

Dirty Practice: A Painting Workshop and the Hidden Curriculum

Maggie Ayliffe and Christian Mieves

It's a matter of making the emancipated people capable of saying: "me too, I'm a painter", a statement that contains nothing in the way of pride, only the reasonable feeling of power that belongs to any reasonable being.

—Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*¹

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* Rancière explores the emancipation of the learner as a form of institutional critique but also questions the perceived divide between manual and cognitive skills and encourages the 'eruption' of this outdated binaristic system.²

Art theoretical and educational debates in recent years have attempted to foreground practice led-approaches and the conviction, that "knowledge is derived from doing and the senses" in a way that could not be achieved through other approaches.³ However, many fine art programmes in large Higher Education (HE) providers are operating on a restricted, generic model where classes and tutors are carefully timetabled and students work on modules with distinct (but not media specific) learning outcomes. In this environment it has perhaps become easier to focus on the cognitive rather than manual skills of our students. Despite certain flexibility and free access to studios, students become increasingly comfortable with this mode of study. It is our contention that this educational framework does not provide an appropriate environment to learn an autonomous studio based discipline such as painting and we are increasingly forced to work 'outside' of the written curriculum to deliver a meaningful fine art education to our students.

In this chapter we explore the extent to which manual skills and studio based practices are increasingly denigrated in favour of conceptual or socially engaged art practices, and how this trend is in part mirrored/formed in the educational structures (and spaces) found in the new HE environment. We also discuss how these structures effectively mitigate against and marginalise

the teaching of 'dirty' studio based practices and disciplines such as painting and how these developments could be summarised as a general critique of practice, where, as argued elsewhere, "conceptual art is to painting as art is to craft".⁴

As a fine art department in a large HE provider we are asking: How can we challenge this model of practice and instil new and more open ended, practice-led approaches to learning in the minds of our students? How can we maintain and develop the traditional values of fine art pedagogy and circumvent the restrictions of modular organisation by providing a model of learning in which "...understandings (that) are realised through our dealings with the tools and materials of production and the handling of ideas".⁵

In the summer 2015, we initiated a week long painting workshop; Dirty Practice, for staff, students and alumni of the Wolverhampton School of Art in an attempt to explore and address some of these challenges.⁶ The aim was to provide students with the opportunity to both observe and take part in a sustainable model of studio based practice alongside tutors who would engage in and teach through their own practice. In this chapter we will discuss the outcomes as an alternative model to the current art curriculum, and explore how the initiative was understood as an attempt, on the one hand, to bring back 'traditional' approaches of making and studio based inquiry and on the other, to test the radical and subversive potential of those strategies in the current climate.

The chapter finally asks to what extent the teaching of creative disciplines through 'dirty' fine art practice (in particular painting) ironically becomes a subversive activity for staff and students in today's art schools?

The idea for the workshop was apparently simple—we would make use of the vacant studios after the degree show, charge a small fee to buy materials and basic refreshments, we would work alongside the students on our own painting projects and the week

would be largely unstructured in terms of timetabling, briefs and certainly not include any kind of assessment/certification. The only expectation would be that students would work long hours, without a sense of fixed learning outcomes/criteria for success and in a mixed cohort of ages/levels and experience. What is perhaps surprising is how this model seemed so very radical in relation to the increasingly regulated experience of most art schools today.

What became apparent through the week is that fundamental ideas such as providing a personalised studio space, encouraging the experimental handling of materials, allowing the students time to test, mess up, fail, play and develop an individually negotiated art practice have all been effectively side lined by both educational rhetoric, its systemising structures and much contemporary art practice and criticism. As Jameson argues:

Yet today, from any number of distinct perspectives, (we)... are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual a individualist subject is "dead": and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological.⁷

We began to look at how and why this disparity between traditional and contemporary pedagogic models has emerged. It became increasingly apparent that some of the core characteristics of a traditional art school education—time, space, failure, mess and individuated learning—had become marginalised by the merger of art schools into universities, the transformation of universities into commercial companies and government (employability) agencies, and arguably certain strands of contemporary art practice that have villainised the studio and the personal as not being legitimate sites and subjects of contemporary art production.

Our individual research has found focus through exploring marginal and liminal spaces in and for painting. So it is perhaps not surprising that we have found a mutual interest in identifying and exploring the subversive potential of the language and key terms once common in art education that have become marginal in the current socio economic and academic climates in which we operate.

In this chapter we will consider 'dirty space', 'failure' and the site of 'personal' expression—the studio as marginalised terms and discuss how we sought to reintroduce them into the everyday language of the Dirty Practice workshop. We shall explore on the one hand the social and economic impact at course level of a curriculum driven by economic and political directives and on the other a workshop, as part of an initiative that critically contests some of these tendencies with a view to developing new pedagogic strategies that might regain the creative imperatives of art school learning.

The Socio-Economic Context

In *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School* Brad Buckley and John Conomos discuss how, from a global perspective, the "evolution of the ecosystem that is peculiar to the art school and the education of artists" has been disrupted by the amalgamation of colleges and polytechnics into universities from the 1990s.⁸ What we have

seen is a gradual erosion of art school teaching pedagogies and methods and we are now in a position that fine art and creative education is so warped by the outcome driven and employability agendas of the current institution that we need to consider what we have lost that is so integral to maintaining this creative "ecosystem".

Art departments face difficult economic situations where, as a result, established so called "Enlightenment objectives" of forming "critical citizens", or independent learners, become increasingly interchanged with a "complex commercial enterprise aimed at producing "knowledge capital" and "economically productive consumers".⁹ It has become commonplace to label universities as corporate businesses that respond to the new economic situation with increased standardisation and emphasis on modular systems.¹⁰ Modulation is here understood as process of control and increased standardisation.

Dean Kenning warned in 2012 not only of the potential "destruction of art school" as a critical and heterogeneous space but moreover he alerts us to the increased standardisation of the art school and how its transformation into a commodity aims to create, in accordance with the neoliberal political agenda, an "obedient, pliant and well disciplined workforce".¹¹

The acclaimed artist Maggie Hambling offers an illustration of the situation and the destruction of the art school as heterogeneous, uncontrolled space when she rejected an honorary doctorate from the University of East Anglia, the university that had closed down the old Ipswich School of Art. *The Guardian* article reports further that, "what really rankled was that the art college was now contained in a building with carpeted floors". When asked she explained further: "There must be room for people to make a mess with paint and clay."¹²

Buckley and Conomos further describe an emerging commercialisation of the art school as creating a "vexing nexus between studio art production and university management and life" and cite Mary Evans argument in *The Killing of Thought* that "more creative work is accomplished in the less well-ordered context".¹³

The Dirty Practice Painting Workshop

It became clear from the outset that the Dirty Practice workshop created a very different learning environment to the highly structured and compartmentalised learning common to modularity. It provided participants with the opportunity to observe, discuss and take part in a sustainable model of studio based practice alongside practitioners who are engaged in their own painting practice. The ideas of 'play', 'productive failure' and exemplar practice were used as a learning strategy with this diverse group of students.

The Dirty Practice workshop intentionally provided a space to examine the student/tutor relationship and consider how we as—artist teachers—might behave differently in a workshop situation. In the attempt to challenge the established pattern of students as passive consumers and rethink the student/tutor relationship, the workshop made a distinct effort to avoid the role of the student as consumer/customer and the tutor as 'knowledge provider'. The student as consumer model has become increasingly problematic, not only since it limits artistic approaches, moreover, as Corris



Caption

has argued, customer satisfaction does not seem to be the right incentive for intellectual or artistic inquiry and rigor.¹⁴

Therefore, the workshop placed tutors and students working alongside each other in the studio spaces—breaching the often artificial distance. We were in this case not visitors to the studio—we were active participants in what Rebecca Fortnum has called the “social site of ongoing processes”.¹⁵

This encountering of distinct subjectivities (students, artists and tutors) and foregrounding the disparate views on painting allowed further a form of dissensus and disagreement; to some extent offering an alternative to the consumerist, neo-liberal model of studentship in which the overt focus on a competitive, career orientated individualism, tends to eclipse other “alternative narratives, based on values inherent in alternative histories and memories”.¹⁶

The deviation from the narrative of competitive, self-interested individuals fighting for their own gain, further puts students in a position where they can hardly admit weaknesses and allow failure to happen. And indeed students in the workshop expressed fear of failing the assessment and performing poorly as the main reason why they could not explore their artistic practice freely.

As Beagles argues against a homogenized student body or set of practices: “That only by turning away from the competitive, market driven, unethical mode of being in art school (heroic



Caption

individualism and the progressive careerist model) can we resurrect a more transformative role for art.”¹⁷

The studio as a Collaborative Experience

It became apparent from feedback during the week that we needed to address and negotiate the thorny issue of the personal and the contentious site of individuated/private studio practice. The communal studio creates a peer led community of learning but is also the “private and personal site” of individually negotiated practice. It is this largely postmodernist reading of the studio and painting practice as a form of “unacceptable” self-indulgence or what Suzi Gablik described as the “inward turn” that has led to wide ranging scepticism of “studio practice” from within the art community.¹⁸ But the critical desire to “rap the hegemony of painting over the knuckles” has also played into the hands of university managerialism that wants to “reduce the footprint” of courses and wants to provide interdisciplinary “hubs” for timetabled activity and not “free range” discreet course based learning spaces.¹⁹ So we felt we needed to examine the role of the studio as both a site of highly personal or individuated learning and a community of practice in which assumptions about art and society can be challenged and tested from within an academic framework prior to public accountability.

Is it possible then that the art school studio rather than being the cherished site of individualism and individual expression is

potentially a liminal space where the demands of the individual and formal butt up against the social and political scrutiny of the community and public realm?

As far back as 1984 Gablik called for a “reconciliation” between the polemics of formalist aesthetics and social practice: “Once we have seen how much art and society are correlative, perhaps we can find an equilibrium between the two extremes of Marxist socialism, which tends to ignore the aesthetic character of art, and an aesthetic formalism that treats art as socially unconditioned and autonomous.”²⁰

We need perhaps to draw a difference between the privileged and rarefied studio of modernist avant garde practice and fine art studios framed by communal, interdisciplinary practice and critique. The art school studio is at once the site of ongoing individuated process and peer to peer learning and is as such difficult to place but important to rethink and recontextualise within our pedagogy.

The Importance of Mess

The fine art course at Wolverhampton provides the opportunity for sustained studio practice over three years. Each student has an identifiable space within the studio and much of our teaching takes place in the student workspaces. As students move through the course, most develop an understanding of how to use this ‘space’ and it becomes a site of creative play and ‘a social site of ongoing process’ in which students test and discuss ideas in relation to individually negotiated themes and practices. A vibrant, well used studio often culminates in a form of productive ‘mess’ out of which elements of practice are defined, edited and represented as works. The studio’s very messiness provides a free space where failure is part and parcel of the process and not ‘exposed’ as out of place or wrong. Indeed, the QAA benchmark criteria put a particular focus on “increasingly independent and personally-focused learning”, as highlighted by McHugh in his analysis of the role of the studio as place of essential open-ended, self-directed enquiry. However, and perhaps more importantly, the studio becomes also the place of “complex (of) resistances” in both practical and theoretical exploration.²¹

In the modern Corporate University—the very use and dirtiness of studio spaces seems to offend the desire to mimic the business/corporate world—how often, indeed, even when new art schools are built do we find the fine art studios (are happily) left in the original buildings or outsourced to industrial units. The art schools are being ‘cleaned up’ and the mess is marginalised as undesirable.

The Dirty Practice Painting Workshop was motivated in part by a discussion about the question to what extent the concept of dirt, often defined as ‘matter out of place’ proves to be productive in artistic practices. In the influential book *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas sets out to define the cultural, social and symbolic understanding of dirt and messiness in our society by arguing that dirt is perceived as “matter out of place”.²² Douglas’s reading of dirt is based on a 1960s sociological approach and the assumption that disorder and the mismatch of meaning are “erroneously positioned in relation to other things”. However, in

this context we will focus on the benefits of the ‘anomalies’ of social or theoretical systems rather than the actual concerns regarding messiness. With regards to a fine art practice that is described as dirty, messiness (the displaced, discarded material, leftovers from previous projects and other accumulated material) become essential to the creative process.²³ It also becomes evident that the subversive potential of anomaly stands in clear conflict with traditional classification, such as traditional skill sets or regimented environments. While this transgression has been pointed out in relation to aspects of deskilling and the perception of skill (eg the notion of error shifts from the “mark of scorn to [a] mark of ambition”²⁴) the focus should here be on the “anti-systematic” aspect of art and, as John Roberts argues, “the struggle to find a process of reasoning outside the bounds of classical standards”.²⁵

Finally, Dirty Practice seeks to explore, beyond the subversive quality of messiness, as outlined above, the quality of art as dirty and not adherent to an ideal system and its “resistance to precedent and academic template”, or failure.²⁶

Failure has been described as the gap between intention and realisation and as a vital “endemic presence” within art making.²⁷ In other words, the artistic outcome defies radically preconceived models of success and failure, or other forms of prediction, by opening up more creative ways that might allow the unexpected and erroneous to happen. Is there a need, therefore, to “untrain” ourselves, as Halberstam argues, and to see “failure as a refusal of mastery” allowing ‘unknowing’, ‘unbecoming’ and ‘undoing’ to open up creative ways?²⁸

Errors or “wrongness” in art operate therefore in particular as a “defiance of the programmatic, systematic or unitary ideal”.²⁹ The link between messiness and error, as both productive artistic strategies and a form of deviation from the norm becomes apparent.

While Dirty Practice could be understood as a further attempt to promote deviation from traditional skill based approaches, and the “struggle to find a process of reasoning outside the bounds of classical standards”, other elements prove equally problematic: the impact of chance, indeterminate and aleatoric elements emphasise further a resistance to any preconceived template.³⁰

However, it has been argued that the concepts of error and mess allow in particular a further insight into art and artistic production. As Trotter argues in his book *Cooking with Mud*, mess demonstrates a key aspect of artistic creation, that is unintentionality. As Trotter outlines “...mess-making, like other varieties of error or slip, demonstrate the force of unconscious intention”, or in other words, are a “hidden necessity”.³¹

As he outlines further, mess here becomes not only a means to confront established order, but eradicates and blurs the subject/object distinction. Trotter compares in his discussion the idea of mess with the idea of “transitional object”, where the young child takes into possession an object, leaves marks and embraces this object gradually. Mess, disorder, staining can therefore be also seen as a way in which the person, or the artist, responds to the world, in a very individual way. As Trotter argues: “Messses often

involve a mutually defining collision between a person and an object... in which the body inhabits the world.”³²

Conclusion

Participants in the workshop were asked to contribute two pieces of formal feedback. At the beginning of the week we asked them to outline their expectations and at the end to reflect on how learning had taken place. The expectations of participants confirmed the idea that the tutors are seen to be in the role of ‘knowledge providers’—with knowledge being something you can clearly impart, learn and apply. Many defined this by citing key reference terms associated with painting—composition, colour theory, specific painting techniques. However, in the final reflections what we see is a marked shift and an appreciation of peer-to-peer learning, the space to test, fail and develop ideas and a sense of value in alternate positions. What was most striking was that participants saw the genuine relevance of this type of practice for themselves as emerging and practicing artists.

The workshop prompted us to reconsider the current model of art education. The week of intense studio practice and the overwhelmingly positive feedback of the participants encouraged us to pursue some of the benefits of this traditional art and design pedagogy, in particular the shift in the tutor/student relationship, the role of the artist teacher, the use of an overly structured (school like) timetable and the intense impact the economic situation has on the curriculum even at course level.

The question then arises how to provide sufficient thinking and working space to allow and foster inhomogeneity and deviation in a fine art course within the current climate of homogenising, standardising and modularising every experience within a consumerist model in which every experience has to be the same.

This question seems very pertinent at a time when student numbers are low and institutions rely increasingly on ‘save’ approaches and controllable standards, eg the modular systems. Moreover, despite our acceptance of non-standardised, inhomogenic approaches, students and staff are often reluctant to put this insight into practice. Messiness and dirtiness, within the art context and in general, is still perceived as a symptom of deeper problems. Despite the fact that messiness is seen as a surface phenomenon, it is often viewed as symptomatic of the uncontrollable, and a form “of a deeper malaise”.³³ And despite our understanding of dirt or messiness, it remains contentious and therefore, one could argue, an ideal ‘trigger’ to question both materiality and social/cultural readings within artistic practices.

The concept of the artist studio has often been, in a simplifying fashion, linked to a specific art movement and specific type of art work, where the studio ultimately has become a target of the institutional critique or a “pathology of the modern”.³⁴ However, the question we have asked here, is to what extent the opposite is true today and to what extent the studio and an active studio practice has become a place of resistance to current, increasingly institutionalised tendencies in HE?

And while in a climate of HE dominated by assessment targets and modularity, sensuous approaches in practice-led research are

eclipsed by increased standardisation. However, it remains a key aspect in artistic studio practice as Christopher McHugh argues, that, “there is something about making, presence and touch that speaks to a still important set of learning dynamics, not to mention, dare I say it, human and artistic needs”.³⁵ The studio space as site of both private and personal exploration and communal learning has the potential to resist these pervasive forms of standardisation and perhaps should be revalued for their subversive potential within the institution and not as the butt of institutional critique.

- 1 Rancière, Jacques, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991, p 67.
- 2 “I took the great *gauchiste* theme—the relations of intellectual and manual work—and put it in reverse: not the re-education of intellectuals, but the eruption of negativity, of *thinking*, into a social category always defined by the positivity of *doing*.” Rancière, XVIII.
- 3 Barrett, Estelle and Barbara Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. London: IB Tauris, 2007, p 2.
- 4 Schwabsky, Barry, “Making is Thinking”, *American Craft*, October/November 2008, pp 84–86.
- 5 Baret and Bolt, *Practice as Research*, p 9.
- 6 The Dirty Practice painting workshop took place in the vacated fine art studios. The week attracted 25–30 participants including pre-degree A Level students, current BA students (level four, five and six), MA students and a number of Fine Art alumni. The course was led by Fine Art Painting and Printmaking lecturers: Maggie Ayliffe, Christian Mieves and Simon Harris and supported by Artists in Residence: David Gleeson and Simon Francis. Participants paid a small fee (£30) which was used to buy materials and basic refreshments.
- 7 Jameson, Frederic, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, Clive Cazeaux ed, *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p 285.
- 8 Buckley, Brad and John Conomos, *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, New York: DAP, 2009, p 3.
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- 13 Buckley and Conomos, *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, p 7.
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- 16 Biggs, Ian “The State of the Art: Art Education and Radical Imagination”, *European Journal of Arts Education*, February 2000, pp 71–79.
- 17 Beagles, John, “In a Class all of their own: The incomprehensiveness of art education”, *Variant*, 39/40, 2010, http://www.variant.org.uk/39_40texts/comp39_40.html.
- 18 Gablik, Suzi, *Has Modernism Failed*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, p 21.
- 19 Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed*, p 27.
- 20 Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed*, p 33.
- 21 McHugh, Christopher, “‘I’ve not finished’: Why studios are still a fundamental requirement in the study of fine art”, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol 13, no 1, 2014, p 35.
- 22 Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Ark Paperbacks, 1966, p 36.
- 23 Fortnum, “On Not Knowing: How Artists Think”, p 1.
- 24 See Roberts, John. *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, London; New York: Verso, 2007, p 212; Elkins, James, *Master Narratives and Their Discontents: Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts*, London: Routledge, 2005, p 124.
- 25 Roberts, John, *The Necessity of Errors*. London: Verso, 2011, p 213.
- 26 Roberts, *The Necessity of Errors*, p 209.
- 27 La Feuvre, Lisa, *Failure*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, p 13.
- 28 Halberstam, Judith, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011, p 11.
- 29 Roberts, *The Necessity of Errors*, p 209.
- 30 Roberts, *The Necessity of Errors*, p 213.
- 31 Trotter, David, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-century Art and Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p 10.
- 32 Trotter, *Cooking with Mud*, p 14.
- 33 Cresswell, Tim, “The Crucial ‘Where’ of Graffiti: A Geographical Analysis of Reactions to Graffiti in New York”, *Environment and Planning, Society and Space*, no 10, 1992, pp 329–344, 334.
- 34 Davidts, Wouter and Kimberly Paice, *The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009, p 28.

- 35 McHugh, “‘I’ve not finished’: Why studios are still a fundamental requirement in the study of fine art”, p 31.