

**Abstract**

The underlying first principle of art & design education and practice is “First design or write your own brief?” a priority in art and design because how else do you know the compromises you are prepared to make or ‘not’. I question that ‘Visual Research Practice’ is lacking in methodological inventiveness validation and credibility.

My concerns are questions of the nature ‘How do I improve my practice?’ and ‘How through practice do I bring meaning and purpose to life for myself and others?’ and thereby ‘Make a contribution towards a better world producing work of public benefit?’

Key words: Living Educational Theory Action Research Reflective Practice.

**Introduction**

In this paper and associated presentation I look at practice as theoretical method as a means of progression and development of visual arts practice specifically ‘Socially Engaged Arts Practice’ educational in delivery, meaning and purpose. Through asking questions of the kind ‘How do I improve my socially engaged arts practice?’ The paper covers issues of ‘What is socially engaged practice?’ and ‘How does methodological inventiveness and creative freedom play a role in continuous professional development?’ What is the role of the ‘artist brief’ in the visual arts?’ and ‘What relevance may this have in the future research and practice in the arts and humanities field?’

My artistic practice spans 34 years. This paper and presentation is my contribution at this moment in time towards the development of the Arts and Humanities in Higher Education research and practice. I believe if we are to maintain a rich diversity of creative, inspiring and world leading work in art and design we will need to enable, facilitate and support diversity of creative, innovative and dedicated young people whilst continue to support ongoing continuous professional development of those practicing now. I agree with Ian Biggs that we need a pedagogical shift. Rather than focus on one singular approach to research and seek equivalence of the ‘Scientific’ method for visual arts and design. We need diversity of approaches a ‘Bricolage’ of ‘Methodological Inventiveness’. We need to create a research environment within which the individual, unique and specific can relate to the common and the shared and thrive. A personalised differentiated recognition of the question ‘How do I improve my practice?’ Moving towards, ‘How do we improve our practice together and work with others?’

**What is socially engaged art practice?**

I describe practice as an artist ‘Socially Engaged Arts Practice’ it is not only a professional area of work it is also vocation and life, the lived experience. I live my life as a socially engaged artist. It is practice that creates meaning and purpose for me in my life and everything that I do and encounter informs my practice in some way. I live my own theory and this theory changes as I change or as external conditions change. It is a ‘Living Theory’ and because most of my work is ‘Educational’ a ‘Living Educational Theory’ (Whitehead1989)

It is a socially engaged practice that is my intent and the influence I intend to make. It is this practice that brings meaning and purpose into my life and into connection with others. It is my own philosophical approach.

I am a socially engaged artist?

*“In calling myself by these descriptors ‘socially engaged’ and ‘Artist’ I need to describe what I as a ‘Socially engaged artist am, do and believe. I try and adhere to a range of core values and principles in my work that are embodied within my practice. I dedicate the work I create both in process and product for the benefit of humanity, in the public interest to be of public benefit. My work is engaged in social change and attempts to create a better world.”*

*“I consider I am an artist in that I do what I do to the very best of my ability. I consider any one who strives to do this as an artist. I see no boundaries in my practice between the educational and artistic endeavor, each are one and the same. I am an educational artist not an art teacher and I will be working with Professor Jack Whitehead and Dr Marie Huxtable on developing work into the future as living legacies of APEX”. (Living Legacies Henon Andrew 2012)<sup>1</sup> Please See: <http://www.mondaystudio.co.uk/publications.html>*

In describing what I do it is useful to quote and refer to the work of Joseph Beuys, Suzanne Lacy, Dr Jack Whitehead and Dr Helen Philips.

*“Every Human Being is an Artist” (Beuys Joseph 1990) “To be a teacher is my greatest work of art” (Beuys Joseph 2003) together with theories of ‘Social sculpture’ “a Social organism as a work of art” (Beuys Joseph 1974)*

*“Your living educational theory is your explanation for your educational influences in your own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which you are living and working”<sup>2</sup> (Whitehead Jack 2012)*

*“To search for the good and to make it matter: This is the real challenge for the artist. Not simply to transform ideas or revelations in to matter, but to make those revelations actually matter.” (Lacy Suzanne 1995)*

*“To be truly creative you need strong social networks and trusting relationships” (Philips Helen 2006)*

*“Among other things, art is a system for exploring, defining and expressing values – a kind of tool box that allows people to examine and re-imagine the values that they or others hold” (Matarasso Francois 2007)*

In many ways my work is ‘Instrumental’ considered an anathema to the art world however

*“Perhaps art should not be for arts sake – one of the most unambitious aesthetic slogans” (De Botton Alain 2012)*

I do not approach my work and practice by the application of a ruling theory. Rather my own ‘Living Educational Theory’ develops as I ask questions of the kind ‘How do I improve my practice’ and ‘How do I work with others’ to advance the core values and principles by which I engage in the world?’ and ‘How do I bring meaning and purpose into my practice for myself and others?’

These are the driving questions behind my work. These motivational drivers also relate to the aims of the British Education Research Association (BERA) and Mission Statement of The American Educational Research Association (AERA)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mondaystudio.co.uk/publications.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/arplanner.htm>

- BERA to encourage the pursuit of educational research and its application for both the improvement of educational practice and for the public benefit.<sup>3</sup>
- AERA a national research society strives to advance knowledge about education, to encourage scholarly inquiry related to education, and to promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good.<sup>4</sup>

My focus is on the last statements in both of these affirmations made by BERA and AERA relating to educational practices service to public benefit and public good. These resonate with my practice as they aim to make the world a better place bringing educational areas of work to this task as core values and principles. These issues have had a long lasting significance for me in my work since I can remember. Even as a young child I yearned for a better world as I watched the famine disasters in Bangladesh or the news coverage of the Aberfan mining disaster or the Vietnam War. Later in 1976-78 I was beginning to implicitly develop an informal brief by which I would practice as an artist. The formalisation and more explicit development of a written brief by which to work came in 1992 with my return to Higher Education studies for HND and ADMP in Spatial Design at Bournemouth & Poole College of Art & Design. Further 'Brief' development came when I returned to study for MA by Research Project Fine Art at University of West of England. I continue to engage with Professor Jack Whitehead and others in action research groups and forums focused on improving practice and study 'Living Educational Theory'

For my MA and Artist Brief see <http://mondaystudio.co.uk/downloads.htm> and video account <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dt2j1DlItE>

**'How does methodological inventiveness (Dadds M. & Hart S. 2001) and creative freedom play a role in continuous professional development?'**

Much of my work for 20 years was funded, reliant on gaining commissions or concept design, develop and deliver projects that progress the work I do. I encountered what is described in the voluntary sector as 'Organisational Drift'. Each time writing funding applications I wanted to do some more than others. I was not always successful with the applications I really wanted but successful with others. Being successful and gaining funding of a particular type each successive round of funding I would be successful in a least favorable area of work. Over time the cumulative compromises reached a turning point. I bench marked this work against my own brief. I found that my creative freedom had over time been increasingly challenged by mismatches between criteria demands and my own brief.

It was methodological inventiveness that sustained me. It was being able to achieve funders target criteria whilst maintaining creative integrity. Being able to deliver the project I really wanted without jeopardizing the project funding. A form of shadowing of projects achieving both my own criteria and those of funders simultaneously.

Methodological inventiveness also applies to the use of video, the use of audio visual data as a means of narrative explanations of intent and influence rather than the communicative limitations of words. This is another paper I will not elaborate further here other than question the dominance of words as written texts or the only means of thinking. There are other forms of thinking beyond a text based language and 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy is revealing none verbal communication.

Each project completed with the projects I have ideas of, together with those influenced by and the many people I have worked with informs my work. There are three main sources of 'Rigorous Evaluation, Evidence, Validation, or Critique of my work. These are:

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bera.ac.uk/about/aims-bera>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/tabid/10062/Default.aspx>

- My intent which leads to the influence I wish to have in the world matched against my brief.
- My intent and influence validated through the evaluations demanded from funders against stated criteria with outcomes and output demands. The feedback of the participants during project delivery pertaining to my practice and the practice of others. Peer review during the project and retrospectively during dissemination of projects. Events, exhibitions and seminars linked to reviews, critiques and public feedback on work and practice.
- My intent and influence with associated claims are also rigorously challenged and validated through action research living educational theory group practitioner meetings. Work is subject to group scrutiny and overview. These are 'Living Educational Theory' action research explorations that challenge practice and practitioners to account.

### **What is the role of the 'artist brief' in the visual arts?'**

As an artist engaged in social practice I will focus on what is central and at the core of practice. The artist brief is the means by which implicit core values and principles leading to the creation of meaning and purpose to lived experience and practice become, explicit, stated and documented. I return to the core of the brief against which I decide what I do, how I do it, where and when and with whom and why. It explicitly states what my core values and principles by which I judge my practice

If my brief were to include making a lot of money achieving fame and fortune becoming the most highly paid artist then those would be stated. However they are not and never have been.

The artist brief, the researchers brief, the educators educational brief is of paramount importance and produces a diversity of unique, specific and individual enquiries, when enabled and supervised properly we then see these individual enquiries relating to the common and the shared. It is then that we can look to the importance to industry, commerce, economy and social benefit. Not the other way round where we consider what the 'Country' or 'Employer' or 'Sector' needs, but what do individuals need so that they can have meaningful, purposefully fulfilled lives making contributions of social benefit or driven and inspired to research and create the real innovations we need?

### **'What relevance may this have in the future research and practice in the arts and humanities field?'**

*That only by turning away from the competitive, market driven, unethical mode of being in art school (heroic individualism and the progressive careerist model) can we resurrect a more transformative role for art. Biggs argues that only by changing pedagogical practices can this be done. For him this is about ditching what Paulo Freire critically called the "banking concept of education" – "where knowledge is seen as a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those whom they consider to know nothing" – to one which is far less hierarchal and is centered on problem posing and a relationship where students and tutors develop, simultaneously, powers of "critical solicitude". For Biggs this is representative of "good educational practice", the kind of pedagogic practice that ensures that teaching is based on: "A real concern for the students' self understanding, because genuine self understanding is always an understanding of our interrelatedness to others, and so finally to questions about the common good in a just society." (Beagles John 2010)*

I propose that we take a radical leap in pedagogical paradigm and consider the body of work now increasingly evidenced by Professor Jack Whitehead as 'Living Educational Theory' that engages each individual student, supervisor and participants in research of the nature 'How do I improve my practice?' In this way such an approach would radically transform, democratize and empower a generation.

*“Competition in the sense of wanting to do better than you did before is not bad”* (Dalai Lama 1990).

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