

## ***Showing Expectations: Curating, Authorship, and the Practices of Institutional Policies.***

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### **Introduction**

In this presentation we would like to work through three terms that are, we think, in urgent need of reconsideration. These are: curating, artistic authorship and the academic institution.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can now say that it was mainly these three terms that brought us, (Leonor, Sue and Ignaz), together to develop a collaborative visual arts project. Collaborative in the widest sense, in that it interrogates and challenges these terms by playing them out creatively and most importantly, *unexpectedly*.

If *art* is a discursively produced label then we need to acknowledge that the academy and the professional art world should remain open and tolerant to differing conceptions of art and aesthetic practices. People have differing (albeit nonetheless fixed) ideas and expectations as to what constitutes art practices, (together with their associated methods of production, distribution and circulation). It is those prevailing cultural and ideological expectations that shape terms like; art, artist, curator and so on that we want to challenge and bring to the fore through our project *Showing: Expectations*. In so doing we also need to ask wider questions relating to the political dynamics that motivate relations between the institution, the author, and the curator.

Art academies, universities, public art galleries and so on, all produce, define and legitimize the *artist* and her/his *art*. Traditionally, an art school generates an author/artist who becomes sanctioned by a curator, which in turn validates the author's positioning in the gallery as a recognized artist. Polemically speaking, one could be an artist by virtue of; having had a degree in Fine Art conferred, by exhibiting in an art gallery or by exchanging artworks for economic currency. And yet academic institutional spaces (which are intended to provide routes to societal roles and economic rewards) are highly safeguarded, and access to art and education is both limited and difficult.

Curating, as it is traditionally defined, involves an editorial process of selection based upon pre-defined criteria. The curator sanctions what is displayed in art exhibitions and what is not. In their role as the gatekeepers of institutional art gallery spaces curators control access to a vital part of the educational environment. Such a role carries the associated power to offer openings to shared potentialities and also to narrow opportunities for communication with wider audiences. Instead of seeing curating as a kind of rigid formula through which to achieve a predetermined, (and often *safe* outcome), we are seeking to apply curatorial processes as a mode of critical practice through which we can further interrogate the politics and power relations underpinning the field of contemporary art.

Our project begins here, with the vast range of expectations associated with the roles of art, artists and curators. The project is collaborative and involves working with six Leeds-based community groups. However, we want to stress that this is *not* a community arts project that seeks to bring the arts to the so-called uneducated, or to those lacking an interest in the arts. That would clearly not be enough. Neither is it, as Irit Rogoff says, 'about the celebration of emergent minority group identities as an achievement in and of itself.'<sup>1</sup> The current drive in Higher Education in the UK, for example, to widen access to those groups who have been identified as being under-represented in academic institutions, imposes a financial obligation upon the sector to take action to recruit more students from ethnic and social minorities. And yet conflicts exist between the nominally related

aims of ‘promoting social inclusion and improving the country’s economic competitiveness’ as the strategic plan by the Higher Education Funding Council for England outlines.<sup>2</sup> For example, the introduction of tuition and top-up fees seems to contradict notions of educational inclusion, generating further divisive class based, social and economic exclusions.

Widening participation in higher education is clearly on social policy and academic agendas with targets of fifty percent of 18-30 year olds having access to higher education by 2010 (DfEs, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Academic institutions require (and fund) each faculty to nominate a Widening Participation Officer who is responsible for administering community databases and for facilitating events that are designed to promote inclusivity.<sup>4</sup> Equally, public art galleries are under political and economic pressure to diversify and widen their audiences so that they more closely reflect the actual demographics of the related geographic location.

However, these initiatives (open days, etc.) are often not only highly bureaucratic exercises – cold applications of institutional policies – but they can also be very prescriptive with regards to notions of identity and community, whereby racial and socio-economic backgrounds are all too easily assumed as a shorthand for someone’s identity. Widening Participation is realized at the University of Leeds, for example, by identifying and addressing specific community groups, who are then invited to closely managed and monitored events. People are granted limited access but the rules are predetermined, prohibiting the possibility for self-articulation. In such a context, achievement is validated via the ticking of particular ideological boxes.

We decided to apply a specific institutional policy, the drive to widen participation in Higher Education, *in practice*, and to put it to work in a genuine, unpredictable and experimental way by allowing differing expectations to be raised and then responding to these through a carefully considered, critically self-reflexive process. So that we might enable this we developed a curatorial concept that is based on, and indeed reinforces the nature of these policies, but that simultaneously undermines institutional hierarchies and unsettles securely believed expectations. The project rethinks knowledge and power relations in the context of visual representations and gallery structures. It also hopes to expose those academic value regimes that sanction and validate recognized aesthetic practices.

But before we introduce you to the project, we want to make a few comments on *practice* and *practice-based* research to clarify our perspective on these unruly areas. Let us be clear: a contemporary art project is *not* research per se. Exhibiting your artwork in a public gallery, for instance, does not mean your work is a research project – even though it has become a familiar ruse for contemporary artists in the UK to drape their artistic practice in the fashionable cloth of *research*. While there are pragmatic and economic reasons for doing this, it does, however, compromise the integrity of practice-based research. Such cut-and-paste strategies are insensitive to the innovative potential of practice-based research and the importance of critically-reflexive processes together with their associated pedagogic potential. Derrida described the problematics of practice-based research like this, ‘a practice worthy of the name “research” mustn’t come “*in the place of discourse*”’. Practice becomes research when it can ‘adequately *replace* it’.<sup>5</sup>

The expansion of research into the fields of contemporary art does not mean that all of a sudden artists, just by means of their artistic productions, are researchers too. Doing a practice-based (or -led) research degree must start from a set of questions in the context of a thematic field.<sup>6</sup> Thus, one has to abandon the simplistic notion that what we do in the practice-based component of the PhD equals *making art* for dissemination in professional exhibition spaces. It can of course enter the exhibition space, if appropriate, but its purpose is first of all to enable a reflective and critical research process. Hannula et al. have drawn attention to the ‘methodological abundance’ in artistic research as a way in which experience reflectively changes itself.<sup>7</sup> This means, that ‘all areas of

experience are at play[...] in the hermeneutic of (artistic) experience. These areas of experience might include experiences that do not lend themselves to easy conceptualization, at least not if conceptualization is understood in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions.’<sup>8</sup>

What practice-based research might then do is to stretch the concepts operating within (conventional) research itself. This makes *criticality* possible, which unlike the authoritative and fixed site of criticism lies, ‘in the operations of recognizing the limitations of one’s thought, for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure.’<sup>9</sup>

We are arguing the case for a surrendering of positions and institutional territories, including our own. We hope to expose the limitations of subjective positioning in relation to art practice, production and presentation, be it academic, professional, amateur, and so on. This is not to establish a consensus of opinion nor is it to affirm differences, but to provide opportunities for discussing differing approaches to the visual arts and to share learning through a self-critically productive process.

### **So how does it all work?**

Using the Widening Participation strategy we contacted a range of groups in Leeds (already identified as being under-represented in the Higher Education sector) and invited them to become involved in the project. The idea was that participants from each community group, (self-selected through open invitation), would be asked to engage in a visual debate by thinking about what meaningful object/artwork they may possess, (have produced or might produce), that could be exhibited as part of a collaborative exhibition consisting of work submitted by other community groups in conjunction with their own. The exhibition is envisaged as being part of a wider ongoing engagement between individuals, key workers, artists and academics, and so on. In this context, the exhibition element presents a by-product of a process that will generate a multitude of differing forms, including a series of discussions, a book and an internet site, none of which takes precedence over the others.

The curatorial concept is based on a seven-week process involving all of the invited community groups.<sup>10</sup> Each week, a number of participants, two from each community group, would leave their objects/artworks in the gallery space. A second group would then curate the work, (again composed of two participants from each community group) and at the end of that week the second group would leave their own work in the gallery for a third group to curate (and so on). This structure would enable a mingling of all community groups involved on a weekly basis. This is an accumulative process that would be repeated for each week of the six-week period resulting in a continually altering exhibitions programme. In the seventh week, the gallery space will situate all of the artworks that will have been submitted throughout the process by each of the groups. The curatorial process brings to the fore different ideological positions held by the participants with regards to notions of *art* and *gallery*. In this sense, participants are being offered an opportunity to engage actively with strategic initiatives in which they are implicated rather than being treated as the targeted objects of a particular political ideology.

This is not a formal exercise in professional curating. Rather, our concept of curating as a critical practice brings about a creative process that is engendered by deliberately shifting roles and associated power hierarchies. As such, we are against any oppositional dichotomy pitting theoretical versus artistic practice as two separate methods of enquiry. As Victor Burgin has pointed out: ‘All discourses rest on assumptions which imply theories about the way things are. All discourses are “theoretical”, the discourses we *call* theoretical are self-consciously so. Theory sets out to question

the underlying assumptions of common sense in order to replace them, where necessary, with better-founded, or more comprehensive, explanations.’<sup>11</sup> At this moment in time, ‘artistic practice is being acknowledged as the production of knowledge, and theoretical and curatorial endeavours have taken on a far more experimental and inventive dimension, both existing in the realm of potentiality and possibility rather than that of exclusively material production.’<sup>12</sup> Likewise, as Tim Brennan says, ‘curators are involved in building new-systems of cultural production in which critical events emerge beyond the existing terms of art. This construction is one in which everyone is considered experientially well versed, regardless of age, background or culture (“everyone” is not “an artist” but everyone does have experience).’<sup>13</sup>

Needless to say, ethical considerations, integrity and genuine intent are fundamental elements that apply to all aspects of this collaborative process. Our approach is to be responsive and flexible to changing circumstances and needs. The terms failure or success are inappropriate in this context. As Irit Rogoff asks: ‘So where is the work located? Perhaps that is the wrong question, perhaps a where intimates a fixed and known location where we might conceivably go and look for the work and actually find it. Perhaps better is the notion of how does the work function and what does it produce, of what effects it has in the world rather than of what existing meanings it uncovers.’<sup>14</sup>

It is crucial for us that the project remains within the structures of mainstream arts institutions/organisations and that it also retains its connections with issues relating to Widening Participation. In encountering resistance from academic art galleries it was suggested at one point that our project could be successfully accommodated in alternatively placed arts environments. This would be wholly unsuitable to the concept of *Showing: Expectations* and would have the adverse effect of allowing academic institutions to marginalize both the participants and the project itself in direct contradiction to their Widening Participation obligation.

Rather than attempting to raise a critique in opposition to current institutional practices, our approach is to work from *within* the mainstream. ‘[...] [A] good way to define an “institution” is to outline the fact that most of its efforts go in the direction of a self-confirmation of the institution itself. Therefore, its activities will be, to a large extent, a “celebration”, a continuous effort to give an image of success, of richness, of effectiveness, of power. It’s obvious that any critical position will be seen as a menace; and, [...] [if] the artist’s position is a critical one, there will be an inevitable contradiction between the artist and the institution.’<sup>15</sup>

### **So how do we summarize *Showing: Expectations*?**

A critical practice requires *active* viewers, disagreements and unstable hierarchies. This is a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between processes, art and audiences. Hence, critical (self-) questioning is to be encouraged as it can enable shared learning processes to occur. Misreadings and misunderstandings, in this context, often provide productive opportunities for critical encounters. For example, we received an email from an academic who expressed concerns about the quality of the potential visual outcomes that the project would generate by asking, ‘[A]re you prepared for the possibility that the shows/show might be visually uninteresting’.<sup>16</sup> The comment was not isolated. For instance, another academic questioned what would happen if the participants were to *submit ten sunsets* to the project. Both of these comments demonstrate anxieties that relate to art practice (in general) as a method for generating object-based outcomes, whereas *Showing: Expectations* (specifically), is a practice-led research process.

We first proposed the project to the University of Leeds Art Gallery. The project was rejected on account of the Gallery’s ‘development work’, and no alternative date was offered.<sup>17</sup> Following this response, we then approached another Leeds-based University Art Gallery. At the time of

approaching this particular gallery we had hoped (and perhaps expected) that the curator might be receptive to the potential of research-led practice, (as we were aware that the gallery would have an explicit commitment to institutional widening participation initiatives).<sup>18</sup> However, the issue of qualitative outcomes again came to the fore and clearly played a significant role in the subsequent rejection of our project by the curator.<sup>19</sup>

The curator's concerns seemed to be situated around the presentation of final exhibits rather than recognizing that the process, *as a process*, is in itself a legitimate outcome. It is worthwhile considering what is meant when the curator writes, 'I am not averse to risk taking and enjoy exploring new practice, but this project does not work for me.'<sup>20</sup> The reply demonstrates that, aside from making a personally motivated choice, a deep sense of ambivalence is expressed that relates to the tensions between risk taking and supporting new practices. This would indicate that controlled risks are acceptable, and yet, unpredictable risk taking is outside the remit of curatorial conventions. As Tim Brennan says in his *Critique of Curatorial Practices*, 'curating under[...] conventional terms involves a "base-pragmatism" (which amounts to gross opportunism). Firstly, to break into the market, the curator needs to "champion" as many key artists as possible, as quickly as possible, and to this end lists of suitable practitioners must be drawn up toward a group show.'<sup>21</sup> With regards to Brennan's notion of 'base-pragmatism' the curatorial process of *Showing: Expectations* requires a relinquishing of control, as the outcomes are both multiple and unpredictable. It is this, together with the many unknown questions and issues that will be raised through this work, that renders this a practice-based research project as opposed to an object-based art exhibition!

To conclude. Though widening participation initiatives aim to increase inclusion among under-represented groups, the mechanisms of institutional policies engender an environment in which segregation persists as a means to identifying and managing those groups. Our project challenges such assumptions by taking the policy as a starting point and working it into an aesthetic concept, thereby facilitating unpredictable encounters between all of those involved. This open and unknown process addresses preconceived hierarchical notions around the production and presentation of art while also helping to develop a deeper understanding of the politics involved in examining our own and each others social conditions.

If hopes, desires, assumptions and presumptions can be associated with expectations then perhaps in contrast to expectations there exist *actualities*, as in the actuality of lived experiences which expand upon and undermine reductive understandings of; community groups, art, curatorial practices and artists. The project presents many multi-dimensional opportunities for interaction, discussion, collaboration, debate, disagreements and so on to emerge, and is grounded in the elements of risk, trust and tolerance. None of these founding requirements can be expected nor demanded, they can only be worked towards.

The concept of *Showing: Expectations* inevitably raises many ethical questions such as, 'How might we describe the relationship between the professional artist, and those who don't consider themselves to be artists?' and 'Where does "arts practice" sit in relation to "social benefit?" There are layers of assumptions, preconceptions and ethical considerations underpinning values. How *might* we therefore assess and define quality?' In considering the support that we have received to date from community key-workers and project funders, together with the many resistances that the project has encountered during its development, we have become acutely aware of how barriers towards accessing shared learning become propagated by fixed concepts, (such as aesthetic standards and academic value regimes). We also recognise the potency of the intangible threats that become raised by a project in which the only guarantee, is that we might expect the unexpected.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Irit Rogoff, 'Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture', in Gavin Butt, ed., *After Criticism* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 118.
- <sup>2</sup> Steve Egan, Acting Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for England, March 2009/13, *Strategic Plan 2006-11*, accessed 23 October 2006, <[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06\\_13/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06_13/)>
- <sup>3</sup> Yvette Taylor, *All round benefits? Student involvement in widening participation programmes*, accessed 13 May 2007 <[www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/project\\_reports/findings/ShowFinding.htm?id=Taylor\\_1](http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/project_reports/findings/ShowFinding.htm?id=Taylor_1)>
- <sup>4</sup> Please refer to the document that was sent by a Widening Participation Officer, available on the Showing: Expectations website at <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/doc27/index.shtml>>
- <sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Échographies de la télévision* (Galilée-INA, 1996), pp. 158-60; translated as *Echographies of television* (Polity, 2002) pp. 141-43.
- <sup>6</sup> See the AHRC's paper 'Review of Research Assessment. Research in the Creative and Performing Arts' (September 2003), accessed online 11 May 2007, <[http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/about/policy/response/the\\_rae\\_research\\_in\\_the\\_creative\\_performing\\_arts.asp#](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/about/policy/response/the_rae_research_in_the_creative_performing_arts.asp#)>
- <sup>7</sup> Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research. Theories, Methods and Practices* (Helsinki and Gothenburg: Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki and University of Gothenburg, 2005), p.37.
- <sup>8</sup> Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research. Theories, Methods and Practices*, p.37.
- <sup>9</sup> Irit Rogoff, 'What is a Theorist?', accessed 28 March 2007, <<http://www.kein.org/node/62>>
- <sup>10</sup> Please refer to Process graphic, available on the Showing: Expectations website at <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/proposalbc/index.shtml>>
- <sup>11</sup> Victor Burgin, 'Something About Photography Theory', in *The New Art History*, ed. A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello (London: Camden Press, 1986) (pp. 41-54), p.44.
- <sup>12</sup> Irit Rogoff, 'What is a Theorist?', accessed 28 March 2007. <<http://www.kein.org/node/62>>
- <sup>13</sup> Tim Brennan is Programme Leader, MA Curating at the University of Sunderland, accessed 4 March 2007, <<http://curationism.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk/>>
- <sup>14</sup> Irit Rogoff, 'What is a Theorist?', accessed 28 March 2007, <<http://www.kein.org/node/62>>
- <sup>15</sup> 'The Folds of an Institution. A conversation between Greg Sholette, Cesare Pietroiusti, and Brett Bloom', accessed 13 May 2007, <[http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors0/groups&spacestext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/groups&spacestext.html)>
- <sup>16</sup> Please refer to the documented email available on the Showing: Expectations website at <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/doc5/index.shtml>>
- <sup>17</sup> Please refer to the documented email available on the Showing: Expectations website at <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/doc11/index.shtml>>
- <sup>18</sup> Please refer to the documented email available on the Showing: Expectations website at <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/doc17/index.shtml>>
- <sup>19</sup> Please refer to the documented letter available on the Showing: Expectations website at <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/doc18/index.shtml>>
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Tim Brennan, 'Critique of Curatorial Practices', accessed 1 March 2007, <<http://curationism.mysite.wanadoo-members.co.uk>>