

## **Situating Gallery Education**

### **Felicity Allen**

The other thing taught from the start is to distrust one's own judgement. Children are taught submission to authority, how to search for other people's opinions and decisions, and how to quote and comply.<sup>1</sup>

...Since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanised, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants ... Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation ... it is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind.<sup>2</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

The following notes, have emerged from a personal and intuitive response to an apparent paucity of critical investigations into the development of gallery education in Britain, particularly in relation to developments in museology, art infrastructures and practices; and a desire to define gallery education as both a strategy and a practice. Although there are overlaps between gallery education, community arts practices, and museum education, in this paper I focus specifically on gallery education. I have drawn on memory, discussion, historical accounts, and original publications and artefacts. Importantly, I have drawn on my own and others' experience of a particular practice; the practice of art and the practice of gallery education.

### **Histories**

In 1991 I became the first Director of Engage, known then as the National Association for Gallery Education, and by the end of the year I was running an organisation that had a membership of about three hundred women and a few men. Most of the women were about ten years younger than me and their sense of politics and urgency reminded me of being involved, as I had been, in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s when these Engage members would have been coming to the end of their own primary education. As an artist I had been involved in gallery education activities that were connected with exhibitions of my own work, connected with gallery exhibitions of other artists' work, or connected with displays of art from museum collections. I had also been a lecturer in art schools, in adult education, and a workshop or project leader in community settings. This type of experience was common to many involved in gallery education – artists taking piecemeal work, distinct from curators who, at that time, were more likely to have continuing contracts and who were almost uniformly art historians. Although framed as 'gallery education' many artists involved in this work had ambivalent and sometimes antagonistic relations with formal education, including, if you were a

---

<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, Introduction, *The Golden Notebook*, 1971 edition, p 15

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published 1970 (1999 edition p 70)

woman, with art schools which had been slow to modify a culture that seemingly privileged the macho heroics of the bohemian Romantic artist.<sup>3</sup>

Five years after the Thatcher government first came to power in 1979, bringing with it cuts in the public sector and experimenting with the arts as a pilot in what was to become known a couple of decades later as the 'public private finance initiative', the Arts Council of Great Britain produced a strategy titled *The Glory of the Garden*, 1984. In the face of both cuts and rebalancing public funding of the arts to develop the infrastructures for contemporary arts across Britain, funding for the new regional contemporary art centres and art galleries (such as Ikon in Birmingham, John Hansard in Southampton, Arnolfini in Bristol and Museum of Modern Art in Oxford) was devolved to the Regional Arts Associations, and the Arts Council developed an interventionist strategy with the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) -funded regional art museums to develop contemporary collecting and exhibitions. These mostly Victorian galleries had very variable strategies for developing their collections, and this initiative was part of a wider strategy to generate a mixed economy for, and interest in, contemporary art across Britain (by the way relieving dependency by artists on the extremes of grant funding or Bond Street collecting). New curatorial posts in contemporary art were developed for the regional art museums, and gallery education posts were created alongside. These encouraged contemporary art lovers to visit the museums as well as to assist existing audiences to develop an engagement with the new exhibitions and displays of contemporary art. The Director of the Arts Council's Visual Arts department at this time was Sandy Nairne, who had already shown his commitment to feminist, cross-cultural and public education agendas in the arts as former Director of Visual Arts at the ICA (who had established in the early 1970s the beginnings of a long-term professional association with Nicholas Serota). Nairne created a new post within the visual arts department, with responsibility for Visual Arts Education, appointing Colin Grigg whose background was in community arts (the Arts Council already had an Education department, but significantly, Colin Grigg's role was integrated into the visual arts department). In the late 1980s Serota, as Director of Tate, recruited Nairne as a deputy, and later Grigg was recruited to become a deputy in the Education Department.

It could be argued therefore that by the mid-1980s, the development of gallery education as a catalytic part of the generation of a creative economy had begun to be consolidated within the experimental end of the public funding infrastructure, although it had yet to become integrated nationally or within individual institutions. Its position was central to the work of visual arts departments which had previously been more conventionally defined as supporting artists and exhibitions, and was a reflection of an emerging trend in contemporary art galleries. But, what had been happening to lead to the beginning of this consolidation of gallery education? I argue that gallery education, as it has developed since the mid-1970s, has been both a distinct and overlapping artistic strategy which is integrally connected to radical art practices linked to values aired and explored in the liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, and particularly the women's movement. It is an individual strategy among many (including, for instance, small-scale exhibitions, small press and small magazine publishing, alternative libraries and archives), to shift art from a monolithic and narcissistic position into a dialogic, open, and pluralist set of tendencies that renegotiate issues of representation, institutional critique and inter-disciplinarity. Its

---

<sup>3</sup> Assertions I make in this essay about the position of women in the British art sector of the 1970s and 80s are generally supported by referring to Rozsika Parker's and Griselda Pollock's invaluable history, *Framing Feminism, Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985*, Pandora, 1987. For this particular reference, see the quote from Elona Bennett on the Romantic artist, p 59

links to education are sometimes oblique, although it is influenced by theories emanating from the social sciences (including education), in addition to art. As well as liberation movements, it drew inspiration from ideas that emerged from the Academy (usually linked to the academic rebellions of 1968), such as institutional power, deconstruction, and the Society of the Spectacle (and created methods of dissemination and engagement as alternatives to the growing prevalence of the mass media, especially television and advertising).

When I re-read Doris Lessing's wide-ranging, discursive introduction to the 1971 reprint of her classic novel, *The Golden Notebook* (originally published 1962), it reminded me of some key issues contained within a single, non-academic text. It is particularly relevant because of its range and because the novel, by the mid-70s, had become common if not required reading for literate British women, especially feminists (and was of course read by men too), and thus Lessing's essay and thinking would reach a far wider audience than, say, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault or Paulo Freire. Inter-disciplinarity and reaching beyond binary opposition is "the essence of the book", she says ("...we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise"). She promotes the artist and the work of art in opposition to academic authority. Critiquing formal education from school to university, she says "The other thing taught from the start is to distrust one's own judgement. Children are taught submission to authority, how to search for other people's opinions and decisions, and how to quote and comply." In a single short essay, Lessing raises questions on: the construction of knowledge and its relation to power; feminism and the position of women (and feminism in relation to a work of art); colonialism and its part in the construction of knowledge; power and anonymity ("the real history of Africa is still in the custody of black storytellers and wise men, black historians, medicine men: it is a verbal history ... never let the printed page be your master"). She also touches on one of the themes of *The Golden Notebook*, namely, mental illness and its relation to knowledge and authority. The essay, therefore, de-compartmentalises a range of different subjects that were of topical importance at that time, but whose terms for debate were very different, for instance, from the French academy to the American Black Panthers - in sum, it reaches a mass audience. Lessing discusses authority and power in direct relation to the education of children and university students. She contests the Canon (or 'received wisdom') and promotes individualised cultural choice and meaning-making. Importantly, the essay is expressly dialogic (as we might term it now), written in response to public and critical reaction to the first publication of *The Golden Notebook* nearly a decade earlier.

As well as the construction of knowledge, there are two imperatives here that continue to be vital to the work of those involved in British gallery education: firstly, engaging with new 'audiences', which involves taking art to the street and thereby integrating practice into everyday life experience. Secondly, by implication, making art (or participation) a means of engaging with and generating knowledge of art. The novel itself puts the peripheral (the mentally ill) and the confessional or subjective (the diaries, or Notebooks) at the centre.

### **The legacy of the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement**

Confession and articulation of the subjective and the marginal were key strategies of the early and mid-1970s women's movement. Starting from a position of marginalisation, and within a network of self-developing women's groups, 'consciousness raising' was a vital process to the activities that we developed both collectively and individually. This involved a process whereby one's subjectivity, assertions, and or motives, were reflected upon to check for prejudice or 'conditioning' in relation to a new routine or activity. Expression of dissent and disagreement was a vital part of this process, as was self-reflexivity. During this time there was much to do to liberate women and to enact change. These developments

and attitudes have informed and created many changes that have occurred since that time – most obviously, legal changes around employment and harassment which may now appear as mundane, prescriptive, and managerialist ('politically correct') irritants, but in the 1970s they seemed positively utopian.<sup>4</sup>

Feminist artists and historians made use of these principles in strategies that have continued to be the fundamentals of gallery education. Common principles include:

- *to be self-reflexive and dialogic* - Mary Kelly's Post Partum Document or Jo Spence's work (collected in *Putting Myself in the Picture*<sup>5</sup>);
- *to be collective, egalitarian and to create alternative networks* - the London Women Artists' Collective was one of eighteen networks or groups listed in Rozsika Parker's article in *Spare Rib*, 1980<sup>6</sup>;
- *to challenge the technical and aesthetic conventions of fine art in relation to traditional 'women's' or 'folk' art* - such as the postal art strategy *Feministo*, with its textile craft references;
- *to cross boundaries and bring together different disciplines* – numerous examples of mixing art with psychoanalysis (Mary Kelly), sociology (Phil Goodall and Tricia Davies), anthropology (Susan Hiller), as well as challenging the privilege of the aesthetic in the development of an art work;
- *to create 'open-ended' art works and develop dialogue with audiences* – Su Richardson, Monica Ross, Suzy Varty and Kate Walker's *Fenix Rising* ('They "wanted to make the process open, with boxes for other women to write and draw in, and for us to learn from women's reactions ..."<sup>7</sup>');
- *to agitate with and advocate on behalf of others* - Margaret Harrison's *Homeworkers* of 1978;
- *to present multiple and alternate voices* – Susan Hiller's *Addenda - Dedicated to the Unknown Artist and Fragments*, or the US-based artist Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*;
- *to represent hidden histories* – for instance, establishing the Women Artists' Slide Library in 1978 (later the Women Artists' Library);
- *to critique and demand change of mainstream institutions by both interventionist and separatist strategies* – for instance, negotiating squatting arrangements to make galleries such as the Women's Free Arts Alliance in Regent's Park, or curating the Hayward Annual 1978.

In addition, women artists were regularly involved in both *demonstrations and performance* (with Situationist references). For instance, the Miss World demonstration 1970, the Women's Day March 1971, and the Greenham demonstrations, performances and fence decorations in the early 1980s. Feminist artists and art historians simultaneously played key roles in developing a number of *integrated radical visual arts strategies*, including the establishment of the Artists Union, which produced and contributed to art magazines, conferences, events, and exhibitions.

---

<sup>4</sup> Following on from the first National Women's Liberation Conference at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1970 four demands were made. They were Equal pay; Equal education and job opportunities; Free contraception and abortion on demand; Free 24-hour nurseries. Additional demands were later added, especially referencing sexuality. By the 1980s the movement had shifted into several trajectories and could no longer be identified by feminists as a single Women's Liberation Movement (although it continued to be ridiculed by the popular press as if it were one).

<sup>5</sup> Jo Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography*, 1986, Camden Press

<sup>6</sup> *Framing Feminism*, p 182

<sup>7</sup> *Framing Feminism*, *ibid*, p 215

Mary Kelly was a prominent figure in the radical and feminist art circles of the 1970s, and the progress of her actions and works illustrate common feminist thinking and activity from that time and was involved in: the early Artists Union, the collaboratively authored film *Night Workers* (1974) agitating for equal pay and conditions, in addition to the self-reflexive, confessional and highly theorised *Post Partum Document* which represented a challenging overhaul of the conventions of representing motherhood in the visual arts. This last development is of particular significance to gallery education, as it is gallery education programmes, habitually run by women artists and art historians, which have primarily generated possibilities for children (accompanied by adults, or individually) to actively engage with exhibitions and displays of art in galleries. Along with offering textual interpretative information for non-specialists, it is one of the changes in galleries over the last few decades that has been most consistently challenged by artists and art historians. Its instigation is largely the responsibility of gallery educationalists, and it is regularly glossed as dumbing down, or as indoctrinating or, conversely, corrupting children. While this issue is the subject of a further paper in preparation, it is worth noting that children's common preference to learn through activity and play is coincidental with the shift from an entirely art historic approach to engaging gallery visitors to a range of approaches, including practice-based, performative, and spectacular. Thus gallery education has created a continuity between 1960s practice-based participation produced by artists like Nikki de Saint-Phalle, Helio Oiticica and Robert Wilson through to contemporary artists such as Andrea Fraser, Anna Best, Thomas Hirschorn, or Carsten Höller.

### **Cultural squatting and bringing home the bacon**

Despite a continuity of radical practices in gallery education they continue to remain in the margins of practice.. A common position for gallery education today is comparable to the negotiated squatting that created the Women's Free Arts Alliance in the 1970s. Squatting is inherently a temporary or contingent position; unusual in Britain now, in the 1970s it was a very normal activity for young metropolitan radicals, to create either housing or cultural venues. When the younger women artists entered galleries as educationalists in the late 70s and early 80s, they were extending the idea of squatting into the gallery.

Typically on short-term contracts (as is still common today), the majority of their neighbours within the institution often couldn't see why they were there at all. Short-term contracts were accepted in the 1970s as many women artists simply could not get the permanent lecturing jobs on offer to the dominant male artists' networks and the arguments for equal opportunities had yet to take effect. In a sense, whether they liked it or not, women artists had to go into other educational settings, to develop the workshop or the project as a *modus operandi*, as an income strategy. They were thus recruitable to gallery education. (The education sector or, occasionally the wider public sector, was the typical employer, the bread and butter, of artists until late into the 1980s when more commercial strategies were developed by a younger generation of 'Thatcher's children' - the YBA generation.) While museums still asked for professional teaching qualifications for educationalists, galleries typically recruited artists into short-term projects or workshops, and gradually some of these artists were offered permanent employment to develop gallery education programmes. They brought with them the critiques, methods and principles passed down from the Women's Movement, some of which had informed and become articulated through the New Art History. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the development of some groundbreaking gallery education programmes, under the leadership for instance of Martin Rewcastle followed by Jenni Lomax at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Toby Jackson at Tate Liverpool, Sue Clive working with Cornerhouse and the South Bank Centre, and Helen Lockett at Southampton City Gallery and the Arts Council's National Touring Exhibitions. A characteristic of the Whitechapel education

programme was the involvement of exhibiting artists, and the links made between the education programme, the significant artists' studio network in its neighbouring East London boroughs, and the annual Whitechapel Open exhibition. Lomax, who went on to direct and transform Camden Arts Centre, researched, networked and commissioned artists, as well as negotiated partnerships, with the professionalism of the best curators. Ironically by the early 1990s the Whitechapel Gallery education programmes had shifted from the curatorial methods of researching and commissioning artists to an 'equal opportunities' policy approach, where artists were asked to complete application forms to become 'artist educators'. This tended inadvertently to homogenise the programme in the name of both quality and equality, re-orienting the relation with artists from one of negotiated experiment to regulated employment. The Alfredo Jaar exhibition of 1992 revealed concomitant tension between curatorial and education strategies, especially when they appeared to overlap. Jaar, then based in New York, was asked to make an exhibition with local Bengali women. The project misfired because of issues of global celebrity and a lack of local or cultural knowledge, and the artists engaged in the Whitechapel's education programme were articulate in their criticism.

### **Boredom, frustration and passion: a context**

The 1970s saw the emergence of a plethora of British magazines on art and ideas that further illuminate the imperatives and debates characteristic of the women's liberation movement and / or radical art practices. The magazines themselves, like the debates and the nascent education programmes, as well as art works and exhibitions, were crucial in the dissemination and interrogation of ideas that have continued to be central in the development of gallery education. As a parallel development, the fact that they are published and archived – in contrast to many gallery education programmes – offers useful illumination of the debates. As well as those concerned with the visual arts such as *Block* or *Screen*<sup>8</sup>, magazines from different disciplines informed and mirrored the development of gallery education. For instance, the stated aims of *Radical Philosophy* make this explicit: '*Radical Philosophy* ... was founded in 1972 in response to the widely felt discontent with the sterility of academic philosophy at the time (in Britain completely dominated by the narrowest sort of "ordinary language" philosophy), with the purpose of providing a forum for the theoretical work which was emerging in the wake of the radical movements of the 1960s, in philosophy and other fields. *Radical Philosophy* is not committed to any particular philosophy, ideology or political programme. The purpose of the journal is to provide a forum for debate and discussion of theoretical issues on the left. It encourages the serious and informed discussion of such issues in clear and non-technical language, aimed to reach a wide audience.' In today's language the editorial 'collective' describe the 1968 impulse when philosophers from the Sorbonne, perhaps apocryphally, took philosophy to the streets and debated with striking workers. It also allows for a pluralist approach to discourses, which epitomises gallery education, and is sometimes its downfall (while it is abundantly inter-disciplinary and critical, its magpie qualities can seem merely incoherent). Other magazines that are of direct relevance to the development of gallery education are *Feminist Review* (first published in 1979, whose first issue included the article *Feminist Art Practice* by Davies and Goodall), and *History Workshop Journal* (1976, whose first issue included Gaby Porter's article *Oral History in Museums*). The American feminist visual culture magazine, *Heresies* (1975/6)<sup>9</sup>, was a model of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Whose history is well documented in, for instance, Neil Mulholland's *The Cultural Devolution: Art in Britain in the Late Twentieth Century*.

<sup>9</sup> *Heresies* was produced by a collective of feminist artists and writers. By spring 1976, twenty of them decided to found a magazine committed to social change. The magazine's title was

inter-disciplinary, eclectic, but themed approach later developed in exhibition making and in gallery education programmes, and later *Third Text* (1987) became crucial reading for gallery educators. Significantly, galleries such as the Whitechapel and the ICA were developing bookshops as a means both to reflect the breadth of debate and in an attempt to earn income as Thatcherism bit and, as well as specialist, independent bookshops such as Sisterwrite or Silver Moon, provided important means of distribution and access to small magazines.

Matthew Higgs has documented a number of artists' magazines from this period that were also exploring, as he quotes artist and editor Thomas Lawson, 'an alternative to an art world "caught up in a narcissistic system" that was "self-regarding, self-enclosed, and irredeemably boring."' Higgs describes how, for Rosetta Brooks, founder editor of the magazine *ZG* (1979) who had links with London's feminist network, 'art was increasingly isolated. Describing the art world as "a cottage industry protected by a minority group of conservationists," she proposed instead that *ZG* would privilege newly emergent and "self-consciously borderline activities" that "refuse to accept the self-imposed limits of their cultural microcosm." Higgs describes how, 'For these artists, "the most arresting images were being presented by the propaganda industries - the mass media of television, movies and advertising." Collectively these artists' works displayed a "familiarity towards popular culture. A mixture of love and contempt for the ever present images of capitalist consumerism." Lawson and Morgan, British editors of the US-based magazine *Real Life*, felt 'a lack of a public forum for their work - which, according to Lawson, "sought precisely to provoke dialogue"...' <sup>10</sup>

Although the dialogue may have been 'provoked', it was still largely artists and the cognoscenti in dialogue, and the actual engagement with non-specialist audiences usually remained uncharted, even hypothetical. Gallery education, therefore, seemed to offer one strategy to overcome this and was often established with similar proportions of boredom, frustration, and passion.

### **Extending the dialogue**

The desire for dialogue and discourse had already been aired by an older generation. Neil Mulholland notes that in the mid-1970s a group of critics, art historians and artists, including Griselda Pollock and Victor Burgin, created an alternative academy through generating and contributing to a series of public debates or conferences. <sup>11</sup> These were usually held in art galleries, including the ICA which was developing a strong inter-disciplinary intellectual seminar programme, quite distinct from the conventional gallery art appreciation lecture more common at that time in the art museums. Essentially, these debates or conferences provided an open platform and network for the emerging theories of art that would become known as the New Art History, as well as related intellectual investigations and theories. By situating these debates in public galleries (as well as universities), they attracted a broader and more diverse public, and were publicised in the art press and in arts centres, as well as through art schools and universities. Importantly they brought disciplines in debate together when structurally and philosophically this was at best problematic for the

---

inspired by Susan Sontag's words: 'New truths begin as heresies'. Each issue of *Heresies Magazine* featured a topic: lesbian art and artists in 1977, third-world women in 1979, feminism and ecology in 1981, and new media in 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Higgs, *Zines for a day: on the other art press - Writing the '80s - ZG magazine - Interview*  
ArtForum, March, 2003

<sup>11</sup> Mulholland, Neil, *The Cultural Devolution: Art in Britain in the Late Twentieth Century*, Ashgate, 2003

academy. (Speakers at these debates included young academics or critics such as Andrew Brighton who, in 1994, was appointed by the Tate Gallery as Head of Public Events and went on to develop the first comparable wide-ranging, challenging programme with a focus on artists and artists' practice, designed to inspire young artists and intellectuals within an art museum.<sup>12</sup>)

Education was often an acknowledged part of the work of those participating in these debates: Victor Burgin made a point of describing himself as an educator as well as an artist while Art & Language challenged Burgin's promotion of conceptual education ... 'In direct contrast, A&L's *School* project of 1975-1976 advocated breaking up 'the regimentation of structures which makes some people "experts", some "learners" ...'. In this, A&L might be said to have aimed to emphasize the directed accumulation of skills and knowledge, including self-knowledge, in everyday life: 'The overall aim of teaching as envisaged within A&L was to enable and assist student self-activity, and positively not to produce acolytes. ...'<sup>13</sup> Within education, political and community activist circles these issues were explored in depth, and the 1970s saw the development of ideas and programmes promoting peer-led learning, life-long learning, and adult literacy, all of which have at times been models for gallery education.<sup>14</sup>

### **Gallery education in practice**

An exhibitions curator recently commented to me that gallery education was so broad, so hard to define, from finger-painting to conferences; she is right, and for those not involved in gallery education there is often confusion about what it is exactly that we do. To help clarify, I want to give a brief introduction to Tate Britain's programme as an example. There are three teams, Adult Programmes, Young People's Programmes, and Interpretation. Out of a department of twenty, only three posts have direct responsibility for schools programmes. We aim to offer broad appeal programmes and interpretation as well as some designed with and for particular visitors and groups. We programme in-depth projects to help inform our wider practice, and they form an important part of our informal and formal research programmes (such as Tate Encounters). These programmes are mostly developed as mutual learning programmes, and visitor groups develop projects with us such as Tate Forum or Visual Dialogues to create displays, interpretation and participatory programmes for a wider public. The 'alternative academy' model is certainly an

---

<sup>12</sup> Having written the note above, I asked Andrew what he thought might have distinguished his time at the Tate and elicited the following in reply: 'The events programme should be part of the critical reception of an exhibition not just an amplification of its curator and catalogue ... One of the functions of a museum of modern art is to feed present and future practice and its discursive reception ... There was a tradition in the art schools that I attended (St Martins and RCA) and in particular taught at (Goldsmiths') which perhaps began in London post-war with the ICA. It believes the discourses of the practice and the reception of art is informed by a range of academic disciplines (such as philosophy, politics...) and cultural practices (such as cinema, music, poetry...) as well as art criticism and history ... The audiences are never in any rigorous sense knowable. You make events for a heuristic fiction. For me the core hypothetical audience for events was artists. (The kind of people I went to art school with and who I had taught.) This does not exclude other kinds of people, in fact it attracts them. Most people interested in art are also interested in artists and what prompts them. Artists are in actuality heterodox, but I assumed they were intellectuals. (I) was interested in intellectuals rather than academics.'

<sup>13</sup> Mulholland, *ibid*, p 40

<sup>14</sup> It is not within the scope of this paper to examine this, but in investigating the development of gallery education, research into the correspondence and mutual influence of art practices and theories and pedagogical theories and practices from the 1960s and 70s should prove fruitful.

aspiration for the department, although it might appear in different forms from the gallery debates of the 1970s: for instance, under the guise of what are now known as widening participation programmes. (Issues of class and power are sometimes addressed through practical projects rather than through debate.) We aim to enable the people we work with, whether as visitors or colleagues, to define their interests and identities in relation to the museum and it is my observation, I am happy to say, that the people who are attracted to work in this department habitually take a creative and critical stance in relation to the museum, the academy, and the development of learning about art. My – and our - intention is that the department's work creates a public forum for debate and dialogue to play a catalytic role for the museum, the subject of art, and their contexts.

Many gallery educators have built on ideas around the gallery as both publicly-owned and offering a philosophically 'free' experience<sup>15</sup>, of particular relevance to visitors who, like many artists, have negative or ambivalent reactions to (or experiences with) conventional systems of authority (including formal education)<sup>16</sup>. They have been interested in developing alternatives to the literalist approach to teaching in school led by civil servants in the 1980s and 1990s (notably, the introduction of The National Curriculum and, with it, methods of assessment that take an auditory model, characterised as 'target culture'), and have implemented strategies for learning more commonly connected with mid-twentieth century ideas of creative (artistic) play – learning which embraces ideas of exploration. Their reflections in their work have overlapped with the increasing interest in developing creativity in education, and recent neuroscientific research including investigations into multiple intelligences or the cognitive power of emotions in learning. Like leading museum education of the 1990s, it has been informed by the work of the 'constructivist' pedagogies, which have mirrored ideas about individual and cultural meaning making.<sup>17</sup> As gallery education has begun to write itself, it is articulated in terms of 'co-learning' or mutual learning, between participants, project managers, and artists.<sup>18</sup> There are similarities here to 1970s community arts practices, although Declan McGonagle makes the point that contemporary process-based collective art has negotiation at its centre, in contrast to issues of representation that, he says, were at the centre of community arts.<sup>19</sup>

Gallery education is typically situated at the edge – physically in the gallery, at the edge of art and other disciplines, at the edge of other institutions, and frequently at the edge of the lives of the people with whom it engages. Although regularly a position of choice, it is also a position of frustration. Ambiguities prevail around recognition for gallery educators, particularly because galleries work hard to gain press and critical attention for exhibitions and building projects (often for economic reasons, including ticket income and attracting investment) and, essentially this overshadows gallery education programmes. (Gallery education grew and took on the critical edge within the gallery during an era when it was becoming incumbent on

---

<sup>15</sup> The 'free' experience connotes a range of freedoms, including the experience of the gallery as a sexualised or liminal space, a space in which freedom is about to happen.

<sup>16</sup> This is an unscientific assumption that I am making based on my own experience, many discussions, and the routine suspiciousness that many artists have towards gallery education. I am currently developing research which may give better information on this.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, AS Neill's *Summerhill*, 1960; C Bannerman, ed, *Navigating the Unknown: The Creative Process in Contemporary Performing Arts*, 2006; Howard Gardner, *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*, New York: Basic Books, 1983; Ortony, A., Clore, G. L., and Collins, A, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions*, 1988; John H Falk and Lynn D Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, 2000, American Association for State and Local History Book Series

<sup>18</sup> See report on Engage's Enquire programme, *Inspiring Learning In Galleries*, 2006, or Engage (review) 18

<sup>19</sup> *Art of Negotiation*, eds David Butler and Viv Reiss, Arts Council, 2007

exhibitions to make money.) There is a sense, therefore, of being hidden within an infrastructure which, in every sense, is based on ideas of promotion, recording names and honouring achievement. A common part of gallery education's work is to give voice to people who are not seeking fame, within institutions which have made a major contribution to the manifestation of fame and legacy for the anonymous individual in the cultural sphere. Creating a theorised history of the development of gallery education in Britain is overdue: focus has been on activity at the expense of recording, analysis, and developing theoretical critique. Case studies advocating model projects have been published; 'toolkits' have been produced. Evaluative papers for private, statutory and trust funders form its documentation, while feel-good pictures illustrate museum annual reports. But the thinking, the motivations, the discussions, and the connections have rarely benefited from the scrutiny of art historians who appear to have turned a blind eye to the formation of over thirty years of activity. Meanwhile, renewed interest in socially engaged, or participatory, artistic and curatorial practice has emerged, to be documented in a series of books that, taken together, form a slightly a-historical reading that does not include an examination of the role and development of gallery education. Predictably, greater attention has been given to gallery education practice in North America than this country, including by British art historians.

### **A platform for the anonymous amateur**

The academic and the cultural sectors, including gallery educationalists, have been unwittingly complicit in maintaining the anonymity of gallery education to such an extent that it is either ignored or simply derided without investigation. While there are specialist books on museum education, historical investigation into the development of gallery education is left to practitioners (some of whom have returned to the academy). Accounts of the last decades of British art history, which include investigations of the cultural infrastructure including exhibition making, critical publishing and economic relations, make little reference to gallery education.<sup>20</sup> As curators and artists take positions in the discussions of socially engaged practice and relational aesthetics, it is remarkable that such little attention has been paid to the continuous development of gallery education as a practice over the last three decades.<sup>21</sup> One explanation for this is that many artists have chosen to enter gallery education as opposed to, or in retreat from, teaching in fine art departments, further education, or schools. Their choice has been inspired by the apparent freedom from the new managerialism, the statistics gathering (relatively simple in gallery education), and the target-driven testing. However, they have also escaped from the

---

<sup>20</sup> A recent exception to this is *Museums after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*, ed Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans, 2007 Blackwell, in which Pollock's introductory article 'Un-framing the Modern' describes and celebrates the work of the education department at the Art Gallery of Ontario and Judith Mastai's leadership. However, the implication that Mastai's work is a unique contrast to the rest of gallery education is articulated when Pollock describes 'the endless troops of schoolchildren brought to national museums of the West, there to be inducted, to learn how to become part of a national entity through its fossilized, fixed historical culture.' This caricatures a common view predicated on seeing but not looking into what's actually happening. While doubtless this is an accurate summary of some Western museum programmes, there are many distinctions. In particular, I would distinguish between British gallery and museum education, although this is a tendentious view and I am sure there are museum educators who take a stance of critique to institutional knowledge in their programmes. Ironically, one of the few British gallery educators credited in the book is Toby Jackson, one of the very few men involved in the profession.

<sup>21</sup> The AAH conference 2007, Victoria Preston paper which made no mention of gallery education, but focused entirely on books published within the last decade about 'socially engaged practice'. Check paper title

Research Assessment Exercise and therefore have not had the pressure to account in peer-reviewed journals for their work. Gallery educators and their advocates are regularly complicit in the a-historical accounts that are given; a recent editorial in *Engage* (journal) stated '...there is a growing overlap between art practice and gallery education. What gallery educators do ... draws from models found in participatory art practice.'<sup>22</sup> The implication that gallery education has just cottoned on to participatory art practice is arguably less valid than arguing it has provided the continuity of knowledge and practice to contribute to the reinvigoration of participatory art practice in the last decade. There is a parallel here to the repeating struggle to enable marginalised peoples to be heard, whether in the film *Night Workers*<sup>23</sup> of 1974, or the film *Conversations* by Gayle Chong Kwan and young mothers in partnership with Coram Family Centre, commissioned by Tate Britain's Learning department to be shown concurrently with Tate Britain's exhibition *Hogarth* (2007). Intimate and challenging, the inaudibility of some of the 'conversations' raised difficult issues about display. When a refugee from Sierra Leone describes her own depression, leading to forced separation from her baby daughter, followed by incarceration as an asylum seeker, and the emotion of her story combined with her accent renders the literal meaning of what she's saying almost impossibly hard for most visitors to the gallery to understand, should we subtitle? We realised that that very impossibility was an integral part of the work's meaning. Similar issues arise in connection with our Nahnou-Together programme with Syrian and Jordanian artists and young people: to what extent can a gallery education project and its products counter the ubiquitous, and undifferentiated 'political' voice represented in the media, with a series of personal voices in the gallery?

For many artists and curators working in gallery education it is both a creative strategy and an income. Whether for political or temperamental reasons, or both, the PR requirements to promote exhibitions are sometimes antipathetic to their 'socially engaged' practice and, in their activity, they have been undertaking both a critical and a catalytic role within the art gallery, regularly, but not only, opting for the intimate over the spectacular. By extension, they have enabled the art museum to incorporate the studio, with practical, personal and radical engagement with art, alongside more academic discourses.

Throughout this paper I have distinguished British gallery education from museum education, because I want to draw out the particularities of gallery education's relation to art practice and radical activism. Gallery education, while engaging with other disciplines, is subject specific and much of its work with artists crosses the subject of art with an interrogation of learning, or vice versa. As a practice it plays a significant role in critiquing the museum, in challenging the mass media both in terms of subject content and as a means of communication, in developing creative learning practices to contest and inform the teaching of art elsewhere. I think it is worth further investigating gallery education's distinction from museum education, whose antecedents can be said to be Victorian and philanthropic whereas, because most British galleries only developed education programmes in the second half of the twentieth century, gallery education was generated by the discourses of the mid-to-late twentieth century liberation movements. While the discourses of the 1960s and 70s have certainly inflected some museum education, there is still a tendency to universalising philanthropy as expressed in David Anderson's introduction to *A Common Wealth: Museums and Learning in the United*

---

<sup>22</sup> *Engage* 18, Research, Karen Raney, Winter 2006

<sup>23</sup> By Margaret Harrison, Mary Kelly and Kay Hunt who were collaborating on the exhibition *Women and Work* 1973-5, an investigation of the differences between women's and men's pay in a Bermondsey factory. The work privileges factual data and direct testimony, presenting it as sociological evidence.

*Kingdom*<sup>24</sup>. He writes, “The 2500 museums in the United Kingdom are a resource for public learning of exceptional educational, social, economic and spiritual value – a common wealth. This wealth is held in trust by museums for the public good, not just for our own time and society but for all times and peoples.” The universal, progressive inclusiveness expressed here has long been critiqued by artists and theorists, and that critique is often part and parcel of gallery education.

There are many aspects to situating gallery education that I have omitted, especially discussions around technology, photographic and film processes and mass communication, and radical art practices that have continued to develop outside the gallery system (and which have informed gallery education). I have failed to examine the correspondence between artists’ photo-text and other textual strategies of the 1970s with textual interpretation in the art gallery today. I have made a passing reference to the impact of mainstreaming gallery education, but have not examined the hostility towards recent government instrumentalisation which some critics have seen as the mantle of gallery education. It seems sometimes there is a failure to identify how gallery education, like other artistic practices, questions or negotiates a route around government objectives, as opposed to simply implementing them. In the last decade, educational and artistic models have regularly been described as if in polarised opposition, despite common libertarian values. Gallery education has been dismissed because of what it looks like rather than what it is.<sup>25</sup> Some artists and curators have theorised engagement with ‘publics’ with little interest in exploring the experience of participants. While I have referred in passing to the ‘issue’ of children in galleries, I have not articulated the tensions between the amateur and the professional, whether as artist, curator or educator. These tensions extend to very real disagreements about whether or how best to professionalise gallery education. There may be a parallel between the marginalisation of women artists of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries as ‘amateur’, and education curators, particularly as their stance is often to introduce the amateur artist into a highly professionalised environment. For some, however, this amateurism, as well as anonymity, is a positive strategy. In the footsteps of Doris Lessing, I would argue that strong gallery education now needs to represent the lived experience of many disciplines and many cultures: don’t compartmentalise. And don’t get hung up about professional status. In the 1970s I’m sure I must have had a badge reading Anonymous was a Woman; in those days it had one political meaning, whereas now, in an era of compulsive celebrity combined with an educational target culture, feminist anonymity has taken new and more interesting meanings.

© Felicity Allen  
2008

---

<sup>24</sup> *A Common Wealth: Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom, A Report to the Dept of National Heritage*, Jan 1997, by David Anderson, Director of Learning at the V&A

<sup>25</sup> For instance, Mark Wallinger, Mary Warnock, eds, *Art for All? Their Policies and Our Culture*, 2000 Peer, or Tom Morton, “Are You Being Served?”, *Frieze* Sept 2006