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Event review of 'What if... Why not? Creative Risk-taking in Art, Design and Performance' at Central St Martins, 21st March 2016

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Abstract

'What if... Why not...?: Creative Risk-taking in Art, Design and Performance' was a symposium organised by Central St Martins (in partnership with the Teaching and Learning Exchange) as part of the on-going Teaching Platform series of events exploring contemporary issues in art and design education. It took place at Central St Martins on 21 March 2016. This review takes the form of a conversation between Áinne Burke and Neus Torres Tamarit who, along with other students on the MA in Art and Science at Central Saint Martins, devised workshops as part of the symposium. As well as these workshops, this daylong symposium brought together keynote presentations that asked whether creative students are allowed to take risks in university learning. Participants explored how risk-taking is perceived within learning and artistic practice, considering whether teaching can accommodate the possibility of positive failures.

Keywords

risk, workshop, student-led, failure, curriculum design, assessment

Introduction

'[What if... Why not?: Creative Risk-taking in Art, Design and Performance](#)' was a symposium held at Central Saint Martins College on the 21 March 2016. The event opened with hands-on creative practice workshops on the 'Rules of Random', run by students from the MA in Art and Science at CSM. The workshops invited participants to engage with the core questions posed by the symposium:

- Is there a space for creative students to take risks in their learning at university?
- How do we understand and experience risk taking within students' learning and practice?
- What teaching approaches support (or not) the possibility of 'positive' failure?

The daylong symposium also incorporated presentations by speakers, including artist Mark Dunhill (Dean of Academic Programmes at CSM), Professor Matthew Kieran (Professor of Philosophy and the Arts at the University of Leeds) and Dr Silke Lange (Associate Dean of Learning, Teaching and Enhancement at CSM).

As students who ran workshops for teaching staff at the symposium, we decided to position this review as a conversation, in order to give a flavour of our perspective on being involved in a staff event and how we experienced the tutors' conversations with each other.

Neus and Aïinne in conversation

Neus: *How did students become involved in delivering workshops at a staff symposium?*

Aïinne: Through Heather Barnett, one of our lecturers on the MA in Art and Science at CSM. As part of Unit 1 of our course in November 2015, Heather directed a workshop with the title 'Rules of Random'. Then, in early March, she invited volunteers to devise and facilitate our own 15 minute long versions of these workshops for the symposium. There were seven workshops in all. As well as Neus and myself, a number of other students volunteered to run individual workshops. These were Ellie Armstrong, Marie Macc, Franceska McCullough, Michelle Von Mandel and one workshop was co-directed by Hannah Scott and Nicholas Strappini.

The workshops had individual titles that responded to the concept of 'Rules of Random', which was used to name the overall first hour of the symposium, during which they took place. After much consultation as a group, we decided to engage visitors from the moment they arrived at CSM. Each symposium attendee received a colour-coded bag during registration. The paper bag contained various objects that had been selected by the student volunteers running the workshops. Visitors were asked to keep these bags sealed. Instructions on the outside of the bag directed visitors to the symposium room and the different colour of each bag indicated which workshop they should join once they arrived. The workshops were held in the same room as the symposium. Each workshop was directed at a table that accommodated up to seven participants. The participants of the symposium were divided between the seven workshops and stayed in that workshop for the duration of the allocated time for the Rules of Random exercise. The participants of each workshop demonstrated to the group what they did in the workshop and the outcome of their work. Each of us seven students also described our workshop in the context of our own practice and research. Heather Barnett concluded the overall exercise by showing photographs and talking about the results of the Rules of Random workshop she devised and directed with during our MA course work in our studio in Archway earlier in the year.

Neus: *I created a workshop linked to my artistic practice about genetics entitled, 'DNA Mutation and Recombination Dadaist Poem'. I introduced the following risks: uncertainty about the activity's objective and a set of rules corresponding to each side of a dice that would be applied according to repeated dice rolls. At the end of the activity, I gave a handout with an explanation of the activity's context.*

The workshop participants had to compose a visual poem from words they would write in a random manner and then deconstruct according to a set of rules that emulate DNA recombination and mutation processes dictated by repeated dice rolls.

The workshop's objective was to revive and modernise Hugo Ball's performance in the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, in which he appeared dressed in a machine-like avatar and read his poem, 'Karawane'. I entered the resulting words that composed the visual poem into speech software that read the final words aloud, resulting in a contemporisation and inversion of 'Karawane'; the original performance involved humans aping machines but we presented the final element of the performance using machines that ape humans.

The deconstructed words resulting from an aleatory process and the rules emulating DNA processes of recombination and mutation connected with the Dadaist poetry characteristics such as incantation of onomatopoeic constructed words, disparate words conjoined to create nonsense, and fragmentation of words into deracinated syllables or manipulated alphabets.

Åinne: For my workshop 'Evoking Memories Through Touch', participants worked in pairs. One person was given the role of 'scribe' and the other 'explorer'. The explorer was asked to close their eyes, reach into the paper bag (which had been given to them when they registered for the symposium) and take out one object. With their eyes still closed, they felt the object for a set time. The scribe then asked them a series of questions from a questionnaire (provided at the start of the workshop) and wrote them down. The questionnaire was split into two parts; the first asked the explorer to describe the object and second asked about the memories evoked by each object. The participants swapped roles so that they were able to develop a co-authored short story of shared memories, created by their combined descriptive responses. This is a workshop I devised and continue to develop in various projects that facilitates individual and group senses of self, and how we come to know who we are throughout our lives (Burke, 2016). In my MA practice I am continuing to develop that sense of self as part of a local community in a global family on a planet we share with all life. It is part of an on-going project called 'TEAM, The Earth And Me' that I am developing with a community in Myanmar.

Neus: *Heather Barnett followed the 7 student-led workshops with a presentation describing how the MA Art and Science course encourages students to focus on process rather than finished artwork and to incorporate risk factors into our artistic practices. She presented the Matter-Method-Material experimental project in which after a brainstorm about subjects, methods and materials, students are assigned a random word from each of the three categories and focus on the process, rather than on the objective of producing a final artwork. Her discussion outlined how we, the students, are usually taken out of our creative comfort zone. As a student and artist with ten years of experience, I found this activity challenging. I was assigned three subject-method-material words that I would have never used. But after my first investigations, I managed to link them to my artistic practice and the process was very rewarding.*

The symposium then continued with speakers and participants discussing the challenges of how to cultivate creative process that involves risk-taking, failure and uncertainty in an educational system that doesn't allow enough time or flexibility around meeting curricular targets to do it.

Åinne: During the afternoon papers I particularly enjoyed Mark Dunhill's talk, 'Houdini's Box' (Philips, 2002). Dunhill demonstrated how risks were taken in the past due to circumstances at play at different moments in history. Mark told us about how in the 1960s, Central Saint Martins created an exploratory way to develop curricula where students explored their work without pre-defined parameters of a set curriculum. Students were free to take responsibility for their own learning by setting up their own projects in their own time frames, without direction. Despite being quite revolutionary this was accepted by the college management at the time. I liked that sense of trust and risk-taking as I am sure all the students gained a very strong sense of who they were and what they wanted to pursue in their work and life.

The group conversation shifted during the subsequent papers during the late afternoon. Both Professor Matthew Kieran and Dr Silke Lange talked about art and art process, which brought

the conversation back to how academics plan, develop, direct and administer their courses. What started as a wide-ranging, stimulating conversation on creative risk-taking swiftly transitioned to people discussing the frustrations caused by institutional administration. During these conversations, the institution was increasingly characterised as an inadequate framework that does not support 'risk taking' as part of creative development. It is totally understandable that the conversation came back to the everyday trials and tribulations of creative work in a formal educational environment for everyone involved. Aspirations for creative risk-taking as a core philosophy for creative learning needs a concerted effort from everyone, including the students. Who is going to promote and support it and how can it be achieved throughout UAL?

As both a student at UAL and someone who has worked professionally as a director/producer of holistic edutainment projects, it was intriguing to listen to these exchanges. During my career facilitating edutainment events that aimed to develop creativity and imagination through art, technology and science, I have produced and directed what might be termed 'high-risk' projects. The process of organising these projects was fluid and allowed for different experiences and varied outputs. However, the structures surrounding educational administration struggle to allow fluidity into curricula, despite the success of the projects academically and creatively. The frustration which led to me scaling back my work was reflected in the late afternoon discussions. Working as staff in the system is incompatible with risk-taking unless it is supported by that system, through its structures. I worked as a maverick on the outside of the educational system bringing projects into it and leaving once they were completed etc. The symposium gave me an inside view of the frustrations that academic staff have in delivering courses under the constraints of heavy administration, sometimes at the loss of creative freedom. I sensed a huge desire to develop a creative risk-taking philosophy and practice, central to the students' learning.

***Neus:** During these discussions, I found myself in an interesting position; although I am a qualified teacher I never think of risk, failure and uncertainty as an educator because I have never had a teaching position, but I introduce them into my artistic practice as part of the creative process. In my artistic career, I have developed a working method that consists of shifting back and forth between concept and material. This allows me to move forwards in the creative process in which I set a proper working environment to act according to a set of rules and allowing risk, uncertainty and (no fear of) failure, as said in the symposium. However, a creative process that embraces failure as an integral part of creation is fine in theory. In practice, there are usually external pressures that penalise failure if the process doesn't arrive to a satisfactory point in a given timeframe. Examples of such external pressures are finishing an artwork either for an exhibition or to have a grade in a course. That said, artists, students or otherwise, should give themselves and be given room to experiment and fail, and be encouraged to learn from failure as well as success when researching techniques, exploring their artistic practice, and following the criteria stipulated by institutions.*

The avant-garde movements changed their framework in order to adapt to the needs of the time allowing flexibility around their rules, accepting different artistic practices and interpretations of the same movement. I believe that by questioning the educational system, interrogating one's own teaching processes, and giving students a degree of creative freedom that is not tied to a marking system, we could be moving forwards. Certainly, as indicated by the presentations and the discussions at the symposium, we are facing a controversial subject that clashes with what is established; certain traditions are very difficult to change.

Áinne: By considering creative risk-taking in an educational and creative environment, it seems that what emerged by the end of the symposium was another question about whether you can introduce and maintain a 'fluid' process of risk-taking in an adaptable art learning environment whilst, at the same time, pleasing less fluid, non risk-taking administration at local and regional levels of government in the UK.

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Biographies

Áinne Burke and *Neus Torres Tamarit* are students on MA Arts and Science at CSM.

Neus Torres Tamarit graduated in Fine Arts in 2007. She is transitioning her artistic practice to creating art about genetics. She is an artist collaborator at the Art Exchange at the Tate Modern and has exhibited internationally at places such as the Louvre Museum, Srishti Institute of Art Design and Technology (India) and the Susak Biennale (Croatia).

Áinne Burke has thirty-five years experience as an artist, writer, producer and director of workshops and projects in Ireland and internationally. Her work centres on the development and facilitation of our creativity and imagination about who we are and the world around us through art, science and technology. She has worked with a wide range of organisations including RTÉ (Ireland), Danmark Radios (Denmark), Norwegian Broadcasting Organization, Netherlands Outside Broadcasting, Svergis Television (Sweden), Canadian Broadcast Co-operation, BBC (UK), Philips Media (Netherlands, New York & UK) and The Office of the President of Ireland.