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## **What function does professional practice occupy within the Fine Art curriculum in Higher Education?**

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What function does professional practice occupy within the Fine Art curriculum in Higher Education? In the past 15 years Professional Practice as a credit bearing core component within Undergraduate Fine Art degree programmes has remained a constant in a shifting curriculum. As degree programmes once based upon old modernist vanguards are largely dismantled or homogenized under the historic umbrella of Fine Art, professional practice has retained its essential qualities as a core and validated component. Has the teaching of 'professional practice' retained its currency within Higher Education due to its apparent transparency or over identification as a social skill? This paper argues that the professional agenda within Fine Art education is misplaced and is inadequately equipping graduates for long-term learning and participation within the cultural conversation. I argue that instead of Professional Practice continuing to fulfill an instrumentalist function, it could symbolically encompass unanswered and avoided questions essential within the education of artists: How do you keep working when you are alone and not part of a community? Is it possible to be an artist without being part of the art world? How does a personal agenda not inflict itself upon a group? This research draws upon questions collected from final year undergraduate students over a period of 5 years responding to the prompt "what do you not know about working as an artist, that you think you should know?" This research explores the importance of opaque question of this nature in forming curricula that is able to engender necessary questioning of insidious professional orthodoxies.

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## **Introduction**

In this article I explore the hidden curriculum of art education with particular reference to Professionalism. I argue for a shift in emphasis of research for what constitutes Professionalism within Fine Art education. I suggest that Professionalism needs to have a broader approach, which acknowledges the key tension between a professionalized art world, and Higher Education sector and an 'a – commercial' aesthetic vanguard. Professionalization has increased within Fine Art Education in the last 20 years. The British Governments Dearing report (1997) did not lead directly towards any official enactment of legislation for professionalism within Higher Education but the intervening years have seen an increased and constant presence of a more skilled and commercially orientated dimension to artistic practice within the curricula. I graduated one year prior to the publication of the Dearing report, in 1996 from Chelsea College of Art from the BA Fine Art and was offered no professional practice classes or lessons. I was not taught how to register as self employed, nor compose a CV, advised about what made a strong application nor given practical advice about working professionally as an artist post graduation. The education I participated in was focused within the making of the artwork. It was to my mind, both then and now, an internal process of discussion that circumnavigated the artwork. Looking back what was nurtured was a spirit of questioning about what could constitute an artwork where ephemerality and immateriality were high values (for me). I spent time drawing chalk circles on concrete around freshly landed rain drops, marking points of evaporation on polystyrene cups, and considered refilling empty puddles by urinating in them. I read in the recently published Calvin Tompkins book 'Marcel Duchamp – The Afternoon Interviews' that Duchamp described artists as *Pariahs* and I would say that this certainly encapsulated my artistic attitude at this point. The idea of the artwork and the artist being *persona non grata* is still incredibly attractive to me. If I were to contrast my own experience of art education described above with the professional impetus I experience now as an educator, the difference would be quite

marked. I have talked and even written about my education to such an extent that I can no longer rely on the purity of my memory. That being said I do consider that students are now more actively educated in the transition to life post graduation with some Fine Art programmes running small credit bearing professional practice courses.<sup>1</sup> Most Universities and art schools certainly mention professional skill sets, and some offer specific post graduate degree's in 'professional practice' Maybe this is all as it should be? Maybe its entirely appropriate for art students to be taught skills and competencies of the 'professional artist' I certainly felt that the Art world abutted abruptly against my willful embrace of immateriality when I first started to work with commercial galleries. I remember distinctly a gallery presuming an object existed and would be exhibited in one of my exhibitions when for me the work was more like a rumor. "I can't sell a rumor" the gallerist pithily replied. This research is arguing that professional orientation is required within art education, however it is this papers assertion that professionalism is too readily identifiable as a transferrable skill by both Universities/Art Schools, and students. Institutions have embraced a culture of transparency preferring systems by which clear information can be communicated whilst at the same time feeling secure about its reception. Equally students have increasingly sought tangible skills, which can be used within future employment. Both these instances result in a reduction of value, for Universities and Art Schools in the quality and purpose of education, and for students this results in young artists possessing less value and capacity to work as 'autonomous artists' to use Hans Abbing's terminology (Abbing, 2002).

Through research conducted over the last 5 years this paper suggests that degree programme's identification with Professional Practice obfuscates opaque lines of thinking important for long-term participation in the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous examples of Undergraduate degree programmes offering stand-alone credit bearing Professional Practice courses. See for example Loughborough University Fine Art offers both modules in Professional and Enterprising practice and Professional Fine Art Practice (<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/departments/arts/fine-art/>) or for a Degree programme aimed at Professionalism see Leeds Beckett University Professional Practice in Art and Design ([http://courses.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/art\\_design\\_professional](http://courses.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/art_design_professional))

conversation. From 2010 I asked final year Fine Art students the same question “what do you not know about working as an artist, that you think you should know?” and the answers that I received surprised me. Many it is true were simple to state, in some ways straightforward to answer or teach. Questions that I would place in this category would be for example ‘ How do I write an artists CV?’ ‘How do I write a good application for a residency?’ but others I felt were more like consistent undercurrents and more nuanced. It is this papers assertion that in composing a syllabus for ‘Professional Practice’, which readily identifies with clear professional skills unwittingly, creates a second and hidden curriculum. This unaddressed and unspoken syllabus encourages mimicry, where instead of questioning professional orthodoxies young artists ‘mirror’ accepted practices. The result is an anathema to artistic practice. As Marshall McLuhan states in *The Medium is the Massage: An inventory of effects* ‘Professionalism merges the individual into patterns of total environment’ he goes on to state ‘The professional tends to classify and to specialize, to accept uncritically the ground rules of the environment...The ‘expert’ is the man who stays put’ (McLuhan, 1967) In offering a survey of the questions that students raised between 2010-15 I would like to firstly demonstrate the conflicted perception of Professionalism for Fine Art students. Secondly I would like to offer two examples of ‘Professionalism’ that display a more nuanced relationship to artistic practice which locates Professionalism *within* artistic practice rather than something that is anterior or posterior to artistic work. This paper would like to make the following contributions.

1. Including, and centering, opaque rather than transparent transferrable skills more readily prepares young artists for participation in the cultural conversation.
2. Amateurism should be promoted equally with Professionalism.

### **The Problem**

In his study ‘The hidden curriculum revisited: a critical review of research into the influence of summative assessment on learning ‘ Gordon

Joughin (Joughin, 2010) wonders if the Hidden Curriculum can still be seen as exercising as profound an influence as when Benson R Snyder's seminal *The Hidden Curriculum* was published 44 years ago (Snyder, 1971). The main motivation for his contestation is that within Higher Education in the last 18 years has seen a greater move towards a more transparent and constructively aligned outcome focused education. Having been involved in a full degree programme validation on several occasions, both as an internal author, and as an external examiner I would agree with this proposition. Most teaching, learning, and assessment tasks are constructively aligned (Biggs and Tang, 2011) whereby clearly specified goals are established, with tasks designed to allow students to engage meaningfully with learning. There have of course been great gains in establishing a more transparent curriculum, not least is this ability to provide directed and specific feedback and involve students as participants in their learning rather than as passive subjects receiving knowledge from 'his masters voice' I do however think that this move towards visibility has had a detrimental impact upon perceptions of professionalism. In English Sociologist Marilyn Strathern's wonderful essay 'The Tyranny of Transparency' (Strathern, 2000) she asks pointedly "What does visibility conceal?" Strathern argues that in acceding to the call to transparency, she makes a more urgent assertion that the will for supposed clarity points to an 'absence of trust' In the case of Professionalism within Fine Art education the evident category error misunderstood by bureaucrats appealing to the 'real world', is that there is the possibility of a describable and delineated route.

I once spoke to the poet and Cairn Gallery founder Thomas A Clark about professionalism. He told me once that he had been invited to come and talk about Cairn at the art school at Cardiff. Cairn is one of the oldest artist run spaces in the UK still in operation and since relocating from Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, UK to Pittenweem, Fife Scotland, Thomas and Laurie Clark still make a number of exhibitions per year which usually occur between April and late October. Cairn is committed to working with artists working within a conceptual lineage and in the previous 27 years Cairn has made exhibitions with Richard Long, Alan Charlton, Hamish Fulton, and more recently Adrian Piper, Hayley Tompkins, and Karin Sander. Thomas said he had given a talk about the history of the exhibitions at Cairn and at the end was willing to

answer the customary questions from the audience. The first question asked was “How do I get an exhibition at Cairn?” Thomas’s response was “You can’t” the second question was “How can I send my work for you to look at?” “You can’t” was Thomas second response, and sensing a mood in the lecture room he clarified his position thus “If your work is right, we will find it”. It’s a difficult position to be confronted with but its not an isolated sentiment. When I worked with the Laure Genillard Gallery in 1996 she told me that only once had she exhibited an artist who had sent images of their work to the gallery. Whilst these attitude runs the risk of being an old fashioned and elitist notion I would still say its prevalence within the art world is widespread. It stands as a marker to the opacity of the art world.

An opposite position to this opaque and what could appear outwardly affronted position was articulated by John Mathers, Chief Executive of the Design Council, and former head of brand at Safeway. In March 2014 he was invited to speak at the Council for Higher Education in Art and Design at Manchester Metropolitan University in a provocation section with the lead title and question ‘*Are we really teaching our students for the world that they will be working in?*’ In his short presentation he outlined the Design councils understanding of design as a process, or set of methods, for creating change and approaching problems. It drew upon on the Design Council’s work in the public sector to highlight how designerly thinking and approaches are being used to create public services and policy from a different point of departure. He completed his talk by stating that the whole art and design sector really needed to start becoming more professional and suggested it was more of a t-shirt wearing industry rather than a suit adorning one and it was time it ‘*got suited*’.

Beyond the fact that I know Thomas A Clark and I don’t know John Mather’s why do I find Clark’s abrupt refusal to be solicited more appealing than the clear professionalized message contained in Mather’s call to smarten up? A Professional can be defined as ‘someone who applies their knowledge to their vocation with rigor and probity, usually within a professionally orientated community’ (Swindells, Atkinson and Sibley 2001) This definition could certainly be applicable to an art world that I have studied, worked within and teach in relation to. As I have previously alluded, my formative experience

of working with a commercial gallery would certainly fulfill the aforementioned definition of professionalism. There existed a method and protocol for working; an established way of doing things that fell within the habits of a convention. There were correct materials, formats, systems that the artist, artwork, and gallery worked towards. This manner of working within a 'professionally orientated community' is what Howard S. Becker would call operating, pejoratively, as an 'integrated professional' (Becker, 1984) who states of integrated professionals that...

"They know the history of work like theirs, so that they, their support personnel, and their audiences can understand what they have attempted and how and to what degree it works. All this makes the joint action necessary to create artworks easier"

For me British artist Phyllida Barlow best explains the dichotomy at the center of the problem with this advanced form of professionalism embedded within Art Schools. In her essay 'Travelling light: a brief analysis of the end of the work and the triumph of the photographic colour transparency' from her 2004 Black Dog publication 'Objects for...and other things' she outlines what is at stake when professionalized outlook is taken up wholesale and uncritically. In this piece she wonderfully compares the experience of looking through holiday brochures at potential destinations, which seem to cover all desires and anticipate all interests, and contrasts this with the notion that it is still possible to travel freely, to *dérive*. For Barlow this is comparable to student artists making work in the spirit of and under the auspice of the specter of the art world industry standard, the catalogue. Quite memorably she uses the David Smith Sculpture DIE (1964), which she remembers only being documented outside. At a particular point in the mid to late 1960s representations of this work of this nature halted and the work was for evermore re-presented within the context of the white cube. Barlow, as an experienced teacher worries that students now (she was writing in 2004) are making work for the industry standard, which is the monograph and its bedfellow the eponymous 'white cube'. For Barlow there are no space for mistakes in these professionalized realms and echoing Strathern's critique of

transparency Barlow states that 'mistakes are intriguing because they reveal something that was not meant to be revealed' (Barlow, 2004) she goes on to state

“So powerful are the instructions from outside art schools as to what constitutes professionalism that the innovation of a new form for what an exhibition could be confronts every young artist today”

My suggestion is that a professionally orientated curriculum contributes towards to a loss of artistic idealism, less nuanced experience, and more predictable artwork.

### **My idea**

Between 2010-2015 I have been asking, and subsequently collating answers, from Final Year Undergraduate students within the School of Art, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, to the following question: - “What do you not know about working as an artist, that you think you should know?” In its infancy the initial motivation for this question was from a genuine uncertainty about what to teach concerning the professional destination of artists. I recognized and felt a strong dichotomy in teaching professionalism. On the one hand it fulfilled a very useful instrumentalist function. I would be able to directly address competencies and ways of working. Yet on the other hand I knew the industry vanguard necessitated that artists eschew working within a paradigm. This occupational mystique of the artist also necessitates that artists value process over product and as Judith Adler terms a ‘vanguard aesthetic stressing the value of the unpredictable and the unplanned’ (Adler 1979) I also had a strong feeling that by 2010 that my own experience of working as an artist can only be useful in a marginal sense. What might have pertinent advice given to me in 1996 is potentially hopelessly outmoded in 2010. Furthermore I was interested in taking a practical look at the French Philosophers Jacques Rancier’s ideas of radical pedagogy that are contained in his 1983 book ‘The Ignorant Schoolmaster’ (Rancier 1991) In democratizing the Professional practice discussions and instead establishing a curriculum

based purely upon students perceived gaps I hoped to dissipate some of the 'crowds, praise, and power' (Jackson, 1968) which form a hidden curriculum for professionalism

For the purposes of this paper I am interested in looking at what the questions from the students suggest about their understanding and expectations of professionalism.

### **Professional Practice and avoided and hidden questions**

The manner in which questions were asked and collated altered following the first year. In the first instance we were starting from degree zero with no groundwork to begin from. From this point on I began each initial session by saying that the process of collecting questions had already occurred before the previous years and although I wouldn't reveal these questions initially they would play some role later in the meetings. Prior to our initial meeting I asked each member of the group to attend the following session with at least 2 questions that they do not know the answers to for "what do you not know about working as an artist, that you think you should know?" I explained that the following week I would project a blank word document for the group and we could collate the questions and they would see the articulation of the questions before them. It became apparent early on in following this process that sometimes people attended the seminar but were unsure exactly how to frame or present the question that they themselves were unsure about. The format of typing the questions 'live' in front of the group therefore became opportunity for the group to clarify any opaque questions and provided an inclusive format for encouraging questions of this nature. In essence presenting of questions was a way of visualizing and raising the problems of professionalism with students.

To provide an overview of the questions that the students asked I have divided them into distinct themes apparent in the questions throughout the years. Firstly there was a strong prominence of Skill based learning through each year, for example:

- Artists CVs What are they?

- Graduate attributes/skills for Art Students? How do they apply to non-art places?
- How do you make 'the work' without skills?
- 'Practical skills? Do you need some skills? What are these? Where can they be found? Transferable skills? What are they?'
- How do you portray your skill set? Interview? CV? Teaching? Advertising? Creative jobs?
- Contracts/ insurance.... The legal and important stuff? What's the support?
- Workshops outside college?

Not surprisingly there was a great deal of questions about the functions of promotion of an artists work.

- How do you promote yourself?
- How important is it to have a website?
- How important is it to have business cards?
- Is there any point in approaching/inviting critic, galleries etc?
- Self-promotion? Technology and then now???? Websites? Social media? What's with this?

Other questions I feel displayed the presence of a more classic form of the Hidden Curriculum, which exercised a disparity between learning and academic attainment.

- Is it really important to get a 1<sup>st</sup>?
- How important is a post-grad or PhD qualification to practice as an artist and if so which types of courses are relevant?

Some directly referred to the transition to continuing education after Undergraduate study

- How important is a MFA? What are the good courses? MFA? Or MA?
- Masters MFA/MA????? What's all this about? When is the deadlines etc.? Funding?
- What's the access to more traditional humanities/ social sciences best subjects in HE?
- What's a good MA application?
- Is it worthwhile to do a PG qualification?

Increasingly as the years progressed there was an increase in the economic concerns of the working artist.

- Paying for exhibition. Is this OK or not? If you don't pay who does?
- How do you make 'the work' without skills or money to do 'the work'
- Is having an economic worldview.... is this bad for art making? Life in general?
- Cost. How do you price your work? Budgets? What?
- What is the balance between working to fund your art, and working to create your art?
- How do you find funding (creative Scotland, EU etc.) ? How do you then apply? Part 2- how do you cultivate this relationship? Make these on going? It's an active relationship. (Councils etc.)
- How do we sell out?

But for me by far the most compelling category, which displayed a consistency across the years, were questions that presented an anxious and existential relationship to professionalism.

- Is it possible to be an artist without being part of the art world? By the art world I mean.... Network, its not what you know but who?
- How long can you sustain 'not-knowing' relative to the process of working with a gallery/curator towards an exhibition?
- How do you find confidence/ and faith in what you do?

- How can artists resist gentrification? Can you resist causing gentrification?
- Is it hard to change 'style' when a reputation has been established? (Guston for example)
- How do you stay connected when you isolate yourself?

This final category of questions seemed to me to be much more embedded within an artistic practice rather than engaged with external factors that require close alliance.

Except for one isolated question in 2013 which asked '*Is being anti-professional another cloaked form of professionalism?*' there was to my surprise very little direct critique of the notion of professionalism. My interests in the questions that I have labeled 'anxious and existential relationship to professionalism' are compelling for me because they do suggest an uneasy relationship to how professionalism is understood and advocated by some (see Lydiate 2008) and legislated by the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency)

The following two instances of Professionalism are suggestions for how a nuanced approach to professionalism can illuminate the relationship between a professionalized art world and a vanguard aesthetic. In outlining and describing this distinction it is this papers intention to contribute a more progressive notion of professionalism with greater relevance to Fine Art education beyond its technocratic functionism, and an overt credentialist mentality.

### **Professionalism as a retreat**

There is a sense in which Professionalism is and can be utilized as a retreat. The majority of my artistic work I would describe as what I can achieve at the means of my disposal. I rarely have any work fabricated and I value the close sense that working with my hands gives to the activity of making. Many of the works that I make are the result of a close identification

of a process and I would have concerns that I would miss the natural development of my work should I overly make use of fabrication outside of what I can achieve. This being said one work of mine has been fabricated commercially. It is a lithographic print of two pieces of lined A4 paper. The two pieces of paper are framed next to each other side by side with the one on the right being an exact copy of A4 paper with the same number of lines and margin and 2 hole punches. The one on the left always has the same number of lines and holes but all these holes are in different places. If the right hand copy is a 'cover version' of A4 paper then the left hand version is a 'remix of a cover version' of A4 paper.

This work, more than others that I have made relied upon the means of its production to appear as legitimate A4 paper and because of this I turned to a commercial printer to have the work manufactured. I didn't want any suggestion or trace of my hand within the process of production, as the work was to exist as commercially produced. In discussing the making of this work with the commercial printer, and in part because the work was a clear deviation from a well know and accepted norm I anticipated the questions that I thought I would be asked as producer and author by instead acting as the artists intermediary and assistant. Instead of standing beside the work I stood behind it with some other fictional author as creator. This conceit allowed me to disavow the work and within this process promote solidarity with the printer. I would argue that a more professional job was conducted due to this fiction.

### **a-professionalism**

In 2007 I was invited to present some work to Dicksmith Gallery, London. I gave a short slide talk, which ran through my work from graduation to the present and finished by presenting two small cubes from my pocket. These cubes were made from the grey backing card found on standard writing pads and on one face of the cubes there existed a small hole punch aperture, itself part of the integrity of the backing card. It had been suggested to me that it's always a good idea, if possible to take actual physical artwork, to meetings of this nature. I wasn't sure what these two small cubes were exactly but they attested to something I felt was common in my work and seemed sufficiently

interesting to end one talk and begin another conversation. When I produced these cubes the two directors of the gallery seemed immediately underwhelmed and were certainly displaying less enthusiasm than one I had planned and anticipated. With this feeling reverberating I lied and stated that I had made 300 of these cubes and that these two were simply 2 of the other 298. Upon hearing this both of the gallery directors seemed immediately impressed and interested and in the January following this December meeting they offered me an exhibition of the 'Cubes' to take place in the April of that year. Why do I tell this story at this point? Because I think it suggests something important and pertinent to our discussion about the function of professionalism within Fine Art practice. Had I followed a strictly professionalized route and thought process it would be safe to say that I would not have lied, as I would have adhered to and focused upon the provision and orthodoxy of the situation I was presenting myself in. As Frank Furedi states of professional work and its fixed dimension 'the mental work of the professional is focused upon the provision of services and not on the promotion of ideas' (Furedi, 2004)

A comparable account of 'a-professionalism' that was told to me by the British artist Martin Creed also underscores this approach to integrating professionalism within artistic work. He explained that one of his methods of making solo exhibitions, particularly for commercial galleries, where the work presented is new (and made to extend the dimensions of a practice) is to withhold knowledge. He explained to me that for him, an element of making exhibitions is concerned with a control of power. Once a deadline and date has been established the power resides with the artist, the gallery in this state is waiting, anticipating what may be presented. For Creed the longer this state can be maintained the better. It gives him the agency to work free of fixed plans and as advocated by Frank Furedi's, and in the spirit Edward Said's intellectual outlined in his Reith Lectures of 1994 (Said, 1994) work more in the spirit of an *amateur*.

### **Related work**

There are few works that deal directly with the problems of professionalism within Fine Art. Howard Singermans excellent Art Subjects – Making artists in the American University, University of California press, is a useful survey of the evolution of Art Schools in the American University context. Phyllida Barlow's 'Travelling Light' is an exemplary text that states that professional orthodoxy invites subversion. Whilst Hans Abbing's 'Why are artists poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts' does provide a economic backdrop to the gift economy v commercial exchange dominant within the operations of the art world.

Interestingly the presence of many texts referring to the problems of the 'Hidden Curriculum' within Higher Education concerns the medical profession. These studies provide a fascinating counter to Art Education. See Becker & Geer (1958) writing about Medical Education suggest that idealism is 'side-tracked' by the demands of coping with day-to-day demands including the sheer quantity of information to digest and the need to decipher the various expectations of staff.

Fox (1979) illuminates economic concerns showing the continuities between the emotional demands faced by students in coping with the challenges and uncertainties of medical school and the adoption of 'affective neutrality' or 'detached concern'

Maybe the absence of cogent approach is indicative of Artistic Practices lack of professional code of conduct that is for example present in Architectural practice (RIBA) or recognized official body (for example Design Council)

### **Conclusion and future work**

There is an evident paradox to artists talking about the Hidden Curriculum. One of the central tenets of artistic practice in the last 60 years is the notion that what might be intended by the artist has marginal importance to how the work is received by the viewer and ultimately by what Marcel Duchamp called 'the posterity'. In Duchamp's lecture titled 'The creative act' delivered in

Houston in 1957 he rationalized the role an audience and the reception of an artwork in the formation of art. As he stated to Calvin Tompkins “The artist produces nothing until the onlooker has said, ‘You have produced something marvelous.’ The onlooker has the last word in it.” No matter how one might intend a work to be read and thought of, or used, there is always a hidden dimension to the hermeneutic equation. Indeed the silent critique, made famous by American Conceptual Artist Michael Asher at Cal Arts in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s has its origins in the simple transaction between what Duchamp called the ‘art coefficient’ – the gap made present by the artists inability to fully express what is meant a ‘relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed’ Art Schools sense of engaging with Professionalism for me has sacrificed its mystery to its detriment. Professionalism can be useful within educational context, but it must remain a mysterious, residual category. I am advocating a form of professionalism for the artist that uses bluff and subterfuge.

**Word Count - 4915**

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