

A Vision for Opportunity A case for contemporary fine art research

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical perspective having been lecturing in art across the various levels in architecture. The paper knits together aspects of the application of artistic practice within this context. It argues for academic recognition, autonomy, which is the aspiration of the Visual Arts Department, and the understanding needed for an artistic research culture in the contemporary fine arts to establish esteem alongside other fields of research in higher education. This stems from the dichotomy between fine art serving its own specialism, direction and prowess versus art serving other domains. The paper infers reciprocal co-existence whilst upholding that academic autonomy should lead and provoke the best in fine art practice. It reflects upon the appropriate research criteria integral to practice-based fine art research, suggesting more flexible 'future-focused' terms suited to artistic provocation. Finally, the paper contests notions of interdisciplinarity within liberal contemporary trends of fine art education.

Keywords: practice-based research, art education, contemporary fine art, art and architecture

Introduction

A clear research identity is required to flag up contemporary fine art specialism in the university, promote good practice, and foresee prospects within the field to generate widespread educational and skilled transferability. The connections between arts education and creative leadership have appeared in regular professional articles lately in relation to opening up global opportunities (Hunter, 2014). The promotion of expertise and scholarship should ultimately provide a vibrant source to attract growth and resources. More importantly, excellence in the arts is only productive if steered away from isolationist tendencies, provoking *a vision for*

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opportunity. This remains a challenge on a small history-focused island like Malta. Our artistic endeavour needs to link and equate with other European and international models through accessible platforms for shared knowledge, quality performance and cultural visibility at the highest international levels of educational and professional research and practice.

Artistic research is still described as an emerging field in international discourse, mostly because of contradictions and debate which have now been long going. Locally, things are in their infancy. For the contemporary fine arts to achieve recognition within a significant research culture, resourceful strategies and appropriate structuring are instrumental in enabling the field to operate organically within a present-day arts ethos, filtering into other educative, cultural, and entrepreneurial strands. Compelling evidence exists on how benefits reaped from arts engagement rebound on society in fruitful ways (Arts Council England, 2014). For, an artistic visual culture should be nurtured in people as a means to creating informed audiences; promote balance in education between science and the creative arts; and extend cultural horizons economically that would make other artistic enterprises viable and sustainable. This cycle should cultivate a demand for broad areas of cultural research in higher education. Academic recognition and autonomy need to promote equity and equivalence on at least two key levels: one, in seeking parity within contemporary fine art research with high-achieving art institutions internationally; and two, balancing investment to develop contemporary fine art research with that invested in other domains.

The current situation for artistic research it would seem rests primarily on identification of various isolated strands and energies. Contemporary art needs to position itself within a generous understanding of non-hierarchical interdisciplinary culture if it is to forge an academic identity in true contemporary spirit. A concerted focus should propel the field forward facilitating links with other universities, art institutes, and peers of professional practice and research internationally. A creative research mentality at higher levels needs reaching from the formative years of general education and schooling. Creativity has become a buzzword in the mouths of policy-makers from regional to European level. This has gathered momentum following from the history and political rhetoric of the Bologna Process insistence on the “academisation” of higher education including that of the arts to install cognitive capital and development policy in Europe (Lesage, 2009). But it is uncertain how promoting creativity links with implementation strategies for ‘innovation’ when it comes to the visual arts in the local situation where initial nurturing goes unheralded. As Hans-Ulrich Obrist says “we must hold on to the idea that public bodies have a duty towards the support of culture, that which has become our heritage” (Obrist, 2014, p. 63).
- Better put, that which is *becoming* our heritage.

Strategies in arts education have a direct influence on our creative economy. Culture and education must progress together. It ought to be said, at this time of writing, as the island heads for the legacy of European City of Culture 2018, that this aspires to international outreach for the contemporary arts, beyond political platitudes. All this, whilst recognising the geo-political and Mediterranean unique potential that should impinge upon our own global contributions in the visual and contemporary arts for the future.

Beyond monetary values

The economic spillover effects between arts education, the creative economy sector and mobility of employment are evident in a recently published *Evidence Review* (2014) by the Arts Council England that studies the intrinsic value of arts and culture to society. The mission *Achieving great art for everyone*, launched in 2006, was underpinned by: excellence, innovation, diversity, engagement and reach (Arts Council England, 2014, p. 10). The current statistical analysis has now been undertaken to demonstrate and gain more national investment in the arts in the United Kingdom. It shows how sectors relate and how arts and culture can boost local economies in five key ways: attracting visitors, creating jobs and developing skills, attracting and retaining businesses, revitalising places, and developing talent. These values should be observed across the wider social and cultural spectrum, from grassroots arts activities to higher education, reverberating into the public and cultural space, health and economy sectors, and shared communities.

“When we talk about the arts and culture, we should always start with the intrinsic – how arts and culture illuminate our inner lives and enrich our emotional world. This is what we cherish”.

(Arts Council England, 2014, p. 4).

Numerous pieces of evidence are emerging that reveal the beneficial impact on people, from young to elderly, enjoying art forms across a vast range including music, drama, the visual arts, storytelling, art festivals and combined arts. Research reveals the merits and impacts on the overall health to the community showing connections between participants in arts activities with physical, mental, social, behavioural and subjective wellbeing, besides cognitive and literacy development. Most importantly, benefits ripple over from the individual to broad “instrumental impacts” in achieving national economic goals beyond the “intrinsic immediate experience or value of art itself” (Arts Council England, 2014, p. 11):

“These intrinsic effects enrich individual lives, but they also have a public spillover component in that they cultivate the kinds of citizens desired in a pluralistic society. These are the social bonds created among individuals when they share their arts experience through reflection and discourse, and the

expression of common values and community identity through artworks commemorating events significant to a nation's (or people's) experience". (McCarthy cited in Arts Council England, 2014, p. 11).

Essentially, this evidence reflects that investment is generated in the wider economy through a combination of indirect and induced multiplier impacts (Arts Council England, 2014, p. 7).

It has been necessary to hinge this introduction to the socio-economic returns tied with an arts education because, whilst other countries in Europe evidence positive feasibility revenues and invest more in country supported artistic infrastructure (educational / museum experiences), the Maltese context still needs persuasive explication to establish 'contemporary fine art practice' with a research acumen at the core, resourcefully linked to societal and artistic betterment, and a creative industry. Creative literacy needs to establish firm equal tenure with numerical and verbal literacy for any sustainable future education (Robinson, 2001). In the current climate of overproduction there is the danger to hasten certain developments when cultured discernment is not evident between populist homogenisation and artistic production emerging from informed practice, beyond the commercial. This is echoed in educational circles where the inherent and indirect values of the fine art field are underrated and await academic esteem amongst the echelons of other disciplines when it comes to position, resources, and space.

Journey unfolding

My teaching has sought to promote a research culture through a buoyant interdisciplinary format, carving a space for practice-based research that explores the interface between fine art practice, cultural theory, history, and other relevant bodies of knowledge incorporating creative spatial practice with positioning the object and changing media. Albeit within the structures of unbending curricula, large student numbers, and non-studio rooms geared for lecture-style delivery, the situation has emerged healthy hybridity, even if somewhat compromising. For, art-based teaching needs appropriate infrastructures to incubate new thinking directly from action spaces.

The question arises between Art that is autonomous, serving its own direction and development. Or, art education at the service of other domains. Ideally the two would co-exist, with the autonomous model leading the way. **Academic autonomy provokes the best of artistic research.** The concern lies with the current system's objective to 'heal' the consummate vacuum of visual literacy in the majority of young Foundation course students entering our programme. For sadly, this indicates that most of those artistically inclined students who have chosen a creative subject like architecture arrive with no erstwhile understanding in the recent history or practice of art.

Students by this time have also formed habits of ‘learning’ hard to ‘unlearn’ through the more exploratory formats of art-based research. The preponderance is to *look back* at knowledge constituted in fossilised objects, rather than *forward* in the yet-to-happen.

In his recent talk on *Unlearning Education*, John Baldacchino suggests that both the constructivist teacher-centred mode and the student-centred mode are “trapped” in systematic pre-conditioned constructs of “learning” that dumb art education rather than opening paths of discovery leading to the unexpected. “Do not search”, Baldacchino tells his students, “find”. The question of “expectation” is particularly pertinent in this instance. Apart from the gaping absence in visual culture, many young freshmen come from sixth forms expecting to be *dealt* information rather than actively *finding*. Education needs to identify an “ability to negate” as opposed to perpetuating models of “received or nurtured knowledge” that fail to liberate (Baldacchino, 2014).

The difference between *searching* and *finding* posits an interesting distinction. Whilst *searching* sets about looking for something, *finding* implies instantaneity and insight. It requires immediate awareness - awakened alertness, open to elements of surprise and chance. This is important, because *finding* in this sense is akin to the experiential quality of practice-research. Less is it a journey with a pre-fixed destination in mind. More is it an act of ‘becoming’, engaging states of flow and presence. ‘Journey unfolding itself’ - as I like to describe research to my students.

Artistic research by its nature nudges edges to provoke discovery - foraging for the unexpected. When it is trapped within the ‘known’ then we question whether it is challenging new boundaries of thinking. Research in the context of art education originates knowledge and “transformation” within complex processes. Graeme Sullivan in his seminal *Art Practice as Research*, explains research as a primary human enterprise to increase awareness of ourselves and our world: “for to know means to be able to think and to act and thereby change things” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 97). This is significant because the theoretical embodiment of ‘what artists do’ and the profundity constituted in the active spaces of research, questioning and articulating is not fully understood in conservative academic circles, and even seems to be “feared” in university situations where the natural sciences “cherish internal hegemony” over research matters (Lesage, 2009).

In the current context, it is worth unraveling some of the heuristic qualities between *practice-led* and *practice-based* research. These terms are often used interchangeably and, of course, different types of projects may integrate a mix of the two, and other processes. But, subtle differences indicate pathways that highlight characteristics and disentangle confusion particularly in establishing practice-based fine art research. These distinctions are also

important because they can entail different priorities, expectations and considerations; different operations, approaches and forms of negotiation; and different methodologies, resources, organization and evaluation altogether.

Practice-led research leads primarily to new understandings *about* practice (Candy, 2006, p. 3). It is generally more appropriately applied to design-based research and other domains such as the social sciences that may also have a central practice element aiming to improving practice. The specific difference is that the objective of new knowledge in these instances focuses on advancing the profession and is of operational significance to the nature and improvement of occupation (e.g. art therapy). The role of the design research specialist can even be a separate individual from the practitioner.

Practice-based research on the other hand is intrinsic and leads to new understandings emerging *out of* the processes of practice, incorporated in the “creative artifact presented as the basis of contribution to knowledge” (Candy, 2006, p. 3). Practice-based enquiry in the fine art context promotes insight and improvement within each immediate interaction. Theorised practice emerges directly from investigative enquiry and the analytical processes of making, demonstrated in original artworks that constitute complex embodiments of knowledge within themselves. Reflexive processes generate knowledge and new understanding situated within critical interrogation and rigorous questioning. Theories originate from practice, contextualized within broad contemporary practices, texts and cultural philosophies that may challenge existing notions of thinking or indeed, present new forms of thinking about them altogether. *Reflexive* research encompasses self-evaluative understanding directly into each interactive action of developing. *Reflective* research inspects completed interactions. Reflexive and reflective research processes intermingle and fuel one another. Writing plays a critical role as a creative tool, both to reflect upon and inspire new practice, bonding closely and contextualising practice. Methodologies synthesising theory and practice originate knowledge and intellect through such artistic investigative frameworks resulting in substantial outcomes equivalent to research contributions in scientific disciplines. This has been recognised through higher research art degrees in other countries (since 1970s in UK and Japan) (Elkins, 2014, p. 11).

Art in Architecture

These processes have reverberated in my teaching and discernment in the design streams of architecture. This position has impinged on my own hybridity and at best continues to be an inspiring and revealing exercise. Architecture stands at an odd junction, not quite a ‘fine art’ (as it once was)

nor entirely a 'science'. Students are keen, though art is relegated to second place under the pressures of other subjects. My critical observations are that architecture, like fine art, requires settings facilitating direct action-based experiences for imagination, ideas, confidence and good practice to develop in shared environments. The current ambiances neglect the dynamics of on-site studio interactions or exhibition spaces as creativity-generating centres of experience. Students work in isolated home-studios to form and illustrate concepts, rather than letting these emerge from creative investigation. Isolation remains an endemic problem and students express the dearth for experimental speculation.

There seems to be the general perception that theory is an isolated historical *appendage* to practice rather than conceiving the integrative nature of *theorised practice* as an intrinsic source for interactive understanding, problem solving and ideas contextualised within relevant contemporary thinking relational to other cultural and sociological practices. Students go away at the start of each project to secure a concept brief which they then set out to illustrate through elevations, sections, and models. Research in this context is assumed to be site history, legislation, norms and policy. Stated bluntly, visual arts input is apprehended as a creative feeder to support architectural studies rather than the reverse, encapsulating the entire ethos.

When Schwitters created his *Merzbau* installations (1933), this provided a method of Merz-modeling for revitalising architectural education via creative practice for imagination to be inspired. Conversely architects use modeling to 'illustrate' already formed ideas, rather than to inspire them. Few contemporary professional architects, as Peter Zumthor states himself, reverse the conventional standard practice of "idea - plan - concrete object". For Zumthor "all design work in the studio is done with materials. There are no cardboard models. Actually no models at all in the conventional sense... Concrete objects are created and then they are drawn to scale" (Zumthor, 2006, p. 66-67). More like Schwitters' Merz process, Zumthor starts by drawing contemplative evaluation through tactile materials that offer suggestions for form and space to prompt innovative design in architecture. This is quite the opposite from normative practices of transforming materials to illustrate preconceived ideas in models that repeat conventional practice, rather than refreshing architectural imagination.

Art needs its time and space to foster creativity. Besides, with more computer-aided design (CAD), artists and designers immerse themselves in isolated virtual environments. The ultimate of architecture is the tactile - human body and site. Studio contexts generate holistic ambiances and humanising forms of contact that counter 'loss of presence'.

I have found Schwitters' model inspirational to instill creative research through integrative discursive-practice approaches. This is driven from my own fine art practice as an interdisciplinarian reaching out to the global and contemporary. This outlook has been pivotal in my teaching merging fine art with creative spatial practice, phenomenology, and contextual studies in art and design within the milieu of rapid technologies and connectivity. In our faculty, where students come from mathematics and physics orientation, art-research flexibly meets the differences of students, encouraging connections between art and science. The chief aim rests on contextualisation of practice - art and architecture placed within our changing perceptions of time, space and history. It has been the prerogative of my own background to construct integrative frameworks of practice and theory enabling students to move between two and three dimensional creativity, writing, self-evaluative critiques and presentations from foundation to graduate years within the faculty. Interdisciplinarity dismantles closed agendas of education towards forms of practice and understanding that are adaptive and creative, testing both the boundaries and frictions of different disciplines and domains. In this instance, art and science encounter one another through fine art, architecture, design and engineering. Interdisciplinary studio-based environments however should be seen as non-hegemonic spaces where inspirational connections for new things to emerge can be created between different practices without homogenising individuality and autonomous subject growth.

Broadening the human experience

Interdisciplinary methods, needless to say, can meet with latent resistance when students have been habituated in systems modeled on straightjacket curricula with less creative subjects. "Polyvalance" was the early term for the notion of interdisciplinarity in France. It was initiated at *L' Institut du Vivant* (The Institute of the Living) to broaden the human experience. In an interview on the *Politics of Interdisciplinarity* (1998), Julia Kristeva had observed that an ambience has to encourage complicities for flexible mobility from the base upwards, like a pyramid, between researchers from different areas of expertise. Interdisciplinary tactics prompt disciplines to 'talk to one another', in order to spur new lines of thinking. A university adopting interdisciplinary directions is not simply a matter of the "good will of educational authorities". It requires rethinking institutional organisation and facilitation (Kristeva, 1998, p. 5-7).

Various critical thinkers have countered isolationist doctrinaire and systematic modes of representation in education and other social structures, manifesting this also in spaces of cultural interaction such as exhibitions and museums. - *Les Immatériaux* curated by Lyotard 1985, marking a key

landmark; and *Laboratorium* curated by Latour & Obrist 1999 (Obrist, 2014, p. 40). Cross-fertilisation generates connections that revitalise fossilised ideas by stimulating new ways of thinking outside one's 'territory' or comfort zones. Kristeva notes, in educational settings where students in pre-university schooling have been accustomed to rigid methods, it can become more problematic up the ladder to engage interdisciplinary environments. Previously learnt habits limit undergraduates with "capacities which can reveal themselves insufficient for the other field". Even when there is a real desire in students to master different disciplines it remains a difficult path of studies wherein implementation requires more work than traditional methods for both student and educator (Kristeva, 1998, p. 6).

The theory-practice debacle, which is actually an old anxiety of interdisciplinarity, has waylaid the status of artistic research. Radical thinkers, from the 80s and 90s, already saw this as a worn debate. The integrative nature of practice-theory is bound in the experiential. It constitutes the starting point of scholarly enquiry rooted in social, cultural and multiple discourses. The dynamic diagonal axis between both poles of theory and practice are integral to rigorous research. Theoretical research remains an insufficient preparatory work if not tested in "concrete experience", which must always be returned to in order to take theory somewhere new. "The dialectic is enriching" Kristeva confirms, no further resolving is needed (Kristeva, 1998, p. 8-9). This explains itself.

Practice-based Fine Art research has long achieved academic status accredited in postgraduate and doctoral study in European and other international universities, based on integrity unhinged from old anxieties and regimes of thinking protecting academic domains. A growing body of literature has emerged on artistic research over recent years. Methodologies continue to develop the field of knowledge production gaining institutional identity in higher education without recourse to scientific standards or dominance. Sullivan outlines some of the difficult issues and problems artist-researchers have faced in competing for resources and respect in traditional university cultures where juried publication and scientific enquiry are the norms. He remarks that problems are more evident where the arts continue to be seen "as agencies of human knowing that are drafted into service" onto other accepted educational and research practices borrowed from other domains – the sciences, the humanities, or the social sciences (Sullivan cited in Thomson, 2006, p. 2-8). This is aggravated by situations where the prevailing academic expectation tends to see the artist solely as maker while acknowledging other related disciplines such as art history and art education as scholarly interpreters of the works of artists.

Domain protection and notions of research that need to buttress credence on other domains will stunt the independence meriting the fine arts in

broadening the human experience with potential headways in transferrable knowledge. The argument also holds that whilst international equals and peers in fine art institutes and circles have long been talking, discussing and writing about ways of advancing the field, the Maltese situation reflects a territorial and insular tugging situation that awaits genial camaraderie to form at the highest level to resolve issues and to flourish.

It's got Provocation

For us artist-educators, arguments pitched from a contemporary pedagogical standpoint strengthen the case for arts-based research. Sullivan outlines the distinctions between modernist interpretive practices relying on self-contained scientific enquiry, and postmodernist approaches stemming from broader contextual and socially grounded factors of qualitative enquiry (Sullivan, 2005, p. 17). Artistic research needs to move beyond these approaches borrowed from other disciplines to valorise its own experiential and insightful methods of enquiry embedded in the everyday. As Sullivan puts it: "If a measure of the value of research is seen to be the capacity to create new knowledge and understanding that is individually and culturally transformative, then criteria need to move beyond probability (quantitative) and plausibility (qualitative) to **possibility**" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 96).

Possibility suggests the unknown. Various thinkers have explained concepts of 'actuality' through 'becoming' or things 'on the way to arrival' to talk about differing modes of praxical knowledge and how creativity throws up novelty (Deleuze, Heidegger, Foucault, Kristeva). These have opposed persistent Romantic views of understanding the world through *reflective* and detached application of theory over *reflexive* experiential engagement (Bannister, 2013). The theory-practice complementarity of art research needs individuality inherent to its own process without being subjected to scientific canonisation or to historic structures of understanding under the power forces of universities and constraints of other forms of discourse.

Possibility is akin to potentiality and opportunity. This particularises the immersive nature of the artist's method of enquiry. I have come across a theory that discusses "presencing" as a model for potentiality and learning that "is not based on reflecting the past, but rather on feeling, tuning in to, and 'bringing-into-the-present' all future possibilities" (Scharmer, 2002, p. 3-9). This calls for a paradigm shift in human and social consciousness to meet a challenging future in the light of inept and failing institutional patterns everywhere.

"Presencing" reshapes thinking from "judging" to "exploring", displacing the will from "hard ego emotional reaction" to a more appreciation-focused

“future-receptive will”. This radical reversal proposes to liberate thinking and organisational power struggle from dualistic to holistic, from *past-focus* to *possibility-focus*, and is highly relevant in view of eroding mechanistic systems of education and governance (Scharmer, 2002, p. 3-9).

Fine Art needs the fortitude of *future-focused* evaluative criterion synthesising its different experiential processes - unattached from inapt research modes foisted upon it by other traditional methods.

Contemporary approaches recognise multiple pathways to human understanding. Indeed, art in its history has dislodged boundaries between its own traditional disciplines. - Putting things forward as **provocation** “beyond yes or no” fact or logic (DeBono, 1990). It continues to transgress divides between practical approaches, media, discourses, cultural theories, and conventional methods of research.

The way contemporary artists work, integrating multi roles in professional practice, articulates complex epistemologies. The contemporary artist functions as theorist-performer-producer-installer-writer-entertainer-critic-catalyst-teacher-shaman. We move flexibly between the “emic and the etic” ways of knowing, the inside and the outside (Bannister, 2013); between our physical and virtual worlds, within and without; between making and writing, matter, space and time.

“A central feature of art practice is that it embodies ideas that are given form in the process of making artworks. Irrespective of the informing sources, media preferences, or image-base, the artist exercises individual control over the creation and presentation of artifacts as forms of knowledge. Further, the images and ideas created have the capacity to not only change the artist’s conceptions of reality, but also influence the viewer’s interpretation of artworks. Consequently art practice can be seen as a form of intellectual and imaginative inquiry, and as a place where research can be carried out that is robust enough to yield reliable insights that are well grounded and culturally relevant”. (Sullivan, 2006, p. 1).

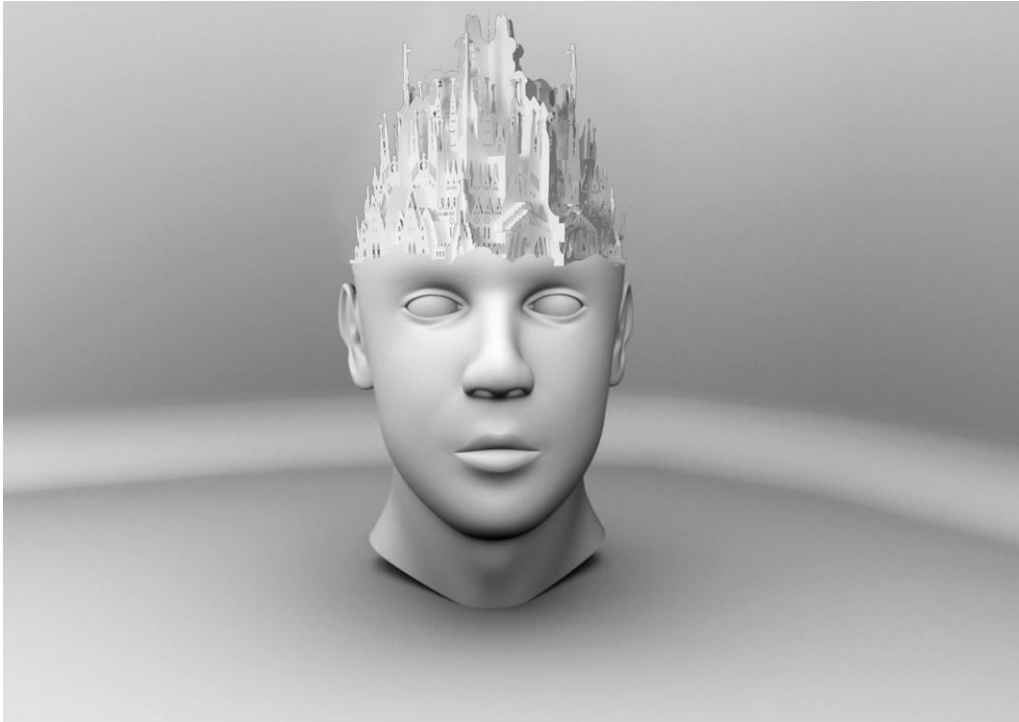
This accentuates the *transformative* capacity of artistic research and infers the understanding of significant human concerns. This is equally the objective of all research, attained in different ways appropriate to different fields of research. The methods of artistic research need to be understood and ascertained more widely in order to achieve academic maturity and communicate how it connects to the human experience, furtherance and knowledge. Artists emphasise the role of the imaginative intellect in varied experiences taking place in the workspace: creating, questioning, interpreting and criticising (Sullivan, 2005, p. 192). These processes become embodied in original forms, formulating innovative bodies of robust research and understanding. It is equally vital for artists to identify and construct the

intellectual framework of their practice, as a means to gaining recognition and legitimacy for what they believe to be is both “individually and socially transformative” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 97). Institutionalising may be perceived to go against the liberal grain. Conversely, it is from *within* such structures that Art can provoke acknowledgement, emancipation, and connection to the world out there to penetrate life and human beings as it should – people, galleries, exhibitions and spaces of intelligent discourse.

Cultural and visual literacy is owed to society. Creativity is frequently hailed as “the new literacy” (Jarvis, 2014). We often talk of resistance when it comes to contemporary culture and Maltese mentalities. Strategies need to be put in place to create a culturally informed society enabled to think and discern old worn pre-conceptions of the ‘image’ of art or the ‘image’ of education for that matter. It is with such imaginative challenge that we can hope to transform and educate, and create new trajectories that combine creativity within an intellectual climate. What no longer works has to change. Both art and education need to be “driven by issues rather than content” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 188). It is from a research standpoint that culture can start to operate and link back to society for contemporary art and its dynamic evolution to be understood and valued and approached more holistically in schools, research circles, cultural communities and professional quarters.

Liminal – the space in between

The ‘space’ between art and architecture is a project with art-research at the core embracing interdisciplinary thinking. I have devised this as an artistic and experimental mechanism to explore ‘forms of space’ through the various dichotomies between art, culture, environment and architecture. The **liminal space in between** art and architecture in this context refrains from any over-determining definition. It invites teasing out conceptual conjecturing between fine art and spatial practice - a space to problematise and provoke speculation. In so doing, students set about interrogating issues of space and material. We engage in a spectrum of fine art practices: installation, drawing, collage, sculpture, painting, documentation journals, photography, the tactile and digital, alongside reading, developing proposals, texts and presentations. Most importantly, this is an opportunity to talk about art and issues: space and consumption, regeneration, museums and social interaction. We discuss history, culture, urbanity, locating practice in relation to world issues, pressures of economy, current affairs and critical discourse. The key is to unleash ‘fixed’ perception and to move the mind creatively forward.



Veselin Veselinov Marinov – mind-scape (collage, photography, 3D modeling) 2014
 Course: Creative Interfaces of Collage (Year 3 BSc Built Environment Studies)
 Course lecturer: Ruth Bianco

The intention is also to offset mechanical-led approaches to design with more conceptual, intuitive questioning. Students become rapt in issues of industry, clients and the market-driven frenzy of the building business, construction, technical protocol and governing policies. Art offers alternative modes of thinking about 'light and space', to unlock the aesthetical, imaginative and humanising sensibilities that raise bare building to an art form – architecture.

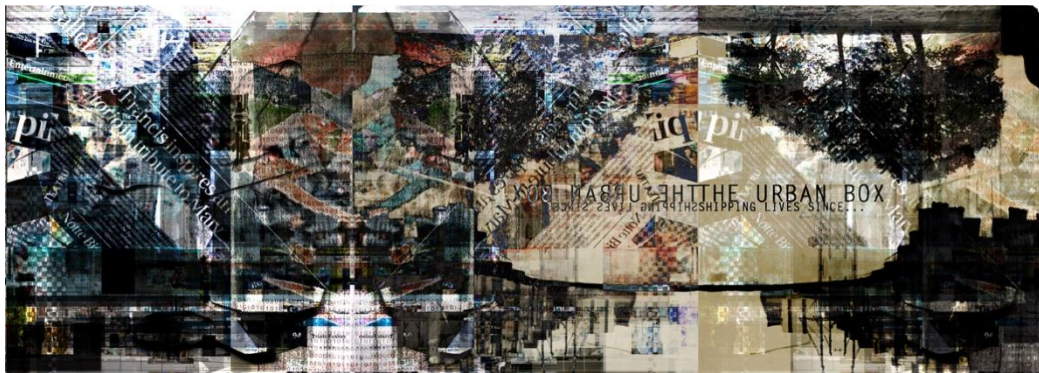


Sacha Cutajar – collage and decollage (tactile and digital) 2014
 Course: Creative Interfaces of Collage (Year 3 BSc Built Environment Studies)
 Course lecturer: Ruth Bianco

The onslaught of a consumerist building industry that responds to ‘policy and measures’ before ‘art and land’ has eroded our landscape. Beyond stone and mortar, ‘shelter’ has an ecological meaning for the earth we inhabit. An essential part of the artistic enquiry links the sensorial with environmental consciousness.

Students reflect on how art and environment may connect: *How as artists and architects do we connect to the public and make the thing that we have every day in our lives heighten that awareness?*

These sensibilities were echoed in the architectural exhibition *Sensing Spaces*, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. It revealed how architecture has its practical and functional aspects but essentially needs to address when it can move people to offer us something more and how it might transform the human spirit (Royal Academy of Arts, 2014).



Sacha Cutajar – urban-scape (tactile and digital collage) 2014

Course: Creative Interfaces of Collage (Year 3 BSc Built Environment Studies)

Course lecturer: Ruth Bianco

***Art by Architects* – spatial awareness – spatial networks – spatial contexts
(an exhibition project):**

Students work in teams towards exhibition to negotiate the dynamics between art-object and space, and how this might relate in a circuit of: user, viewer, audience, public and the production of space.



Andrea Zerafa - untitled (collage, drawing, watercolour) 2014
 Course: Creative Interfaces of Collage (Year 3 BSc Built Environment Studies)
 Course lecturer: Ruth Bianco

Contemporary Fine Art speaks from various voices

Contemporary Fine Art has moved from the self-referential isolated contexts of early academies to interdisciplinary environments in practice and educational settings. Perhaps more uniquely than other disciplines, fine art, inherently effervescent and temporal, continues to redefine its own boundaries. Although new technologies and media have created new hybrids of practice, this should only be seen within a non-hierarchical interdisciplinary process, for example Sculpture taught aside New Media. Intellectual debate, thinking, talking and discourse mediate the emotional environment of the contemporary studio. For art today **speaks from various voices** provocatively, non-linearly, inclusively, pluralistically, and convivially. As Kristeva stated:

“As for dangerous aspects, you will find that some people think their specialisation is interdisciplinarity itself, which is tantamount to saying that they have a limited amount of knowledge of various domains, and only fragmentary competences! This [...] reduces its scope as a project” (Kristeva, 1998, p. 6).

Let us be absolutely clear, to instigate a fully represented interdisciplinary contemporary Fine Art faculty it would need to include all the wide ranging disciplines of fine art practice such as interrogating the object in space, investigating tactile surfaces, and communicative and interactive media – for there can be no disguise.

Artistic application interacts with cultural dialogue, community building, and collaborative space. It is within such malleable temperaments that Fine Art can assert an autonomy in new forms of visibility integrating diversity through the aural, the olfactory, the written, spoken and performed text, and more.

Educational environments correspond with varied opinions and interpretations across a wide range of practices and discourses. Interdisciplinary contexts bring different facets together while enabling pathways of concentration within a setting to investigate new terrain. Individuality therefore, redefines itself through a course of diverse experiences rather than a singular pathway. The experience is broader, more generous and enriching. Artists are equipped with dexterous flexibility in articulating or redefining an art language. This enables dynamic environments of opposite views to sit side by side where only change has any form of consistency. This extensive diversity is echoed in the environments of European pioneering arts specialist universities. Indeed, their university courses respond to the complexity of the contemporary artist’s mindset attuned to the present-day needs of society, cultural proximities, political tensions and global change.

This arena encompasses differences. Interdisciplinarity keeps the autonomy of the individual arts and at the same time transgresses it. It infuses exchanges that do not homogenise culture but produce a difference from which new things can emerge. The outlook of cultural settings today (whether educational/museum/exhibition) no longer necessitates a ‘finished object’ but an active space for discussion and interjection, whilst actively encouraging the often-unheralded benefits of transferable skills. This environment makes it practicable for those artists, designers, architects, and theorists who embark upon a philosophy of interdisciplinarity. The culture of contemporary fine art practice offers a celebration of creativity through understanding the possibilities of different disciplines. It is an outdated model and does not parallel contemporary practice to have postgraduate courses which characterise single strands of fine art practice. Such descriptors

of separate disciplines are often established to encourage student recruitment and marketing, rather than echoing genuine fine art trends. For it is the close working proximity between disciplines that creates the opening for the undiscovered and at the best the original. It also discards old-fashioned barriers, stereotypes, and egocentric academic segregation. It needs to be within this context, and its enlightening connections that students of fine art should be able to reflect upon present day contemporary fine art practice in order to position themselves through relative investigation and implementation.



LEFT: Julia Duda - untitled (painting relief) 2014 ; RIGHT: Kris Tabone - time-scape (glass sculpture) 2014
Course: Understanding Disciplines of Fine Art (Year 2 BSc Built Environment Studies)
Course lecturer: Ruth Bianco

Conclusion

The case remains for accomplishing in Malta's higher education, institutional recognition at the highest academic esteem befitting practice-based fine art research and qualification to propel the field and the profound place it can occupy in contributing to European human development and knowledge production. The pressures of economy bring alienations that Art can offset through illuminating our inner lives. A sustainable education needs to cherish this potential through an artistically informed society.

Contemporary artistic research embeds reflection in thinking and making, relating our creativity to life, human need and our social constructs within relevant discourses. A focused research identity would enable the field to lead academically in positive ways, beyond isolated pockets of art infusion servicing other domains. Having stated this, it should be recognised that recent strides have been taken in our faculty to engage with this through our Visual Arts Department. It holds however, that where art teaching is deemed to be beneficial and essential to other areas (as it is to architecture), fine art

research professionals are also required and need to develop their own academic field and prowess like those of other domains and European centres. The role of our department is presently twofold: that of augmenting architectural education, and that of developing Fine Art academia. The latter should predominate for any real future befitting Fine Art in the university. This implies: first, it is instrumental for qualified Fine Art doctorates to lead the subject up to and beyond postdoctoral research; second, the support mechanism, space and resources needed to direct fine art research towards erudite ranks as an autonomous field; third, such ambition is crucial for a fine art research culture to meet the stature and opportunities of European counterparts in art specialist schools and universities internationally.

A contemporary fine art research core in the university should offer the prerogative to create new conversations without depending on older unsustainable processes of isolation. It is timely to equip future art in Malta with flexibility in climates of overproduction, fragmentation and stifling competition. It is with this outlook in mind that artistic paths for excellence, research and innovative thinking need to be forged that reform the pitfalls of insular habits through centre-points for negotiating diversity in practice to emerge in a true shared contemporary environment in the fine arts. Malta is often spoken of as a potential 'hub' for creativity by Maltese politicians, so let us now make every attempt to realise this in a spirit of enlightened academic discourse, collegial generosity, and unified through *a vision for opportunity*.

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