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ART AND COMMITMENT: GALLERIES WITHOUT WALLS

Propositions

INTRODUCTION

Teachers and students (leadership and people) co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators.... Not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement.

Paulo Freire, 1970

This chapter explores the role of the artist in adult education within the art gallery. I explore how artist-led learning projects in galleries are situated in terms of their commitment to art and their commitment to intentional learning. How do we approach current ideas that view adult learning environments as spaces of collective emancipation? How do we address the reality that learning has become a commodity product?

When I speak of learning environments I am referring directly to adult education. Problematically, art galleries and museums have taken up a discourse of learning, which comes directly from government discourses that position learning as 'learning for life' and 'supporting the market economy'. Instead of promoting a discourse which views learning as a market place commodity, I will talk about 'adult education'. Adult education eschews the didactic and expert-driven approaches, which used to dominate in museums, instead emphasising intentional learning toward social change. And Freire (1970) reminds us "education [is] a social action that [can] either empower or domesticate people" (p. 10).

The art gallery is a site for cultural production and knowledge exchange, but who has the right to participate? In the past it has tended to be expert-driven with exclusive ideas about who is qualified to create art. I argue here that cultural production and knowledge exchange can be inclusive, and that learning experiences can be co-created in a manner that acknowledges the institution, the artist, the art work and the participant. In this chapter I focus on how learning in an arts context can move beyond normative pedagogical structures such as classrooms and didactic lecture theatres. I also explore how galleries can learn from artistic practices that focus on critical learning platforms and constructs of pedagogy and power. This exploration offers new breath to the stifled government discourses of 'lifelong learning' with and of art.

The following ideas are explorations of theoretical and practical elements of adult learning in galleries. Throughout this exploration I propose that language and learning environments can move beyond the restricted idea that learning is a product to be purchased. I present examples of practices such as the Silent University, Thomas Hirschhorn's 'Gramsci Monument', the Situation Unit Commission series at mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), the Alternative Art College and Hito Steyerl's

'How not to be Seen: A fucking Didactic Educational.mov File' . I draw from the theoretical positions of Gavin Grindon, Jaques Ranciere, Boris Groys and others to argue how these practices challenge the commodification of arts education and can expand our imagination of arts based adult pedagogy. I feel our sector has hit an urgent crossroads in arts education across the UK in terms of how we define and practice adult education in galleries and museums. In the following sections I present a series of interwoven propositions, which bring out the questions we, as gallery and adult educators, should be asking in terms of art, learning, and social change.

THE EMO-ACTIVE TURN

The first proposition involves finding the moment when the learner becomes activated in the experience of learning. It highlights notions of commitment and engagement in gallery education and suggests that creative opportunities emerge when artists engage politically through art practices in learning contexts. Firstly I want to point out the difference between the commitment of an artwork and the commitment of an individual artist. As suggested by Jaques Rancière in *Politics of Aesthetics* (2004)

an artist is committed by their writings, paintings, films, which contribute to a certain type of political struggle. An artist can be committed, but what is that to say the artwork is committed? ... This does not mean art is apolitical it means aesthetics has its own politics (p. 6).

This differentiates the politics of the artwork from the politics of the artist. There are similarities but each can be perceived through different lenses, with different preconceptions and different objectives. Here, the role of the artist is to commit to involvement and to the process of learning, rather than to a particular ideology or any particular 'end' outcomes. Awareness of this distinction can benefit a learning environment and avoid dogmatic interpretations of the notion of commitment.

This proposition is built on the idea that the learning with art in galleries is achieved through the collective of the artist, the artwork and the viewer, which becomes innately political. Here there is movement towards an emotive turn not to express feeling or sensation for its own sake but rather to activate a stimulus for change, which I call the 'emo-active' position. This is a term I have devised to represent a moment where a collective becomes activated. It suggests the production of a strong feeling or reaction to something, but is not specifically connected to sentimental outcomes. It is also not connected to an individual, but rather is a collective 'emo-active' position that is motivated in this scenario. This has similarities to the Lil'wat First Nations term Kamúcwkalha i Kà-mú-kà-shà which Leslie Brown, Joanna Ochocka, Sylvie de Grosbois and Budd Hall have used to represent developing and maintaining communities, in the recently published chapter *Kamúcwkalha: Canadian Approaches to Community-University Research Partnerships* (2015). The term means the energy of a group attuned to its collectivity, and possibly this is what we could develop in a learning environment with the emo-active notion. In the same way Brown et al, discuss community research methodologies and the barriers that exist in an open and sustainable society we could apply such a term to the same difficulties of representation, equality and openness in our learning environments away from terms such as life long learning.

So what I want to offer with the emo-active proposition is a strategy to developing programming that fosters collective activation of a community of learners focusing on the five premises below as starting points:

1. Acknowledgement of the collective politics of the learners
2. A learning experience that collectively commits to learning in galleries for the benefit of the learner rather than to the institution, the artist or the art work.
3. Programming developed with the learner and its direction shaped by the group rather than institutional values.
4. The learners, artists, artwork, staff and practitioners are all equal members of the experience
5. The learning environment is set up to acknowledge each other as a community of learners each committed to their involvement and respect to one another.

In so doing, we can activate a shared experience where each individual can see something differently rather than becoming silent partners being filled with knowledge without questioning its origin.

THE PRESENCE OF CHOICE

Following the first proposition the next idea is around presence. The learning experience within a gallery offers different methods to have contact with histories and concepts by offering subjective interpretations through visual representations of society and daily life. This is not a ground breaking observation but what this proposal is looking for is what is *not* present and advocating that adult-education can encourage participants to inquire about what is 'not present' in the environment of the gallery.



Figure 1. How Not To Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .Mov File, Hito Steyerl, 2013

For example if I were to play a game of football but not bring a ball to the pitch it would become apparent something important was missing, as demonstrated by Monty Pythons "Philosophers Football" Sketch. In a similar way when I saw Hito Steyerl's work at the

ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London) in 2015 called *How not to be seen: A fucking didactic educational.mov file* (Figure 1) I felt the work was consciously paradoxical in the same way to the missing football. In Steyerl's attempt to become invisible the absence or silence is rendered visible. From this analogy I saw similarities to how our committed involvement in adult education works, as it uncovers what is not present by seeing the absence or silence through a pedagogy focused on committed involvement rather than learning outcomes.

This location of absence generates possibilities for social change to emerge. As Steyerl (2009) states, "Freedom consists in accepting that authority should not be questioned" (p. 15). In other words, the concept of freedom can only exist in the acceptance of an unchangeable authority. This can refer to the hierarchical power structures that currently dominate how art practice is defined, whether who is represented at the Turner Prize or what tools of practice are taught at art schools. We are only offered our freedom through the acceptance of having no choice. We are offered no position to designate a true freedom from capitalism as our illusion of choice is bound up by what the market deems suitable.

RE - LEARN

The next proposition starts by seeing artworks as interventions in a learning environment that support the learners to reconsider what is to be learned. Anton Vidolke an Artist and Founder of E-Flux (2009), in his chapter *From Exhibition to School*, discusses how the student producing artwork can move against the formative education they received. This can include a move beyond set methodologies and pre-formulated learning outcomes. This is not a revolt against the tools of the artist but against the framework in which they are developed. It is an attempt to de-habituate from one's learnt processes and to create something material that embodies and provokes critique. This insight was also shared by a book *Reversible Actions* (2010) that emerged from a symposium at the ACIVC, Centre d'Arts Contemporanies in Spain. The symposium questions the role of art, education and territory in relation to social or political change. It presents and interrogates a number of practices that have appeared across Europe as a process of producing radical territories of arts education.

I found Vidolke and the symposium at the ACIVC a good way to enter into what I am trying to describe here as they both situate an attempt to readdress what has already been learnt. So for me un-learning is simply shifting from stating what is to be learnt to a question; what can we learn differently? Adult education should have nothing to do with developing specific or technical ability, but should foster the tools needed to look beyond the normative rules of representation (Schwabsky, 2014). But in the current commodification of learning, these spaces have been compelled to focus on professional practices that offer an economic benefit, whether the institutional staff sympathise with this or not. When discussing the unique learning environments of art-school, Shwasbsky reflects

That blindness can lead to insight is something I was never taught as a philosophy major, and I suspect I would not have learned it if I'd studied chemistry or history or French either. In medicine, the fledgling doctor needn't learn how to be patient. In none of these fields is it normally considered necessary for students to learn by

systematically pulling the rug out from under their feet. That risk is peculiar to contemporary art (Shwasbsky, 2014).

This quotation may be specific to the art school but it also lends insight to adult education in galleries. To learn with and of art is to continuously question the foundations of what you perceived prior to the learning experience. This consistent need for foundational critique is the platform from which we enact a shift in practice, an outward perspective from within the gallery walls to permeate the social and political worlds we inhabit. An example of this is *The Silent University* produced by Ahmet Ögüt. Ögüt produced a space that provided a resource for asylum seekers and migrant workers who have, in the process of migration, had their skills or knowledge repressed in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2, The Silent University Archive, Welcome Room, Tate Modern, Delfina Foundation, Ahmet Ögüt, 2012.

Ögüt created a platform that highlighted difference and engaged the gallery in its own representation of practice. It engaged viewers, in turn, by producing a learning space that allowed flight from institutional dichotomy, if only briefly. It gives those who are normally voiceless in such institutions opportunities to share knowledge and take independence and ownership over their environment. This way of working allows the artwork to become the encompassing space for the development of a community of learners. *The Silent University* is an artwork, but it is also a process of sharing the tools that help us to un-learn normative social structures. It gives us the chance to ask of our adult education provision; what is it that a learner is learning rather than what is it they should have learnt.

CRITICALITY

A fourth proposition is about how we develop criticality. Adult education, as a tool for social change, needs to step out of being a cycle of critique but active in having a community of learners that embody criticality. Grindon (2010), a scholar of art and political activism, sees this institutional critique of institutionalisation as a “militant exodus from enclosure”. It presents, he argues, “a new field of creative political possibilities, a new trajectory for hopes, dreams and desires to build new social institutions” (p.12).

An example of these possibilities is represented clearly in the learning spaces of galleries that shift towards critical practice focused on the context, privilege and responsibilities of art. Ögüt's Silent University, discussed earlier, is a form of art practice that offers contextual exchange as well as the space to formulate new practices. The pedagogic shift enables the space to be both artwork and platform for other practices to emerge. Santiago (2006) states in the 'Art Education and Territory' following the AVIC symposium:

The question is understanding that what is political in art is not just the aesthetising of social problems and conflicts, but also the capacity to provide impetus for the other practices that are inserted and deployed in the interior of the context and from this perspective observe the questions and challenges that emerge (p. 98)

The Silent University highlights issue of social inequality, what Ögüt has produced is a site for those who are unseen to be seen. The Silent University works by using all of the tools that validate those who attend higher education. It allows those who are normally paperless to have documentation authorising their existence. This is where the *emo-active* response is most apparent as it allows a collective of individuals' to activate a direct response and through a shared presence produce a community of learners whom were otherwise ignored due to their migrant status. Adult education can foster such an environment as a tool for social change due to the freeing of knowledge from set parameters and developing a community of learners that embody criticality as a core value.

DISFIGUREMENT

I noticed, when working in gallery education, that artworks, in some cases, are used as tools to disfigure commonly accepted ideas. Disfigured ideas can help a community of learners to interpret worlds or ideas so formalised and intellectualised that they have become unintelligible. Art practice that focuses on disfigurement offers a different perspective. What if art practice could be used as a tool in a community of learners to locate ideas that challenge the current commodity based scenario of power relations and public policy? This question requires an answer that positions the ethical or moral as the primary and the aesthetic as secondary in a learning context. This is not to dismiss aesthetics or to claim that the ethical positions are the only space for social change. But if we develop adult learning provision that highlights the ethical through the process of disfiguring it leads directly to learning within galleries as a tool for social change. This is due to its inevitable aim to be self-reflective and reformulate pre-conceived concepts. Rancière in his book *Dissensus* (2010) discusses the Archi-Ethical paradigm where the aim of the artwork is not to represent the present but to create a sense of commonality. He argues it is "archi-ethical, because the stake here is not to improve behaviour through representation, but to have all the bodies directly embody the sense of the "common (...)" community as art work" (p.137). From here it is possible to explore the idea that art as a tool for disfiguring can attempt to envelop the learning experience to locate the community of learners as the artwork rather than the gallery's collection.

Boris Groys an art critic, media theorist, and philosopher, (2014) sees a clear delineation between work that is created for design and that, which is created for art in an article about art and activism in E-Flux. This definition of design maintains the status quo and makes it appear prettier, whereas art can be an attempt to disfigure the status quo. I see the development of a community of learners including all active partners whether artist, participant, practitioner, and so on, as the community to disfigure rather than to maintain. I believe it is in the exploration of how our gallery spaces treat art and learning as separate experiences that we are able to locate a community of learners. Art activism is not limited to a specific genre within the art world, but as a political and pedagogical concern that should permeate all institutional and arts practice, and from this juncture I see learning and art practices with a activist intent as the trans-disciplinary approach to blur the institutional definitions that are rendered unintelligible.



Figure 3, TWOC, Situation Unit Commission, mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), Artist: John Reardon, Curator: Paul Stewart, 2015

The shift in power relations towards a community of learners suggests that artwork is not to be hung and admired in a gallery, but is an expression that is more ideological than physical. This is the disfigurement: the artwork in this instance does not have a final product but is the space in-between. It is the middle between un-knowing and knowing between un-seeing and seeing. It is the space in which learning in galleries and museums is able to remove its own institutional cloak, and this disfigures what we already know into what we begin to see differently. This is the community of learners.

At mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), I curated an exhibition series called 'The Situation Unit', May- September 2015. One intervention by the artist John Reardon,

called TWOC 'Taken Without Owners Consent', a police term for stolen goods, was an attempt to shift the gallery outside of its physical space. Reardon used thirty-one hats that have been acquired possibly illegally and modified with both the mima logo and a red letter from the phrase 'taken without owners consent.' Each hat was then worn consecutively by the curator the entire day and then deposited at the gallery. This work looked to explore my role as a curator in relation to both the gallery's locality and the interactions I made on a daily basis. This space of interaction has become the practice as a moment of confrontation that was explored through the changing of appearance (figure 3).

The purpose was to locate the site of mima directly in its neighbouring community by taking stolen goods into the site of the gallery. Middlesbrough, which is in the North East of England, is a riverside town that once was a pearl of iron industry. It expanded from only twenty-five inhabitants in 1801 to 165,000 in the 1960s. But in 1980 the docks closed, the population began to fall, and a void opened between the town and the river. It is now a collection of boarded-up houses, Dickensian wall fragments and roads to nowhere. In this context Reardon is attempting to represent the formation of different industries following an abandonment of people similar to Detroit and the rust belt in the states. The intervention focused specifically on the unlearning of normative gallery displays to incorporate a wider learning experience of place, class and identification. The relationship to disfigurement is its ability to take the normative display and force the curator to be a direct instigator in the project by wearing the caps. This disfigures both the relationship of the curator to the work as well as their individual interactions on a daily basis. It forces a reconsideration into how the work functions and what it represents when taking the work to different contexts where it's not recognised as an artwork. Moreover it develops a community of learners through the process of disfiguring simple daily tasks.

The commitment here can be seen in a variety of places. Reardon is committed to produce a new transparency between the gallery and its locale. The Curator is committed to the wearing (Figure 4) and placing of the hats, which in turn produces a direct commitment of the art work through social interaction and the daily performance whether that be in the office, the pub or at home. These new interactions allow the practice to be contextualised in a wider sphere than the isolated site of the gallery through movement and travel. In the same way adult education needs to escape the invisible and physical constraints of the gallery and engage in a larger context of place and identity.



Figure 4, TWOC Commission, Curator Wearing Hat (performance), Situation Unit, mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), John Reardon and Paul Stewart 2015.

DIFFERENTLY

The acknowledgment of our own criticality as institutions compels us to be critical of one's own practices. Learning in galleries and peripheral spaces offer us room to really question. How does art affect the world? The gallery is not a site to teach something 'new', but it should present the viewer with the opportunity to think about something differently. This idea of seeing something differently rather than producing 'new' is from my experience of creating the Alternative Art College (2011-present) (figure 5) The Alternative Art College was a refusal to participate in Higher Education. In the autumn of 2010 changes were announced to the tuition fees in the UK to rise from £3,000 to £9,000 at this juncture and I refused to continue my 'role' as an art student and swiftly turned my student accommodation and other houses into an Alternative Art College. We managed to shift three months of the programme from the institution and into the home. This was due to a collective commitment from my peers and the faculty whom sympathised with the attempt to question the consumer style of education. (Alternative Art College, 2011).

What the AAC produces are both art works themselves and spaces to learn with and of art. Its role as an art practice, similar to the Silent University, is to be a space that facilitates thinking differently. Its transfiguration involved shifting to a shared learning practice, and moving from the institution to a private space, a living space. This removed the presence of structures they opposed and enabled the practice, in its fragility, to exist for a brief moment before collapsing under its own form. Like bamboo, art is able to produce structures that can hold metaphorical weights greater than its own mass. In the instance of this being realised it falls back in on itself to be reformed from the embers of its own demise. I would advocate for adult education to address its environment at what is possible in its format, sometimes it is not the place of the gallery to discuss or identify with certain issues, as it simply becomes a weak imitation of an other. Adult education

should focus on facilitating the community of learners with the tools to question the institution as much as the topic being discussed.



Figure 5, *The Alternative Art College, Education as Experiment, Goldsmiths College, Paul Stewart, 2012.*

WALLS

Another proposition is that we examine the walls that divide the inside and outside of adult education. It is about the artist as activist or agitator who consciously creates environments for critical discourse. The art here is not made for the gallery space but in support of a cause or collective learning experience. Sometimes artists choose to create art works or practices that re-formulate spaces within the cracks of the current structures.

An example is Thomas Hirschhorn's *Monuments series*, which locate a critical presence in public space, crossing boundaries and using art as a site to discuss Antonio Gramsci, gun crime or even art itself. His work, *Gramsci Monument* (2013), follows Hirschhorn's guidelines of being constantly present in the production of work in public space. The work itself is installation, workshop, sculpture and community centre, and for me is a representation of where we could develop programming the crosses the boundaries of learning, curating, art production and community activism. *Gramsci Monument* took

place on the grounds of Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority development in the Morrisania neighbourhood of the Bronx, New York. It was created in collaboration with the residence of the area to develop spaces they wanted or required. Funded by Dia Arts, they have developed a website that archives the approaches(www.diaart.org/gramsci-monument/index.php). For me the importance of this work is encapsulated from a review in *Art Review*:

When Gramsci stated that ‘every human being is an intellectual,’ his point was not that we are all equally gifted with intelligence, but that everyone has the capacity to harness the power of ideas. Such capacity requires effort. It requires making a decision, such as taking a train to the Bronx and walking to the Forest Houses, and having a conversation, perhaps about Weiner or Spitzer, but more likely about Gramsci, or about race, or guns, or art (n.p.).

(Neil, 2013)



Figure 7, Gramsci Monument, South Bronx, New York, Thomas Hirschhorn, 2013.

This could be the connection to the first proposition as this manifesting of a community could be from an *emo-active* response. When the learner is activated in such a way, there is a shift from the individual receiving knowledge from a predefined knowledge bank and possibly move towards a reframing of what is already known in an attempt to see differently. This form of practice has a commitment that engages directly with developing a community of learners in relation to the artist’s work outside of the gallery framework. In other instances the gallery and or the museum can be seen as tools that are used by groups like Silent University and The Alternative Art College to incorporate a radical topic within and against the walls of an institution. The artwork is the creation of a community of learners through creative production and the development of questioning what is defined as an artwork or a learning environment within, against and beyond the galleries walls.

Does this suggest that the 'art' has to leave the art world to make a difference? Artists, for example, might move to urban streets in search of a moral shift towards critical art. An artist's interest in critical art could reflect a need to justify aesthetic practice that in its production merely creates objects. It is the artist's search for purpose. I suggest a shift where politics and art can exist in a format that can activate a participant through learning and art practice.

SHIFT

I conclude with a short and final proposition: I feel that if we are able to harness any of the previous suggestions we need to move away from adult education being treated in anyway as commodity. The commitment of the individual to their practice is not important; it is the collective commitment to an involvement that is crucial. The development of spaces to 'think differently' can allow a community of learners to emerge from the malaise of noise that is capitalism. In their multiplicity these communities are able to locate not a 'new' space but a different one. This shift is not just an imagined utopia. It is a sincere appeal for adult education to foster tools that look beyond what has been already defined and develop different perspectives of how we live in the world through art. The current commodification of learning needs to be challenged and these propositions, I hope are possible tactics to do just that. In my career I have, at times, had to focus on programming that offers an economic benefit, and from this experience I became aware that it no longer felt like a learning experience. It became a commodity for consumers whom wanted to buy into a lifestyle the same way I brought this Vivian Westwood Denim Jacket I am wearing as I write this chapter. But this is my point, learning, or building a community of learners is not meant to be just a representation of wealth but an environment that allows different knowledge's and ideas to be formed. It is through a collective experience that adult education is truly able to offer something that is critical and reflective and not just become a government policy focused on 'lifelong learning' to legitimise public funding. What we can be sure of is that our sector has an abundance of possibilities with which to question social change and adult education. It's just a matter of having the space and the commitment to involvement to develop a community of learners.

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