positioning someone’s practice can be compartmentalised in this way.

Not only do respondents make their practice visible to one another, but some also mention the need to advertise the connections they have forged with fellow artists and curators. This can happen on social networking sites informally, or more formally on the artist’s online CV. Word-of-mouth promotion is also important. Diane says:

*I feel that you have to do a lot of work in this area, by constantly telling people that you have just established links, what is the new work you are doing, and maybe they will be...until you have managed to find the people that know the friends, you have managed to find the people that collaborate, then you have reached that stage.*

As the number of online platforms for visibility proliferate, so the need for convergence increases. Ros uses various online profiles, each one with a different emphasis on parts of creative or professional practice, but attempts to bring these together as links beneath her email signature:

*(...) my Facebook page is limited to people that know me so nobody would be able to source me as an artist, but I’ve always put everything that links to all my blogs and everything on signatures of emails, so anyone that I email they’d obviously have my artist blog, which then has links to all of the project blogs that I’ve done. So anyone can see my artist background from that. And also LinkedIn is really good. I haven’t really used it too much yet, but it’s really good to have like an online CV I think. So I have my CV on that and you get a link with it and you can put that link on the bottom of your signature and anyone can just click on that link and they can look at your online profile, which is like an online CV and it says everything that you’ve done and it’s just kind of there as like an online presence, which is quite good and loads of employers are on it as well.*

Although respondents online profiles may be distributed, they also express a desire to present a coherent image of their activity to peers, curators and commissioners, an image that can act as a more

direct reminder of the individual amidst online social networking 'noise', hence the recent phenomenon of the artist's email update. This is generally a short compendium of projects, exhibitions, publications, research and other achievements that artists want to advertise to their peers and potentially interested parties. Although it has become more popular since I completed my fieldwork, I wanted to comment upon its similarity to the 'Christmas Newsletter' form, much maligned for its unintentional smugness. Like the Christmas update letter it can also strike an uncomfortable tone between the promotional and the personal. The awkward relationship between an informal, 'chatty' style and practice promotion is reflected in the use of other platforms. Spike Associate, Abigail comments on her use of Twitter:

*It has made me very aware of the public persona of being an artist, i.e. the expectation of performing a witty, insightful p.o.v. to an unknown public.*

Apart from having a dedicated website or blog, this suggests there is an onus now on the artists to actively broadcast their practice as a series of ongoing episodes.

However, maintaining a view of peers' activities is important for artists who are unable for whatever reason to regularly attend private views and events where they can meet their peers face-to-face.

Pippa's responsibilities as a parent prevent her from attending many of these events, so online social networking is a valuable way for her to maintain connections with fellow artists. She also subscribes to email bulletins:

*For me, I see Facebook as a conversation...it's like, "oh, have you heard this song... or seen this or that exhibition", so I use that because I don't get out much. I don't have that chance to do networking. I actually do...I get to see what's going on. I get to see influences and students that I've taught...there's one particular student that I've taught here at UWE, an Animation MA*



*student who's really talented and she posts all sorts of mad stuff on there and I really enjoy that forum because I can have that without having to go out of the house. As I said, I don't really post that much stuff and when I do...occasionally...I posted up some cyanotypes that I did in a workshop, but I don't put much stuff up there at all unless it's something that comes to me that I wanna share with others...generally kind of artistic or musical. So I really appreciate that forum.*

*I have a look at what comes through on Bristol Creatives and the Associates bulletins, but again, the time. Each thing like that takes time.*

Respondents refer to the time taken up with maintaining an overview of opportunities and practices. They learn how to filter and edit communication on social media. For example, Sylvie started to use Twitter to promote her practice in 2012. She comments:

*It can be time consuming if you want to do it properly and capitalise on your audience.*

Although she says she can make her practice visible to a wider audience of arts professionals than via Facebook, Twitter is, she says: *more demanding on a weekly/ daily basis*. Similarly Tania at Motorcade FlashParade gallery in Bristol refers to the necessity of filtering and rationalizing their use of Twitter:

*There are so many tweets in our feed that we'd never be able to read them all – we could probably see 500+ tweets in an hour from all the people we follow, so we just get a snap shot of the latest ones when we look at it.*

Spike Associate, Abigail also has an ambivalent relationship to Twitter. While she likes receiving personal feedback about her practice from wide-ranging sources, she also sees it as a difficult platform to keep up with:

*I'm a real novice and get easily frustrated/forgetful about social media. (...)* I also find it can be a demand on my time - as I've not incorporated it into my daily routine.

It could be argued that the blog is a visual commodification of process as product, where one's process and the references implicit

in that process have a cultural value. However, the blog can also function as an invitation to other artists to respond to a tone, a mood, a set of visual or textual references. In this way it can be the beginning of a practice-led 'conversation'.

Online visibility ranges from using a website or blog to make a practice visible to others and using the same platform to make the process of practice visible to oneself. For Philippa, who's work is multi-disciplinary and project-based, and also site-responsive rather than studio-based, this online platform becomes a kind of virtual studio where she can bring works together so she can visualise disparate elements in the same virtual space:

*It's a good space in which to sort of collect things, so on my website sometimes it's just quite straightforward. It'll be an illustration of a project that I've done somewhere, and other bits on my website. It's like a sketchbook, so some stuff that I'm doing...I'm doing a project called Savage Study. It's me working outside and doing various things. (...) It's not something necessarily at a stage to consume. It's quite useful to me to use that space to put information there in a way. It's like a thinking space.*

Blogs allow this highly personal visual "Wunderkammer" approach, akin to a virtual *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924), an ever-changing work in which Aby Warburg compiled and re-configured images to document his impression of the changing forms of expression over time.

## Visibility through Peer Engagement and Making Knowledge Visible

The artist, Colm talks about the struggle to define, identify and therefore have a visible “signature” for his work, a trait he relates to self-conscious commodification, as opposed to exploratory practice development:

*I was working on lighting design for this artist, (...) who is quite a young artist. (...) he's almost uncool in his ambition. All he's about, or a lot of what he's about is distilling what his look is. I mean his work has a certain aesthetic kind of signature, which I can see is quite cynical in some ways. That's not really about exploring your creativity. That's about distilling your creativity into a product base.*

*(...)*

*I guess I feel like a lot of my generation is tainted by the YBAs and all that, successful, the fashion for successful ... so a lot of the Goldsmiths production line of artists that are very recognisable and have a kind of signature look, which is very kind of immediate, and a lot of the artists that I admire that maybe have quite a diverse practice, you can see (for them) it's much harder in some ways.*

This question of how to make diverse practices visible is partially addressed by having a distributed and sometimes differentiated online presence<sup>48</sup>.

Colm moved back to Bristol after completing an MA in Falmouth. He describes how lack of contact with other practitioners has had a negative impact on his practice. However, it is also a question of gaining the experience of exposing practice to others in order to invite feedback. Colm describes how engagement with peers through practice has a generative effect:

*(...) lack of visibility leads into lack of confidence and then you're less likely to make yourself available, so it's just reversing that negative cycle or gaining*

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<sup>48</sup> Respondents have also sought out and initiated collective projects where practice identities can be suspended for a period of time, a strategy I discuss in Chapter Three.

*confidence through doing projects or exhibiting and then that would get your confidence up and be much more visible and more open to discussions and just be more out there.*

It has been possible for Sylvie to begin to find this confidence through group engagement with her collaborative project, the Bristol Drawing Club:

*I made my own website, but with a template obviously, which is my main online thing. I'm not very...I know some artists who are just very good at getting in touch with people and galleries and other artists and I'm not that good with that online I think. I think it's just that partly my job is writing emails all day.*

*I don't want to go home and do it and it's also a question of confidence. I think you need to be confident to write to a gallery and say look, my work's great. I think you should have a look at it. I want to show with you. Or writing to another artist saying I want to do something with you 'cause your work...after uni that's something I really struggled with, just getting that confidence to do those things.*

*However, having said that, last week, The Bristol Drawing School [as distinct from the Bristol Drawing Club, Sylvie's artist-led project] got in touch cause they wanted to meet me and I arranged to go and meet them and spend the afternoon talking to them. As a result I'm going to have a show with them probably next Spring. So I'm okay, I am good at doing it but I'm not as good as some people who I know are very, very into doing that.*

Sylvie's visibility through the Bristol Drawing Club and her subsequent show, was not the result of strategic promotion, but a question of engaging in a process with others that initially diverted attention away from her individual progress.<sup>49</sup> By initiating or participating in collective peer-oriented situations around practice, respondents have found confidence in gradually increasing visibility. Even if it is not a conscious intention, increased visibility resulting in opportunities can be an outcome of this engagement with artist-led initiatives.

The emphasis in the aforementioned report, *Market Matters* (Buck, 2004) is very much upon the art market in London and the ways in which London-based artists negotiate "subscription". It

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<sup>49</sup> I explore this 'defocussing' in terms of experimentation with practice identities in Chapter Three: Identities.

may be the case that artists working in contexts outside London network with peers across regions of the UK and beyond as a reaction to fewer commercial opportunities for contemporary art in their home cities. Respondents who have chosen to base themselves in a city other than London seem aware of these potential limitations<sup>50</sup> and perhaps engage more readily with their peers in artist-led and publically-funded scenes as a result. The *type* of visibility respondents seek may also reflect the extent to which colleges outside London are visited by dealers and curators and whether graduates from these colleges are encouraged to strive for commercial success in relation to their London-based peers. Through peer visibility and recognition, respondents maintain support, a sense of identity and a sense of dynamic collective momentum, which can enable them to resist a pull towards practising in London after graduation<sup>51</sup>.

Some respondents mention the importance of practice exposure outside of contemporary art worlds altogether:

*In Boston we would have Open Studios so I would invite everybody from my Quaker meeting and the girl's school and people loved it and they'd come through and go "wow!, I had no idea you did this." And then I kind of revelled in taking their feedback as significant as a curator. Even though you know you're career's gonna benefit more if the curator says something positive, I'm very curious to know what the less trained or sophisticated beholder has to say, and then I'm very interested in my neighbour down the street who makes finger-print acrylic paintings. I just love the fact that she came over to Spike for our talk and came to the For Real show. She's interested, you know.*

Audio artist, Theo perceives a danger in solely looking to his artist peers for affirmation of his practice and welcomes the sense of discomfort he can experience from exposing his practice to those who are not versed in its codes:

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<sup>50</sup> See Chapter Two: 'Transitions'

<sup>51</sup> I have discussed the issue of location and visibility for artists peer networks in Chapter Two: 'Transitions', in which respondents cite an appreciation of the visibility they benefit from in a less saturated art scene.

*I suppose it's quite important as well when you're talking to people who aren't from an art background who get confused about what you're doing. It's quite a grounding experience – I suppose that's quite important, on reflection. It does make you question what you're doing more, rather than someone who knows about something saying, "oh that's amazing". I think there's an importance for both things: a sense of support to help understanding and to help promote your work and to help encourage you, but also I think you should...(not) fly out and get carried away and get lost in your stuff.*

Similarly, Kathleen at BV Studios opened up the *MotorMouth* peer critique sessions she had initiated in the gallery to non-artists<sup>52</sup>:

*... as a way for practicing artists to realise that other section – get feedback from people who aren't really, really involved in art, cause I think that's valuable as well.*

This need to disrupt and challenge one's "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1993) contradicts the image of contemporary art as inward-looking and intentionally inaccessible to non-artists. For these respondents, deliberate visibility beyond those who are wholly familiar with contemporary art both motivates them and causes them to reflect upon practice from an unfamiliar perspective.

For some respondents, residencies and exchanges have a similar effect of altering their perspective. They can gain a new perspective on the arts scene in the city where they live, while seeming to attain fresh visibility in their host city<sup>53</sup>. Working in a new context can form part of a similar strategy for positive disruption. Colm talks about the necessity to negotiate an artistic subjectivity in an unfamiliar context, while benefitting from the novelty afforded by outsider status:

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<sup>52</sup> See: Chapter Two: Transitions. Kathleen also invited non-artists into these sessions for reasons related to building a sense of self-belief after graduation.

<sup>53</sup> In Chapter Four I discuss respondents' needs to periodically introduce unfamiliar elements and challenges into their creative practice in the form of critique and collaboration.

*(...) maybe it's after being somewhere for 10-12 years that you can't see the wood for the trees and you go to a new city somewhere else and you can see things more clearly, how things are laid out and how you can choose how you can then navigate and feed into different institutions and somehow you're more recognisable to ...practitioners but also people like curators and people because you're an outsider you're almost...better received.*

*(...) That seems just mad that you didn't feel like you were in a city for a week or a month and you had many more opportunities presented to you than when you're in your own city for ten years. I don't know if that would be in every city or whether that is actually inherent in Bristol or inherent in how I see myself.*

*In the city where you live you kind of almost don't set yourself up to network or advertise yourself or promote yourself in the same way, as suddenly arriving somewhere and being very proactive.*

The subtext here is that artists can 'exhaust' the benefits of visibility in their home cities and by negotiating new terrain they can be seen in a new way, and hence experiment with adaptations to practice.

Contemporary critics of immaterial labour politics see a drive towards visibility as symptomatic of an enterprise culture, in which social expression is commodified as human capital:

The dominant pathology of the future will not be produced by repression, but instead by the injunction to express, which will become a generalized obligation. (Berardi, 2009, p179).

Berardi portrays this drive towards visibility and expressivity related to oneself and one's cognitive and creative labour as indicative of an enterprise culture emptied out of all somatic experience:

Cognitive labour is essentially a labour of communication, that is to say communication put to work. From a certain point of view, this could be seen as an enrichment of experience. But it is also (and this is generally the rule) an impoverishment, since communication loses its character of gratuitous, pleasurable and erotic contact, becoming an economic necessity, a joyless fiction. (Berardi, 2009. Pp86-7)

I would argue that, although artists do utilise visibility as an instrument to gain professional development skills or information, they also make their work visible to one another through self-

organised and facilitated strategies in ways that incorporate pleasure, reciprocal bonds of trust and commitment and communicative acts that cannot be reduced to simple transactions.

I propose that although many artists experience anxiety related to the perceived need to network or perform, they meet the demands of 'exteriority' through controlled incremental interaction with, and exposure to groups and clusters, both managing their visibility and the sharing of their practice in relation to their peers, and building confidence gradually<sup>54</sup>.

Sylvie talks about how, as a student and then as a recent graduate, she used her time working as an invigilator in the Spike Island gallery to quiz fellow artists about their experiences, to assess possible directions and opportunities, to gain advice and other forms of support and to ease the transition between college and working as an independent practitioner. She expresses a need to see a plan laid out before her, rendering decisions and knowledge pertaining to reputations and connections explicit. Informal interactions between artists often allow these unseen links and negotiations to be traced:

*I was spending a lot of time with other artists who were all ahead of me in the scheme of things and that was really helpful because I would sit there for seven hours and just ask them for advice.*

*(...) I think what I was really interested in, and I still am whenever I meet an artist further ahead than I am in getting somewhere, is just always knowing how, how they got there.*

*Cause sometimes it's very hard to imagine or to see it happen so it's kind of reassuring to be able to see someone else's journey. Then you know how to map your own.*

*So I'd ask them a lot about that, which competitions do you apply to?, how did you get an internship? How do you get residencies and did someone come and spot your work? Do you ever get moments of anxiety when you can't work (?), because I get those quite badly and it's reassuring to see that others do as well.*

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<sup>54</sup> I argue in Chapter 4 that there are many forms of tacit exchange and experience that cannot be reduced to symbolic or economic value alone.



Respondents report that visibility counters isolation by giving them the feeling that they are connected to networks, clusters and communities.

Greater visibility aids promotion of projects, events and other practices to peers, and therefore facilitates feedback and the formation of connections, collaborations and participation, a cycle that potentially propagates further connections. The level of visibility of artists, practices and information within networks and groups determines levels of social capital within that group.

Robert Putnam defines social capital as:

features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions. (Putnam, R, 1993 in Field, J, 2003, p31)

Higher levels of acceptance and trust amongst peers again increases the likelihood of reciprocal exchanges of knowledge and collaborative or participatory practices.

Respondents indicate that their visibility amongst other contemporary artists and powerful actors within the contemporary art world is indeed of primary importance, but that this is not the only sphere in which they hope to gain visibility. 'Nor is it purely a means of gaining 'subscription'<sup>55</sup>.

Many artists who may have achieved higher levels of 'subscription' or 'consecration' do not solely see visibility amongst their peers in terms of a springboard to wider visibility in the commercial and publically-funded scene (although I concede that this is a consideration for some), but they continue to engage with their peers through self-organised projects for reasons that include pleasure, commitment, inspiration and interest, support and

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<sup>55</sup> It is a way of opening up conversations with peers and inviting feedback and critique, as I explore in Chapter 4.

practice development. These interactions help to maintain a fertile ground for practice through collaboration and the sharing of information.

### Inter & Intra-Group Visibility

During my time working with and for the Spike Associates group I came to see the visibility of members and their activities as key to the 'success' of the group and in 2010-11 I estimated that at any one time about a third of Associate members were engaging with the programme (comprising talks, peer crits, workshops, reading groups etc). This meant that the remaining members were still paying their monthly fees and simply receiving a fortnightly e-bulletin that informed them about events and opportunities.

According to Anita, the Associates Co-ordinator:

*I think a lot of people use it or would like to imagine it as a networking opportunity or a support group, ...but I think often people don't actually utilise that very well, so I think almost that they think that's what they want, but they don't then input or access it very often, almost that they like the idea of it more than they do physically engaging with it.*

An ongoing question revolved around how to improve levels of engagement with the group.

As a result, at this time many of the 90 + members did not know one another. As well as providing and organising the activities, events and administering any of the funds on offer, the co-ordinator's role became one of a social broker of peer interaction. Visibility became vital for enabling a flow of information in the group. Anita comments:

*I think what's at the crux of it for me in terms of what could be improved or what would make my role as that middle person much easier would be a*

*visibility of individuals. I think that's kind of at the bottom of what isn't working well at the moment in terms of if I was more aware of what people were doing, understanding their practice and who they already had links with, it would make my job much easier to (...) offer that a little bit more widely, but also for that to happen within the group a little bit more organically, for people to understand where expertise was, but also where similar interests lie, and then for that to kind of grow beyond the group itself, so I think that the first thing that I would improve if we had more time and money...probably more of an online presence...would be to do that, and then I think just funding trips to go and meet those people in person. I think that's really important.*

Online platforms are able to provide some background information about participants and their practices so that members can make expedient choices about communication, but also so that they can observe one another over time. They can have a sense of group identity<sup>56</sup> and the communication channels are open should they want to use them. As well as being a facility for immediate communication, social media allows for 'sleeping' members to participate passively, a stage of observational learning that is often a precursor for more active engagement.

Online communication with and between the Associates began with an email bulletin that was sent out intermittently and in 2009 when the Associates Co-ordinator was employed, she and I initiated the sending of weekly e-bulletins to members. We tried to make these a comprehensive list of opportunities, events and news and members were invited to contact us with information about events they wanted to promote to the group, call-outs for participants or help required etc. As the email addresses were made visible, members also had access to a mailing list and could use it to send their own separate messages to the group. There were several attempts to set up a website and an Associates blog, but members failed to use the blog regularly. In 2010 the Spike Island Associates Facebook page was set up. This meant that

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<sup>56</sup> I elaborate further on this in Chapter 3: 'Identities'.

events could be advertised, members could post comments or events, and the group could be 'Liked' by anyone. In this way, other groups around the UK and beyond could keep an eye upon Associate's activities. However, because the page was visible to anyone online, opportunities exclusive to the group were publically available.

At the time of writing in 2012, a private social networking site has been set up using the Ning.com and this and the Facebook site run concurrently. The 'Ning' site is accessible to members only. It includes events and opportunities and members can promote their own events on the site. Significantly, for the first time, members have individual pages on which they post a photo of themselves, a link to their website and any further information. Visibility of members (in terms of facial recognition) within the group has therefore been improved. This is also an attempt to solve the problem of information sharing. If members are paying a monthly fee, the information they receive as a result of their membership becomes part of the "service" for which they pay, and one of the benefits of membership. By limiting the visibility of that information to the group alone, a claim for exclusivity can be made and the information acquires value. Amongst the plethora of information online, the same events and opportunities may be freely available (on Twitter, Facebook events pages or bulletins from arts organisations for example), but the service provided by the co-ordinator is one of sifting, editing and mediation.

Sally at Extra Special People membership group in Birmingham's Eastside Projects comments on the need for both face-to-face and online platforms for visibility in the group:

*We had a six month review earlier this year where people were invited to give feedback on the scheme, we could talk about improvements etc. and one of the*

*things that came up was that people didn't feel that they knew everybody in the group and in a way that's never going to happen because it is so diverse, but it has meant that really using things like group critique as one of the main ways that people get to know what each other do, although at the moment we've just built an ESP website, which will be linked from our main website and I think that has a lot of potential for providing again that kind of level of intimacy.*

Andreas Wittel argues for a build-up of trust in informational relationships and states that there has been a “shift away from sociality in closed social systems towards regimes of sociality in open social systems.” (Wittel, 2001, p64). However, as I also argue in Chapter Four, respondents indicate that contemporary artists socialise and learn informally across a variety of social configurations. Some may constitute ideas of “community”: shared narrative histories, a shared repertoire constructed over time, strong, durable ties of friendship, shared values, such as a drive towards trust and reciprocity. Some may be more like “networks”: looser ties, information sharing, few mutual obligations, transient encounters. Stronger ties can be built up incrementally through repeated online visibility *as well as and in addition to* collaborations, critiques, conversations and collective projects.

One of the reasons cited for establishing the membership groups, Spike Associates and Extra Special People was the need to make arts activity visible and accessible to people new to the cities in which the groups are based. As I have noted in Chapter Four, The Spike Associates was described as a facility for, *seeing who's around and who's in the city*, (Philippa, Membership Groups Debate, 17.09.09). Sally at ESP comments:

*(...) one of the problems in the West Midlands is that there is a certain amount of activity going on and there are certain groups of people or individuals who are operating here, but if you're somebody who is moving to the city it's actually very difficult to gain access to that community, it's quite*

*hidden. And maybe that is often the case, but actually there's often an organisation or a space in a city that gives you a platform for that.*

The difficulty of making the Associates' activity visible is expressed by members. Diane suggests that because it incorporates both informal exchanges of information and relationships, as well as specific material resources, it should be measured according to different criteria:

*It's more about the exchange of information and knowledge and networking. You cannot say that things work or not work. I feel it's not the same kind of thinking as if it was an institution. So in terms of what works and what doesn't work... I suppose the space as a space it works, having the library and this information there is great and having the computers for people to work. In terms of the events, I'm not sure if there would be a kind of coherence. There's no kind of clear coherence, but I don't think it's a bad thing because of the nature of what the Associates are, being a diverse group, it's just a series of different types of events.  
I think people have to be proactive to navigate, to find their way of using Associates for what they want. I'm not sure if people do that, so that may be the critique.*

Writing about social capital, John Field's comments outline the necessity of active participation in order to gain direct experience of certain social situations to be able to navigate them effectively:

*Many of the skills required to access the different resources available through people's networks are tacit ones, which are deeply embedded in the practices or the relationships themselves. (Field, 2003, p69)*

Even with the Associates, a group that any artist with a contemporary practice from the Bristol area can join, the realities of networking within the wider group are difficult to negotiate for less assertive artists, without a boundary-spanning figure or an advocate to supply a brokering role, or without having an awareness of the existing cultures of the city, through having been resident there or having graduated from a local college. Anita remarks:

*that idea of it being quite a big group and not knowing anybody in that can be quite a daunting thing, (..) because it hasn't ever really had a structure that*

*people can tap into quite easily. Trying to understand exactly what we do or what we offer can be quite complex.*

Nina had moved from Boston in the US to Bath in 2008 and was keen to get involved with Spike Island. She was offered Associate membership after initially failing to secure a studio at Spike Island, and volunteered to be the Spike Associates representative for the annual Open Studios in 2009:

*Getting to be part of Spike...things really just flew open when I became a Spike Associate and it was like a month later they were looking for people to be the rep, the Spike Associates rep to the organising committee for the Open Studios. I was like 'pick me!' (...) I had been so invisible. I was very concerned with visibility, personally but also for the group. I wanted to know who are these Spike Associates, what do you mean? I didn't know anything about it. I'm getting the feeling that maybe it's an interesting group, quick I want to get to know them all.*

Her concern was with visibility of the group as whole, but also with representation of the group's internal variety:

*(...) and that was when I suggested (...) I said we should have a flat screen with a slide show of images going by of all the work and then you could at least get a sense of it (...) I still think being able to visualise some aspect of what people are doing would be helpful.*

Other respondents, who are Spike Associates members have expressed similar problems in conceptualising and engaging with the group. In fact, the sheer size of a membership group can mean that it is difficult to conceptualise. Associate member Sarah describes her image of the group:

*I think of it as a kind of fuzzy cloud where I'm not sure where it begins and ends.*

In order to meet fellow members and see their practice, Sarah set up her own series of film screenings showing feature films that were connected in some way to the exhibitions being held in the Spike Island gallery. The idea was, she said, about, *opening it out*

*from another perspective.* She then collaborated on *Reception*, a one-off inter-disciplinary event held at Plan 9 artist-led space, which received funding from the Associates scheme and involved certain members as both collaborators and participants. However, Sarah only managed to visibly engage a small proportion of Associate members:

*(...) that was really good in terms of getting in touch with people and finding out what they were doing. But that was quite a small piece of the pie. There were 60 or 70 people on the Associates list and I only know about 10 or 15 of them.*

The lack of mutual visibility and lack of a sense of shared ownership in the group means that it has the feeling of a resource that members can dip into, rather than a dense network without, what is termed in social network analysis, a high “clustering coefficient” (Uzzi, 2005)<sup>57</sup>: Many members had not previously worked together, nor were they linked by mutual collaborators. Caroline, the ex-director of Spike Island talks about how a cohesive group identity disintegrated as the group increased in size. She spoke about the group as it existed in 2007:

*(...) to begin with there was a kind of 'oh, we're the Associates', which was quite a nice thing, but as the group got bigger and bigger it was really clear that people didn't have things in common, which is absolutely appropriate and that actually they needed to self generate and find contacts of common value.*

As the size of the group increased members needed to make more effort to engage in order to find practice resonances and have conversations with like-minded members. Anita, as Associates Co-ordinator, takes on the role of rationalising communication within the group by establishing online platforms as well as brokering

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<sup>57</sup> clustering coefficient: “the average fraction of an actor’s collaborators who are also collaborators with one another.” (Uzzi, 2005, p46)



face-to-face meetings<sup>58</sup>. Here she elaborates upon the role of the wider group vis-à-vis, smaller clusters and individuals:

*(...) different groups or clusters that form within a wider group, but also individuals as well, so the kind of ethos of Associates is about those individuals or groups going out and that activity happening outside of Spike usually, and then that feeding back into the group and into the culture of the group as well, so I think what a wider group helps to do is to nurture that activity happening in smaller groups.*

The wider group can act as an audience and provider of feedback, critique and commentary, and as a pool for potential participants. Associates member Ros, for example, is a recent graduate who has initiated a variety of artist-led projects. She welcomed the experience of giving a talk to fellow members:

*The talk (the Open Studios talk) I found really good. It was really good to have everything that I've done put into a presentation.*

The experience of drawing the threads of her practice together as a cohesive whole in front of an audience made it visible and communicable to herself. This reflexive process not only enables the formation of practice identities (See Chapter Three), but sediments confidence in activities through the reification of a process.

Another of the problems inherent in facilitating a semi-autonomous space and “community” within a hierarchically-structured institution is the need to make visible the processes that constitute this community for public funding, for promotion of the group and for institutional transparency agendas. The informal meetings, exchanges and disparate events that occur, the collaborations and ties that develop between members are important ways in which members benefit from the group.

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<sup>58</sup> In Chapter Four I discuss clustering in larger membership groups and how respondents experience and benefit from both weak ties (Granovetter, 1983) and stronger bonds within these groups.

Members' proximity to one another and the opportunity to learn through observation of one another is also significant.

However, these informal interactions and experiences cannot be easily made explicit or presented as "services" or educational resources, unlike the knowledge accrued as a result of programmed talks, peer critique sessions, research trips or workshops.

As I **also** discuss in Chapter 4 in relation to sociality and participation in artist-led groups, this kind of tacit knowledge that is informal in style, has behavioural 'codes' that are appropriate for particular contexts and can pivot on an awareness of the subtle nuances of relationships between actors.

In his "Communities of Practice" model (Wenger, 1998), Wenger posits the dynamic mixture of participation and reification as a process of socially-constructed learning. Such forms of tacit and explicit knowledge, he argues, are interrelated:

Knowledge is never entirely tacit or entirely explicit. These types of knowledge do not lie at either end of the spectrum but are contingent upon one another, just as participation and reification are an "interacting duality". (Wenger, 1998, p67)

Some artists will already be au fait with these codes, because they are familiar with the participating individuals and the social landscape, because their practice has accrued greater 'subscription' or because they themselves are well connected to powerful artworld agents of "consecration" (Bourdieu, 1993). In some ways the scheme can be seen as a microcosm of the wider contemporary art world in that certain individuals may benefit more rapidly from the group's social and material resources, but their 'success' may be dependent upon their ability to negotiate relationships, as much as it is on the strength of their practice.

Greater visibility of members aids internal networking within the group, and consequently members' sense of benefitting from the group. Group visibility also aids networking between the Associates group as a body and artist-led groups and organisations nationally and internationally. This visibility encourages outside groups to propose opportunities and collaborations to Associate members, hence the subsequent expansion of those members' networks. For example, a research trip to Cardiff initiated by an Associates member in February 2009 led to her initiating a city-wide collaborative art event (*September XVII*) in September of the same year, with guests from Cardiff and Birmingham art organisations and groups. This set up a chain of reciprocal hosting whereby Cardiff artists at G39 artist-led gallery organised a similar city-wide event in December 2009 and Birmingham artists at Eastside Projects followed on by organising *The Event*, another collaborative platform to showcase the Birmingham contemporary scene.

Apart from the exhibitions that occurred during these events, they also precipitated further connections. Spike Associate member Nina met artists on the Cardiff trip, who she later invited to exhibit in an exhibition she curated for the Spike 'Open' in May 2009. Moreover, I could see that the experience of travelling (as I did) as a group with other previously unfamiliar Associate members helped to build trust and social cohesion within clusters in the wider group.

Respondents manage their visibility in a number of ways: through affiliation with groups and through a distributed and differentiated online profile, as well as through participation in self-organised activity that allows them to mitigate the discomfort of increased visibility in an environment in which they have

shared ownership and pleasurable engagement. Through peer engagement artists can also make tacit knowledge visible and negotiate a balance between tacit and explicit forms of expression that is unique to that context, and that cannot be easily be evidenced as learning. Such situations and collaborations can, however, lead to significant developments in both practice and confidence in practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through the course of my study I found that respondents constructed situations of interaction around art practice in multiple ways. These included engagement with membership groups, the organisation of and participation with artist-led groups, the initiation of temporary events and exhibiting spaces, peer critique sessions, talks, research trips and online documentation, social networking and observation.

The sense of pleasurable participation in a social event underpinned many of these situations. Indeed, the status of the situation as a social platform was often presented as having the same importance as the creative practice it centred upon.

Respondents did not always talk about their engagements in terms of learning and I am aware that the reflective space of an interview or discussion often allowed for the reification of certain processes in educational terms. I was sensitised to themes of development in respondents' practice, as expressed in their own words and I stress that my conceptualisation of these processes as learning has often been a retrospective act.

I maintain that the most important forms of learning by far in these situations are experiential and socially-constructed through encounters and entanglements with peers. Artists rely on both explicit and tacit skills that lead to forms of cognitive, emotional, ethical and embodied knowledge.

I suggest that post-formal learning for artists moves through certain stages and that an initial stage is the period shortly after leaving university when a graduate is attempting to establish themselves as an artist. The length of time that one regards this stage as a transitional period will vary from person to person.

However, most respondents report experiencing a certain amount of anxiety and disorientation at this time. They seek affirmation and recognition of their chosen metier. Feelings of alienation are compounded by a sense of isolation when they do not have studio space and often initially work in non-art related fields. Some artists build 'bridges' by setting up artist-led spaces and other projects with their student cohort prior to graduation.

Engagement with artist-led groups and other initiatives often mitigates the anxiety of graduation significantly, in that it provides regular contact with peers and the beginnings of a practice routine or rhythm. This routine can be particularly important in a working life pattern that has been characterised as "precarious" (McRobbie, 2000), in that artists may be establishing themselves as freelancers, while pursuing low-paid part-time employment at the same time as internships or other voluntary roles. A simple awareness of the mere proximity of peers motivates artists to continue to practice, and respondents have often established open-plan studios in shared artist-led spaces in order to fully benefit from mutual proximity and exchange.

At times, respondents use this period to experiment with forms of practice that are not constrained by academic disciplinary frameworks. Finding a sense of belonging through engagement with artist-led groups and membership groups can be the beginning of establishing self-belief and self-determination for artists.

There is a strong link between ontological and epistemological effects of art practice and the emotional landscape of practice is highly significant in terms of peer engagement.

Respondents identify and understand their practice in reflexive social interaction with their peers: e.g. through

engagement with groups, artist-led projects peer critiques and artists' talks. Rather than solely exchanging information, (which they do online and face-to-face), respondents learn from one another via a 'narrational' mode, through telling and listening to stories about practice development and 'professional' trajectories. In the absence of clear career paths, respondents appear to make sense of their own choices, often retrospectively, through the integration of their experiences and practices with those of their peers. They develop a "line of concordance" (Ricoeur, 1992, p147) in terms of a synthesised practice trajectory.

Respondents have not necessarily sought out peers with the same practice, but often relate to a way of thinking and expression that they identify as being indicative of an artistic approach. Therefore, a shared attitude or inclination can bring artists together around collaborative projects as much as a common medium.

While respondents report that there is some pressure to have a clearly identifiable practice or practice signature, at the same time many construct an "undecidable terrain" (Mouffe, 2007), or space where practice identities are temporarily suspended in order to collaborate with others and to experiment. An incidental outcome of such collective ventures is often a new perspective upon individual practice and a temporary relinquishment of control and therefore pressure, on the individual artist.

Decentring and disruption of practice identities can be a bold statement, signifying that artists choose to avoid aligning themselves with art institutions or institutionally-legitimised practices in order to prevent the coalescence of identities and meanings. The creation of less codified discursive spaces, in which experimentation with forms and ways of becoming are made

possible, is also a strategic way of gaining space for reflection and discourse that is not contingent upon other life roles.

However, respondents also construct artistic subjectivities by affiliating with supporting and legitimising organisations: e.g. through joining membership groups, through creating online identities and through entanglement with their artist peers by participating in an arts 'scene'.

Respondents forge a mixture of weak and strong ties that help them to sustain their practice through support and affirmation and develop their practice through peer feedback and critique. Many talk about an idea of support that also involves challenge and discomfort, the need to 'shake up' practice and organisational structures. There is sometimes difficulty in being able to do this with the same peers who also affirm and support practice, so there is a constant negotiation between familiarity and the introduction of fresh input through residencies, exchanges, collective projects and peer critique.

Participation in organisationally-facilitated membership groups, such as the Spike Associates differs from participation with artist-led groups in certain ways. Respondents reveal that they have often not found a sense of "community" in membership groups, but use them instead as a resource, a useful symbolic collective for the purposes of practice dissemination, an audience to witness practice through the delivery and reception of artists' talks or peer critiques, a centre of continuing professional development or a means of accessing connections and affiliations that may affect artistic reputation and further practice opportunities. Respondents welcome the slightly more formalised or institutionalised framework for interaction to which they feel little personal ownership or responsibility.



However, artists also desire stronger connections with their peers. These relationships can occur through repeated engagement with artist-led activity and groups and collaborations with peers over time. The membership groups I have analysed are underpinned by a drive towards transient movement through them rather than dependency upon them. I discovered that participation in both cases involves tacit understanding about relationships, power structures and practices that can often only develop through active engagement. Respondents who are assertive and already engaged with groups and art organisations or who have connections with groups via friendships, are more likely to be able to benefit from the less tangible resources of the group, such as social brokering or advocacy.

I found that the facilitation of these groups attempts to match a semi-hierarchical framework with an encouragement of the kind of energetic self-determination characteristic of artist-led culture.

There is often an aspiration to construct encounters that feel ethically appropriate between and within artists' groups, and particularly within artist-led groups where reciprocity, hospitality and generosity are foundational values. In the case of artist-led culture, learning to understand unspoken notions of equivalence holds import for social cohesion: for example, in the case of making work for no fee. When money is involved, (as in a membership group fee or studio rental), tensions between a culture of goodwill and one of service can arise.

Another problematic area is that of critique. Respondents often turn to their peers for critique at different stages of practice, before feeling ready to expose their practice in a public exhibition or competition. However, there is a hunger for honest and

'rigorous' critique, particularly once artists are entangled with their peers and feel secure in their sense of belonging and identity. An important stage of potentially transformative learning for respondents is the challenge or rupture produced as a result of critique. Critical ruptures are seen as advantageous to the development of practice and artistic self-belief, but only when there is a foundation of convivial exchange and trust and an assumption of equality that underpins the situation of interaction. Tensions arise when social cohesion is threatened by the desire to give or receive honest critique and I found this balance to be unresolved amongst many respondents; the relationship between friendship, conviviality and critique appears to be open to constant negotiation.

I was struck by the extent to which the theme of visibility featured in interviews and discussions with research participants. I found that artists strategically manage their visibility both online and in real-world interactions. Individuals and groups also manage a perceived pressure to be seen to have a relevant practice, a good reputation with the 'right' people and the correct affiliations. In some cases, respondents increase their visibility as a result of collaborative or collective activities with their peers. Although not explicitly a conscious strategy, this does have the effect of releasing some of the pressure artists experience to assert or promote their individual practice.

I was surprised about the degree to which extended communities of ex-committee members or even the wider membership of groups who have dispersed away from direct engagement over time, retain an investment in the interests of artist-led groups. They supply practical advice to current members and through conversations with members as well as via gossip

and rumour, they exert an influence over those groups. They contribute to an idea of group history and mythology, as well as a sense of group continuity or legacy.

It is extremely important for practitioners to feel part of a wider 'conversation', a dynamic polyphonic landscape where they can stay in touch with events and opportunities and one another's practices. Respondents describe the incremental build-up of engagement through repeated encounters with peers. This can happen in one-to-one collaborations or across wider networks. There is a certain defocusing that takes place in these situations, where respondents have slowly relinquished their practice identities over time and been able to experiment with new forms, take risks and generate excitement and enthusiasm to make work. The mixture of accumulating interest or excitement alongside commitment takes on its own momentum, creating a unique 'third space' between practitioners, which can instigate further practice and exchange.

### Dissemination<sup>59</sup>, Contributions to Knowledge and Future Work

I have so far discussed my research in the context of artist-led, events, symposia and debates. I would like to continue to do this by sharing my findings with participants in the study as well as other artists, and I would like to bring together groups that rely

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<sup>59</sup> I have so far disseminated research-in-progress at the following events: S1 Assembly, (5<sup>th</sup> April 2011), S1, Sheffield, where I spoke about 'Association' ; Alias Hub Event, Cornwall, Back Lane West, (Sat 27<sup>th</sup> Nov 2010), where I discussed my research; a lecture at Corridor 8 Art School Alternatives conference, Liverpool John Moors University, (7<sup>th</sup> Oct 2010), where I gave a paper entitled: 'Ethics of Encounter between Artists' and *Peer, Collaborator, Comrade, Friend*, (30<sup>th</sup> April 2011), Spike Island, a symposium I organised to discuss entanglements within contemporary art worlds. I have also given lectures on informal peer learning at University College, Falmouth and University of the West of England.

heavily upon informal learning to feed into these events. I expect my findings to support the interests of respondents and other art practitioners and to expose some of the obstacles and difficulties they may experience around peer learning, whilst affirming the value of the situations they construct where learning takes place and the importance of sustaining such activity.

I would also like to present this research in an academic context alongside those engaged in informal learning research from different disciplinary perspectives.

Much of the scholarship on informal learning appears to be in the areas of work-based or organisational learning, web-based online learning or in community education. This research adds a new dimension to the thinking on informal learning in that it looks at a field of practice that is regarded both as a profession and a calling. Similarly, the situations of socially-constructed learning I investigate occupy both social and professional realms where the two are indistinguishable.

My research posits a view of socially-constructed learning in which individuals become entangled by a mixture of strong and weak ties, seeking intense temporary, collaborative encounters while maintaining an overview of and visibility in a much wider plane. While I have been informed by *Communities of Practice* models (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) and theories of social production (Engestrom, 2007, Wittel, 2001), these do not adequately express for me the sedimentation of trust and tacit knowledge over time, contingent upon repeated practice-led collaborations alongside much more wide-reaching connections that tie artists to their broader field.

I see my research as a contribution to the conceptualisation of such a landscape and to participation within it. The terrain

consists of both networks and communities, but is, from the artists' point of view, more of an "entanglement". I am informed by Jorella Andrews' use of this term (Andrews, 2006) in relation to a person's relationship with an art work, but I apply it here to an assemblage comprising artists, artworks, values, reputations influences and even "memes" (Dawkins, 1976) passed between artists.

I believe there is more work to be done to evaluate such informal entanglements in order to better understand the potential of informal experience-based learning, with the proviso that this research needs to be carried out as a participant in the field in order to invest in and appreciate the tacit processes at work in such arenas.

With the increasing cost of higher art education, my research could also contribute to the fostering of peer learning endeavours outside of formal education. These might be within the artist-led sphere or part of a collaboration between art institutions and artist-led groups. The balance of power in these relationships must be negotiated very carefully in order that participants approach such projects as equals.

My research can be used to inform the future development and possible adaptation of membership groups embedded within organisations, such as the Spike Associates or Extra Special People, addressing sometimes controversial areas such a group visibility, cohesion, ownership and control in such schemes to better facilitate peer interaction.

I acknowledge the existence of self-organised projects that are consciously developed as educational forums and would also like to support the sustainable development of such initiatives. As I have shown, both artist-led groups and organisationally

facilitated membership groups already attempt to attract final-year university students and recent graduates. In terms of formal education, I see my work as a tool for informing students and tutors alike about ways in which they can build bridges between their formal education and life as an independent and confident practitioner.

There is a significant body of research into the creative industries and an artist's place within that sector. I see my research as a valuable contribution to the debate on the insecurity or precarity of an artist's position in society, in that it underlines the socially-oriented, self-determined motivations for practice rather than starting from a point of the artist as exploited worker.

I would like to introduce my findings to both researchers and participants in other contexts of informal learning, such as the area of intentional communities, (housing co-operatives, communes, religious communities etc.), to expand my notions of collective action and support and to investigate ways of attaining qualities associated with 'community' while maintaining an open flexible, and critical learning framework.

## APPENDIX I

### Details of Interview Themes and Approach

Experience from pilot interviews taught me that it was important to anchor the interview from an early stage in an area that was valued by, and familiar to the respondent.

This helped me to understand the unique way in which each respondent's practice was developing and what their particular needs, interests and desires might be in regards to their practice. It situated the interview in the present moment and provided a point from which I could explore other territory. As Kvale says, "The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge", (Kvale, 2007, p21). Kvale uses metaphors of the interviewer as a "miner" and a "traveller" wherein the miner is unearthing pre-existing knowledge and the traveller is collecting and at the same time constructing (already socially-constructed) knowledge with an eye on the narrative to be recounted.

I therefore interviewed with a series of core questions in mind that were related to my research questions. This led to the emergence of a series of themes, which provided the framework for my thesis.

Because each respondent had a unique experience of collaborative work, projects and peer interaction, I used techniques that allowed me to gain responses to a list of priority questions, and to diverge from these to focus in on seemingly significant details of experience.

I asked respondents certain core questions about the period since graduation. For the majority of my interviewees this will have been less than 5 years, but for a minority of older

respondents the time periods discussed could potentially be much larger. So in these cases I asked participants to be selective in terms of the projects or moments they discussed.

After asking a respondent to tell me a little about their practice at that moment, I then returned to their graduation and asked them to reflect upon their feelings about their course as a preparation for leaving college. Subsequently I asked respondents to tell me, stage by stage, dividing time up as they saw fit, about the period since graduation and peers and/or interactions that seemed to be significant over that period. These could, for example, be artist-led initiatives or studio groups they had engaged with. At certain points I would prompt the interviewee to expand upon a situation that seemed significant in terms of peer learning. In addition I was very interested in other dimensions of the participant's experience: namely, a sense of time or progress.

In regard learning as a developmental process, and rather than making my own assumptions about the longitudinal links between artists episodic experiences, I wanted respondents to describe to me if and how they saw their practice in terms of development, whether notions of 'progress', 'success' or 'failure' were relevant to them, and, if so, how. I hoped that this would serve to make more explicit the effects of certain interactions upon their practice and their sense of themselves as an artist.

I wanted to know how important use of the Internet was to peer interaction around practice, so asked participants about their use of online tools. If they had a studio, I asked about their feelings about their studio spaces and about groups or initiatives they were involved with. I also wanted to know if cities outside London offered specific contexts for artists that shaped the nature of peer interactions, contexts that might differ from a base in London or a



rural base, and what made for a vibrant art scene or an effective artistic 'community' in a city. I therefore asked participants about how they felt about being based in Bristol, Birmingham or Norwich, for example.

## APPENDIX II

### Details of Participatory Action Research: Selected Work in Relation to the Spike Associates group

#### Recorded Conversations with Artist-Led Groups Visiting the Associates and Bristol

Spike Island formed part of the itinerary for certain artist-led groups who were visiting art organisations and groups for their own research purposes. I noticed that many artist groups made these visits not only as an informal organisational and professional development strategy, but also in the spirit of a social visit. Artists would arrange a loose itinerary with the help of contacts in Bristol in order to get a more immediate, first-hand experience of significant landmarks and people in the Bristol contemporary arts scene.

I was interested to see what these groups hoped to gain from their tours and I also used the conversations to inform visiting groups about my research and probe some current questions. I recorded conversations with certain groups: namely, Tether from Nottingham and PoST from London. I used the conversations as an ongoing opportunity to monitor my own research in relation to the attitudes and experiences of artists in other contexts. The informal conversation as a form (and practice) for catalysing ideas, generating excitement, exchanging information and seeding practice is a theme of this thesis (see Chapter 4), informed by my own participant-observation with visiting groups.

On January 13<sup>th</sup> 2011, the newly formed artist-led group Aid & Abet from Cambridge visited Spike Island as part of a tour of

cities funded by the a-n “NAN” (Networking Artist’s Networks) bursary. They gave a talk about their formation and plans, which I recorded, and I participated in a meeting they had with members of the Associates about a planned collaborative publication project with Eastside Projects, Birmingham, Spike Associates and G39 artist-led group in Cardiff. The proposed publication and the discussions around it was potentially a catalyst for rich inter-regional interactions and co-constructive activity, and with the consent of all present I took notes of the meeting both for my research and to be used as information for the other participants.

#### ‘Research’ Trips with Other Members of the Associates

I participated in several trips organised by one of the Associate members, who had already made connections by working with artists in Cardiff and Birmingham. Trips included collective visits to Cardiff in February, 2009, Birmingham in May 2009 and the Glasgow International in April, 2009.

These group trips were intended to forge links between artists in different cities. They were useful to my research as a form of participant-observation, as a way of learning about the arts ecologies of other cities and they led to a greater realisation of the importance of reciprocal links between artists, a realisation that had implications for my research practice (See Chapter 4).

Such links formed and strengthened by these trips led to the establishment of three subsequent events, each of which were platforms for artists to meet and share practice. One of these (*September XVII* in 2009) provided me with a platform for a panel discussion related to my research. Moreover, my participation in

these trips led me to reflect upon the importance of these events for the augmentation of social ties between artists and the implications of this for artists' development and practice. They facilitated my own research in terms of establishing trust, mutual familiarity, interest and engagement with artists in Bristol and beyond and helped me to gain the advocacy of individual artists, which in turn aided my access to other groups. It was also on these trips that I came into contact with fellow researchers, who formed my own academic peer group.

### Peer Critique Attendance and Facilitation

I attended peer critiques organised for, and with, members of the Associates by the Associates Co-ordinator and myself. I recorded some of these events and have used detailed parts of one in my thesis in relation to the formation of practice identities (Chapter 3).

For another, I attended the crit, but also interviewed participants afterwards and have incorporated this material into a section about critique (See Chapter 4). These sessions were facilitated by a volunteer member of the Associates and recorded with members' consent.

I also attended peer critiques organised informally at the Arnolfini by and for members of staff and their friends. Finally, I facilitated a peer critique at BV Studios, Bristol, (where I have been based) and noted my reflections about this.

## Spike Associates Reading Group Facilitation: October 2008 – June 2010

I facilitated this group that concentrated on art theory, artists' writings, philosophy, poetry and literature. Each month a different group member chose the text for the subsequent month. I developed background knowledge that supported my thesis through discussions with members in this context. For example, reading *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (Simmel, 1903) or *Art in the Knowledge-Based Polis* (Holert, 2008) in discussion with artists helped me to analyse the foundation of the idea of the power of weak ties in urban settings or grasp debates around knowledge-production in creative research. I also gained a clear understanding of what participation in the group signified for regular members in terms of their Spike Associates engagement.

## Details of Participatory Action Research: Selected Collaborative Projects

- *Art + Writing* – May-August 2009  
I co-curated a panel discussion and four subsequent workshops, each led by different practitioner:  
May 2nd - *Art + Writing* panel discussion  
20th May - Neil Mulholland's workshop  
13th June - Colin Glen's workshop  
18th July - Becky Shaw's workshop  
1 August - Brian Catling's workshop
- *Reading for Reading's Sake 1*, 23 & 24 January, 2010

Spike Island, Bristol

A collaborative event with a London-based curator and a Salford-based artist, with members of the Spike Associates, to explore the experience of reading and sharing texts.

- Islington Mill, Salford, 10 April, 2010  
I ran a public a public workshop entitled: *Mapping Reading Histories*.
- *Tertulia*, from April 2010 - ongoing  
An ongoing quarterly public 'salon'- style event about experimental approaches to language. I co-curate this with a Bristol-based artists and we hold it at various venues.

Details of Participatory Action Research: Testing Research Propositions and Gathering Information

Membership Groups Debate, Spike Island, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009

In Summer 2009 I had started to make my own research visits to artist-led groups and membership groups around the country and at the same time I was attempting to establish a comprehensive picture of the background to the Spike Associates group. I was having some difficulty in seeing how the group was formed and for what reasons. Although I had interviewed several people who had been involved with the Spike Associates and a preceding group at an early stage, I was receiving conflicting information about the group's provenance and I wanted to bring different

voices together to see if participants would prompt one another, through a wider discussion, to reveal more about the group.

I imagined that a collective debate would be an ideal way of bringing some of the original motivations behind the group to light, and also a way of creating an opinion forum and knowledge pool for some of the groups I had been visiting to share their experiences.

I therefore invited members of the original steering group for the Spike Associates to participate in a panel discussion, chaired by myself with an invited audience of representatives of artist groups that I visited from around the UK: Plan 9, Islington Mill, Transmission, East Street Arts, Eastside Projects, G39 and others. Also present were current members of the Spike Associates as well as artists who had formed the 'Interp' groups, a precursor to the Spike Associates.

### 'Funf' Art Group

In Autumn 2010 four artists and myself set up a group in order to have monthly meetings to discuss our practice, and in my case my research. Our various motivations included a need for honest critique, for reflection, a desire for a platform for new work and a need for emotional support. For myself, there was also a need to interrogate my ideas in a collective on a more regular basis, with my peers as well as with my supervisors. I felt that this regular articulation, interrogation and critique would help me to chart the progression of my ideas in that in discussing my work, I would make shifts in my concerns more explicit and would gain from the reflections of others. This was the first stage for me in committing

ideas to writing and developing them in this way in the company of practitioners who were peers, but also potential research subjects.

I was particularly inspired to form a group after hearing one of the Associates members speak about her experience of being part of a tight-knit committed group over several years, and the effect this had had on her practice. I consulted the Funf group about initial plans for my research at an early stage and, at a later stage, about my thesis structure and developing themes.

Facilitated Seminar on Artists' Knowledge: *Control Point* Exhibition, Plymouth Arts Centre, 17 Dec 2009

I was asked to lead a seminar as part of the Control Point exhibition curated at Plymouth Arts Centre. The workshop participants were to be predominantly local artists, (recent graduates and art students), who had helped to work on the exhibition. At this time I was thinking about questions of knowledge as it pertained to artists' work, so I decided to frame the seminar as a short presentation about my research and a discussion based on the question, 'What do artists know?' I disseminated the following short texts amongst the potential participants in advance to help catalyse a discussion:

Extracts from *Why Art Cannot be Taught* (Elkins, J, 2001),  
What Can Education Learn from the Arts about the Practice of  
Education? (Eisner. E, 2002), *Art As Experience* (Dewey. J, 1934),  
The Art of Innovation (2008, Oakley. K, Brooke SB and Pratt. A),  
The Editorial Moment (in Becker. H, *Art Worlds*, 1982),  
Thinking with Art: from Situated Knowledge to Experiential



Knowing (Sutherland. I, Krzys Acord. S, 2007).

The majority of participants referred to the process of forming and negotiating networks as the most valuable aspect of their formal education and this preoccupation with strategic socialisation informed my research, in particular the section of my thesis that was to become Chapter 2: 'Transitions'.

Other events I initiated or attended included:

- Art & Education Reading Group, 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2010  
Islington Mill Salford
- Lecture at Corridor 8, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2010  
Liverpool John Moors University  
*Art School Alternatives* conference  
I gave a paper: 'Ethics of Encounter between Artists',
- *Alias Hub* Event, Cornwall, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2010  
Back Lane West artist-led space  
I delivered a talk on my research.
- *Peer, Collaborator, Comrade, Friend: Entanglements for Survival in Contemporary Art*, 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2011, Spike Island, Bristol.  
I devised this symposium with invited speakers and fellow researchers, Andy Abbott and Sophie Hope.

## Details of Participatory Action Research: Debate Facilitation

### *Two Is One One Is None, Redruth, Cornwall, 31st August 2009*

I chaired a discussion on collaboration at an exhibition featuring collaborative work by six artists, three of whom were based in Bristol or London. Each Bristol artist collaborated with one of the remaining three Cornwall-based artists.

I had been struggling with diverse definitions of the word “peer” as it was used by practitioners and my experiences here compounded my realisation that participants’ definitions of who constituted their peer could be far more dynamic than I had originally supposed, altering from one project to the next.

### *Vice Versa Exchanges seminar, Spike Island, 21 Nov 2009*

I was asked to facilitate this day-long seminar, which was a showcase of various exchange projects and included a debate about the nature of artists’ exchanges. I was given permission to record this debate with a view to it being informative for my research.

The participants were a mixture of University of the West of England MA students and other artists, some of whom were Spike Associates. Several had worked with a group of artists from Gronigen in the Netherlands, who were also present. The subsequent debate informed my descriptions of learning through collaboration.

## APPENDIX III

### Coding – Phase One

As I have made clear, I applied the same process of coding and analysis to all data I used in this thesis. However, this process is best schematised by referring to interview data. I began coding interview material as I listened back to recordings in order to transcribe the material. The notes I made were, as an edited interpretive distillation or synthesis of material, a product of my personal hermeneutic lens. So the formation of concepts, and an idea of the status of these concepts in relation to one another began immediately through this initial note taking process.

Example:

The following example from my raw data will show how I started to code:

7.15

*“Well that was quite a long while later, cause I didn’t really know what to do with all this. I **went to work at the Arnolfini**, started there in 2006 or 7 – I can’t remember, just as a steward and was instantly launched into this **amazing culture of stewards there, who were all art graduates, people who’d got MAs from Chelsea and really good, interesting people who were still making work, and it was a lot of fun socially as well, and we all got on tremendously well.** Lots of talking about work,*

8.00

*but when I first started there I remember I was thinking a lot about writing, kind of creative writing, because I knew I wanted to carry on with something creative, but I didn’t want to go back to...I had difficulties with performing in classical music because I had quite sort of...nerves around performing, so I thought that, oh okay well what can I do? I knew I was fairly ok at writing so I thought, ok I’ll work with that. So I did that for a **bit, but then very gradually over the course of lots of conversations, partly with people I was working with and also partly people I knew who were teaching at UWE, I ended up signing up for the Fine Art MA.** I*

*originally signed up for the BA in Fine Art but was quite quickly persuaded to go straight for the MA, which ...I was quite surprised that they'd let me, but they did, and in that year things took off really, really quickly so I started off doing visual work, drawing and writing, drawing and text- based visual work about music again and musical notation and the idea of musical silence and stuff and listening, but then very gradually through the course of that year which was a year of lots of critical engagement, giving tutorials from different artists and lots of group crits and things, I realised that I really understood performance. This coincided as well with my increased exposure at Arnolfini to live art, which it had a lot of at the time (...) and that showed me a whole new way of performance...*

**9.44**

*that was so much more inclusive and expansive than classical music, as I understood it, so the two things came together and I suddenly thought, wow there's this really workable thing available to me, so buoyed by that I gave up the MA, on good terms, very good terms with the lecturer...I just felt that I understood what I needed to do now and since then I've just been working my way along that furrow."*

**10.16**

As I transcribed I noted time signatures at various points in the interview and kept notes in a separate memo pad. For this particular time signature they looked something like this:

**CULTURE of Arnolfini Stewards:**

*"interesting people"*

*"talk about work"*

**SOCIAL**

**Finding PRACTICE**

*"very gradually" - CONVERSATIONS*

**Exposure to live art at work.**

**Formal MA**

**Left Formal MA.**

In this extract from an interview with Bristol artist, Carl, he tells me how he came to develop the art practice he was engaged with at the time of the interview. As I have explained, I am particularly sensitised to any mention of other artists in relation to his practice and to interactions with artists that occur outside of formal educational frameworks. This thematic sensitisation already determines the parts of the interview that I have chosen to select as particularly pertinent to my study (marked in bold type). For

example, Carl talks about the “*amazing culture of stewards*” at the Arnolfini gallery where he went to work. I am interested in the “*properties and dimensions*” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the “*culture of stewards*”. What precisely are the qualities that make it “*amazing*” for Carl and to what extent does this affect the development of his practice and the sense he has of himself as an artist, which I have called his ‘artistic identity’?

Other properties Carl uses to define the stewards’ culture include: they have “*MAAs from Chelsea*”, they are “*good, interesting people*” and they “*were still making work*”. Carl also emphasises the social dimension by talking about the fun they had together.

Carl then describes a period of uncertainty about the nature of the creative practice that he wants to engage with, the potential obstacles or inhibitions he experiences around performance, which seems to lead him towards the relative privacy of writing. His decision to sign up for an MA is particularly interesting to me because it appears to happen as a result of “*lots of conversations*” both with work colleagues and college tutors. It also happens “*very gradually*”: this incremental change is a noteworthy quality or dimension of a process of transformation pertaining to a period of interaction outside of formal education.

During his year on the MA, Carl describes a period of intense activity in terms of interaction with other artists and practices in a formal educational environment and the impact this has on the practices that he engages with, coming to the realisation that he “*understood performance*”. Although this is interesting, formal education is not the main focus of my study. I am more interested in his decision not to carry on with the MA.

His decision to leave the course is not presented as a negative decision, but a positive one springing from what he

*“needed to do”* connected to an understanding of a potential practice, a practice that he defines in relation to his previous formal educational experience of practice as a classical musician, and strengthened by increased exposure to live art practices in his place of work, suggesting it seems, potential practices *“available”* to him, potential paths to follow. The word *“furrow”* implies to me, a way that has been mapped out, but that also must be ‘ploughed’ or ‘worked’ by Carl himself.

Overall, there is somewhat of an imperative tone I receive from the interview with Carl, implied not only by his timbre of voice, but by words such as *“buoyed”* and *“needed”* coupled with a sense of the pleasure and inspiration he has received from his interactions with other artists (e.g. the *“amazing”* culture of stewards, with who he got on *“tremendously well”*). This contrasts with the measured and *“gradual”* development of his decisions relating to his practice. The tone of the interview seems significant in the same way that, waking from a dream one can be left with a particular lingering feeling while not being able to recall the details. In the case of this interview I have transcribed the details, but the tone I intuit also affects the concepts I subsequently develop that drive my research.

For example, this was one of many interviews that informed the development of my ideas about changes in practice being inextricably linked with the formation of subjectivities through exposure to others over time, where the dimension of protracted resonance or desire rather than sudden revelation, is significant.

I initially employed a process of *“Open Coding”* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), replacing memos with concepts for quanta of raw data. I have in the accompanying notes, based partly on instinct and partly on experience of analysis of previous data and action

within the field, assigned notes or concepts differing levels of importance (e.g. capitalising some, underlining others) and so a hierarchy starts to emerge, and higher and lower level concepts come into being.

I picked up on the “*CULTURE*” of stewards, for example and this is linked to the “*SOCIAL*” sphere in which Carl experiences that culture. In subsequent and previous interviews I had also noted dimensions of interactions and developed various higher and lower level concepts, which resonate with these references and help to modify and define them. Similarly, based on previous data I had already started to develop concepts around the development of “*PRACTICE*” through peer dialogue and other interactions, and the qualities or dimensions of the developmental process.

Subsequently in this interview Carl mentions the word “*gradual*” 5 more times, e.g.: he talks about “*gradual learning*” and a “*gradual accumulation of insight*” when describing the development of his practice after leaving college. I created a code for ‘Incremental Development’, which I refined according to the different incidences of data in this and further interviews, where I believed a similar process was occurring. At a later date I employed “*Axial Coding*” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) by choosing to link these incidences with existing codes or higher level concepts of ‘Time’ and ‘Learning Process’, ‘Artistic Identity’ and ‘Practice Identity’.

I also developed concepts around reactions to and reflections on experiences of formal art education.

## Sorting Coding – Phase Two

I experimented with different ways of grouping the memos that I had written beside my interview data, also incorporating notes from participant-observation and action research events. At this stage I constructed my analytic scheme according to the following headings, headings that seemed like appropriate umbrellas under which I could gather sub-themes and develop concepts, and that seemed to cover the breadth of participants experience as it was described to me:

**Art School**  
**Physical Space**  
**Self-Organised Projects**  
**Practice**  
**Interactions, Collaborations, Groups & Collectives**  
**Identity (Artistic)**  
**Time**  
**Money**  
**Work and Other Roles Beyond Practice**  
**Asymmetrical Relationships**  
**Bristol**  
**Other Cities**  
**Online**

As my data gathering continued I started to develop sub-headings. For example, under the heading of 'Practice', I extrapolated many sub-themes. I added 'trigger' phrases or references to remind me of specific incidences that suggested that descriptor to me:

**Practice**  
Support for practice  
Awareness about practice  
Sustainability and continuity of  
Returning to practice  
Transitions in practice  
Pleasure/Enjoyment of  
Failure  
Verbalisation of Practice / Dialogue– important  
Trying new ways of practicing/Experimentation  
Legitimacy of  
Affirmation/Reassurance/Encouragement of



Play and practice  
Diversity of  
Establishing practice  
Comprehension of  
Residencies/New perspectives/Outsider/Exchanges  
Confidence/Assertiveness  
Proximity  
Influence and practice  
Visibility of

Doing/ Action  
Reflexivity and practice  
Editing practice  
Direction of practice  
Competition  
Proficiency at practice  
Efficiency of practice  
Positioning of practice  
Practice as positioning  
Reputation and practice  
Belonging and practice  
Progress and practice  
Practice identity  
Peers and practice  
Expanding practice  
Travel and practice

### Coding – Phase Three

It became important at this stage to spiral back to the centre or 'backbone' of my thesis, with its concentration on peer interaction. This was not a study of the many ways in which artists practice, but I was interested in the ways in which peer interaction and practice development interrelated. This focus affected the concepts I began to develop from these memos, and how I continued to develop these concepts and modify them with ongoing data analysis.

With each new interview and each event certain themes recurred, so were fleshed out and modified, while others did not

appear to be significant. For example, the **concepts of Practice Identity and Identity** acquired many related references:

## Practice

### Practice identity

- Self-determination and practice
- Subjectivity and practice
- Differentiation of practice
  - Different contexts – e.g., Colm working in for galleries and for Blackout Arts
  - Practice falling between two camps – e.g., “floating in between”, Sylvie
  - Practice not easily definable
  - Practice “community” – not knowing/ knowing
  - Language of practice – recognised/ not recognised, e.g. Carl, dissatisfied with language of musicology in relation to live art
  - Formal language and self-constructed language of practice

### Visibility of Practice

- Importance of people knowing your practice, e.g. Iris needing particular curators & institutions to connect with to validate practice –
- Targeted visibility, e.g. Diane seeking specific visibility to aid funding – leads to more projects

I employed axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.195) by relating concepts in different thematic groupings to one another. So, for example below, the text in red shows how I have related data coded at ‘Visibility of Practice’ to ‘Progress and Practice’ and how I have connected data coded at ‘Practice Identity’ to ‘Verbalisation of Practice’:

- Progress and practice
  - stress of first 7 years, (Diane)
  - getting a gallerist
  - different types of progress, eg progress in networking (visibility) and progress in practice – needing particular types of visibility, eg Diane wanting attention within the UK.

progress through others who validate practice,  
eg Diane  
age comparisons and progress, eg Thalia  
need for change and progress, eg Thalia

### **Visibility of Practice**

importance of people knowing your practice,  
eg Iris needing particular curators &  
institutions to connect with to validate  
practice – targeted visibility, eg Diane seeking  
specific visibility to aid funding – leads to more  
projects

### Verbalisation of Practice – important

Dialogue  
Conversation as Practice – Bringing people together  
to make something happen - Thalia  
Hard to talk about practice in Transition/Ideas  
in Development - Diane

### **Practice Identity**

Self-determination and practice  
Subjectivity and practice  
Differentiation of practice  
    Different contexts – eg, Colm working in  
        for galleries and for Blackout Arts  
Practice falling between two camps – eg,  
    “floating in between”, Sylvie  
Practice not easily definable  
Practice “community” – not  
    knowing/knowing  
Language of practice – recognised/ not  
    recognised, eg Carl, dissatisfied with  
        language of musicology in relation to  
        live art  
Formal language and self-constructed  
    language of practice

## APPENDIX IV



University of the  
West of England

Faculty of Creative Arts,  
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Bower Ashton Campus,  
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Bristol.  
BS3 2JT

### Participant Information Sheet, Talks/Events 1

#### **Learning Beyond Formal Education: Peer Learning in Networks of Contemporary Art in regional Cities**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and if you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to read and, *if I choose to quote you*, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Consent via email with an electronic signature is also acceptable. You are free to withdraw from the process at any point and if you do so, please contact me so that I can do my best to delete data attributable to you.

The principal focus of my research will be an investigation into different forms of knowledge transference and construction outside of formal education, in regional contemporary art networks. This part of my research will take the form of participation in talks and events. I am interested in your experiences of peer learning after formal education, in your own practice, and in situations where knowledge transfer might take place (for example in an artist-run group, social network or institution) and your perceptions of and reflections on those situations.

I am also interested in role(s) within a group/network, how the group structure might influence how and what people learn,

events that you have participated in with a group or network and associations with other groups, networks and institutions.

The main objective of the project is to research ways in which regional cities do or do not grow and sustain contemporary arts “communities”.

I have invited you to take part because I believe that your experience of, or opinion about peer learning will be a valuable contribution to my research.

I will record the talk/event with a digital recorder.

### **Anonymity**

**Wherever possible, I will attempt to make individuals interviewed (and mentioned during the course of interviews) anonymous. They will be identified by a pseudonym, their age range and gender and a reference to their generic role in relation to a group or network e.g.**

**Laura, 32 yrs, Member Artist, Artist-Run Group**

**Ned, 25 yrs Education Officer, Regional Art Gallery**

### **My contact details**

**I am a registered PhD student at University of the West of England and my PhD is a collaboration between UWE and Spike Island, Bristol.**

Megan Wakefield  
School of Creative Arts  
Bower Ashton Campus  
Kennel Lodge Road  
Bristol BS3 2JT

Should you wish to contact someone regarding the conduct of the interview procedure, please see below:

Supervisors Contact Details:

Please feel free to contact any member of the supervisory team if necessary.

Paul Gough  
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## Participant Information Sheet, Practitioners 1

### **Learning Beyond Formal Education: Peer Learning in Networks of Contemporary Art in regional Cities**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and if you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. You are free to withdraw from the process at any point.

The principal focus of my research will be an investigation into different forms of knowledge transference outside of formal education, in regional contemporary art networks. This part of my research will take the form of interviews. Questions will be related to your experiences of peer learning after formal education. This may include the situations where peer learning might take place (for example in an artist-run group, social network or institution) and your perceptions of and reflections on those situations.

For example, my questions may relate to your role(s) within the group, how the group structure might influence how you learn, events that you have participated in with the group or the group associations with other groups and institutions.

The main objective of the project is to research ways in which regional cities can grow and sustain a well-informed, self-motivated and confident contemporary arts community.

I have invited you to take part because I believe that your experience of, or opinion about peer learning will be a valuable contribution to my research.

The interview will, where possible, take place at a public venue such as an artist-run space and will last approximately 45 minutes. I will record the interview with a digital recorder.

### **Anonymity**

**Wherever possible, I will attempt to make individuals interviewed (and mentioned during the course of interviews) anonymous. They will be identified by a pseudonym, their age range and gender and a reference to their generic role in relation to a group or network e.g.**

**Laura, 32 yrs, Member Artist, Artist-Run Group**

**Ned, 25 yrs Education Officer, Regional Art Gallery**

### **My contact details**

**I am a registered PhD student at University of the West of England.**

Megan Wakefield  
School of Creative Arts  
Bower Ashton Campus  
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In the unlikely event that you wish to contact someone regarding the conduct of the interview procedure, please see below:

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Please feel free to contact any member of the supervisory team if necessary.

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Tel: 0117 929 2266



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### Consent Form

#### **Learning Beyond Formal Education: Peer Learning in Networks of Contemporary Art in regional Cities**

Please read the information on the Participant Information Sheet overleaf.

If you agree with the terms as described in that document and are happy to take part in the study, please sign below.

Full name of participant / interviewee

Gender

Age

If you are a college graduate, Year of Graduation

Course graduated from & college attended

Full address

Home telephone number

Mobile number

Email address

I \_\_\_\_\_ (print name) agree with the terms as described in the Participant Information Sheet, and am a willing participant in this research on peer learning.

#### **My contact details**

**I am a registered PhD student at University of the West of England.**

Megan Wakefield  
School of Creative Arts



Bower Ashton Campus  
Kennel Lodge Road  
Bristol BS3 2JT

In the unlikely event that you wish to contact someone regarding the conduct of the interview procedure, please see below:

Supervisors Contact Details:

Please feel free to contact any member of the supervisory team if necessary.

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Marie-Anne McQuay

[Marie-Anne.McQuay@spikeisland.org.uk](mailto:Marie-Anne.McQuay@spikeisland.org.uk)

Tel: 0117 929 2266

**Verification that you are happy to proceed**

You have the right to withdraw from this process at any time. If you would like to send me the transcript of your interview after it has been drafted (this will be within one month of the interview taking place), please tick here.

If you would like me to contact you when I have started to write up my PhD thesis to review your interview at this stage, please tick here:

**Data Protection**

The results of the research will be published in my PhD thesis, presented at conferences, and articles in print and online. I will treat the information with great care and any personally identifiable information will be removed. I will use pseudonyms in my field notes as well as my transcripts. If you would like me to destroy any interview data relating to you after completion of my thesis, please tick here:

## Changes to Levels of Anonymity: Email

23/2/10

Dear ...

I am emailing you to clarify some minor changes I have made to the different sorts of anonymity in my PhD project. I am still giving individuals pseudonyms, but would like to name places, artworks, groups and events. I feel this is very important for the specificity and potential usefulness of my thesis.

Would you kindly return a signed email to me giving me consent again to use your interview data? If you have any objections please also let me know and I will not use the data.

Many thanks,

Kind regards

Megan Wakefield



University of the  
West of England

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Bristol.  
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## Participant Information Sheet, Talks/Events 2

### **Learning Beyond Formal Education: Peer Learning in Networks of Contemporary Art in regional Cities**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and if you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to read and, *if I choose to quote you*, you will be asked to sign a consent form. Consent via email with an electronic signature is also acceptable. You are free to withdraw from the process at any point and if you do so, please contact me so that I can do my best to delete data attributable to you.

The principal focus of my research will be an investigation into different forms of knowledge transference and construction outside of formal education, in regional contemporary art networks. This part of my research will take the form of participation in talks and events. I am interested in your experiences of peer learning after formal education, in your own practice, and in situations where knowledge transfer might take place (for example in an artist-run group, social network or institution) and your perceptions of and reflections on those situations.

I am also interested in role(s) within a group/network, how the group structure might influence how and what people learn,

events that you have participated in with a group or network and associations with other groups, networks and institutions.

The main objective of the project is to research ways in which regional cities do or do not grow and sustain contemporary arts “communities”.

I have invited you to take part because I believe that your experience of, or opinion about peer learning will be a valuable contribution to my research.

I will record the talk/event with a digital recorder.

### **Anonymity**

**While I will mention group, project and organisation names, and identify city locations, individuals will be given pseudonyms. Participants may be identifiable through the groups, works or events they mention.**

### **My contact details**

**I am a registered PhD student at University of the West of England and my PhD is a collaboration between UWE and Spike Island, Bristol.**

Megan Wakefield  
School of Creative Arts  
Bower Ashton Campus  
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Should you wish to contact someone regarding the conduct of the interview procedure, please see below:

Supervisors Contact Details:

Please feel free to contact any member of the supervisory team if necessary.

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## Participant Information Sheet, Practitioners 2

### **Learning Beyond Formal Education: Peer Learning in Networks of Contemporary Art in Regional Cities**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary and if you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. Consent via email with an electronic signature is also acceptable. You are free to withdraw from the process at any point and if you do so, please contact me so that I can do my best to delete data attributable to you.

The principal focus of my research will be an investigation into different forms of knowledge transference and construction outside of formal education, in regional contemporary art networks. This part of my research will take the form of interviews. Questions will be related to your experiences of peer learning after formal education. I may ask you about your own practice and about situations where knowledge transfer might take place (for example in an artist-run group, social network or institution) and your perceptions of and reflections on those situations.

Questions may also relate to your role(s) within a group/network, how the group structure might influence how you learn, events that you have participated in with a group or network and associations with other groups, networks and institutions.

The main objective of the project is to research ways in which peer learning happens in regional cities and ways in which they can grow and sustain contemporary arts “communities”.

I have invited you to take part because I believe that your experience of, or opinion about peer learning will be a valuable contribution to my research.

The interview will, where possible, take place at a public venue such as an artist-run space and will last approximately 45 minutes. I will record the interview with a digital recorder.

### **Anonymity**

**While I will mention group, project and organisation names, and identify city locations, individuals will be given pseudonyms. Participants may be identifiable through the groups, works or events they mention.**

### **My contact details**

**I am a registered PhD student at University of the West of England.**

Megan Wakefield  
School of Creative Arts  
Bower Ashton Campus  
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Should you wish to contact someone regarding the conduct of the interview procedure, please see below:

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