

## **Maximising the MA Show**

**A report on the purposes served by MA Fine Art shows, the practices followed in staging them, and their effectiveness in meeting audience needs**

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## 1 Introduction

### The purpose of the research: the questions defined

The Fine Art<sup>1</sup> MA show represents a pivotal juncture in an emerging artist's career. It is a crucial rite of passage which marks a student's exit from the art college and, for many, the entry-point into a career as a professional artist. It is both a moment of academic assessment and an important opportunity to present a body of work to the public, including to an audience of peers and arts professionals. This research project set out to interrogate the Fine Art MA show as it is manifested through various courses and colleges of the University of the Arts London (UAL)<sup>2</sup> and, more broadly, through shows representing MA courses at art colleges and universities across England and Wales. The research aimed to consider the following questions:

- How is the MA show currently regarded by a] the staff and b] post-graduate students of the Colleges of the UAL: what are its roles; what expectations are attached it?
- To what extent is the MA show regarded as a public facing event, as part of the 'knowledge transfer' and 'outreach' agendas of the UAL, and what audience development practices, and artist/student PPD<sup>3</sup> strategies are followed in its staging and presentation?
- What is the current audience experience of arts professionals attending MA shows at the UAL, and more broadly across art colleges and university art departments in England and Wales?

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this research project, a liberal interpretation is applied to the concept 'Fine Art' whereby the term is understood to apply to all the creative disciplines that are currently represented through MA shows at the UAL. Along with courses actually labelled 'Fine Art', this also includes courses such as 'Interactive Media' (at London College of Communications) and 'Visual Aspects of Performance' (at Wimbledon College of Art).

<sup>2</sup> Comprising six specialist art and design colleges – at Camberwell, Chelsea, Wimbledon, Central Saint Martins, London College of Communication and London College of Fashion - the University of the Arts London (UAL) describes itself as 'Europe's largest university for art, design, fashion, communication and the performing arts' (see: [www.arts.ac.uk/about-university-of-the-arts.htm](http://www.arts.ac.uk/about-university-of-the-arts.htm)).

<sup>3</sup> Within the UAL, the term 'PPD', or Personal and Professional Development, refers to learning activities that are designed to equip students, or staff, to operate more effectively in their chosen professional milieu.

- From the findings of the above, is it possible to identify examples of current good practice and suggestions for future practice that could be disseminated to benefit both staff and students at UAL and the broader Higher Education-based Fine Art community in the UK?

## **Background, and aspirations**

In 2006, I was invited to act as a 'advisor' for Axis Graduates<sup>4</sup>. This required me to attend MA shows at two specialist art colleges, one in London and one in the English regions, to select three graduating students from each college to be profiled on the Axis website, to give the graduates publicity and professional endorsement as they moved out into the professional world of the arts, or creative industries. As a advisor, it seemed to me that insufficient consideration had been given to how audiences (and, in particular, the professional art audience that I had assumed MA graduates would be especially keen to attract) might be facilitated to engage with the shows that I visited. There seemed scope for a re-evaluation of how events of this kind are tailored to cater for a public audience. Consequently, I developed the research proposal outlined above in the hope that its findings could lead an enhanced awareness of the audience experience, which might, in turn, prompt new thinking and practice in this area of visual arts' presentation.

A better understanding of the expectations and the experience of the tutors, students, and other members of Higher Education (HE) institution staff involved in staging shows, and of a sample of the arts professionals who attend them, could enable HE institution managers and those involved in MA Fine Art courses to adopt a more reflective and informed approach to the staging of MA shows. It is hoped that the findings of this research will inform debate about the purpose and efficacy of this important milestone in a fine art student's development, which also offers a high profile opportunity for HE institutions to promote themselves to a variegated public audience. The skills learned by students in staging the MA show would thereafter be directly transferable to the organisation of their future exhibitions and events.

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<sup>4</sup> Axis is an on-line database featuring the work of professional visual artists working in the UK (see: [www.axisweb.org](http://www.axisweb.org)). 'Graduates' is a specific initiative within the Axis database in which recent graduates selected from MA Fine Art courses in England and Wales are profiled (see: <http://www.axisweb.org/grHOME.aspx>).

## **2 Summary of methodology**

The programme of research, which took place between July and November 2007, involve five discrete but complementary elements:

- Face-to-face interviews with 14 UAL staff involved in the staging of MA shows, including tutors and programme directors responsible for MA courses, communications staff, and exhibition organisers.
- Face-to-face interviews with 7 students who were presenting their work in MA shows at the UAL
- A survey of the opinions of 19 arts professionals who had attended MA shows at colleges in England and Wales during the period June to September 2007 (carried out in association with Axis Graduates).
- 'Video diary' style observation and commentary on MA shows at three of the six colleges of the UAL by arts professionals, followed by audio-recorded interviews, to gain an understanding of the audience experience of a small sample of arts professionals.
- A 'Personal Bullet-Point Research Diary': a space to record insights-in-progress and to reflect on research as process (included, as an Appendix 5, in the UAL/CLIP CETL version of this report only). This element of the research also included my own experiment with the 'video diary' format (partly as a means of testing it's suitability as a method for other project participants to use), and the compilation of a photographic record based on a number of the MA shows that I visited during the research period.

### **3 The Data Collected and the Findings**

For reporting purposes, the findings of the research have been divided into two categories. The first category (4.1) focuses on the perceptions and practices of those with either a direct involvement, or a professional interest, in the staging of MA shows at the UAL. The second category (4.2) focuses on the responses of a range of arts professionals to the MA shows they had attended, at the UAL and at other art colleges and university art faculties in England and Wales, during the period from June to September 2007.

#### **3.1 The UAL perspective: what are Fine Art MA shows for and how do they work?**

In order to answer this question, 21 face-to-face interviews were conducted between 17 July and 30 October 2007, with a range of staff and students at the UAL. The objective was to identify a range of stakeholder perspectives and priorities regarding the purposes and aims of these events, and to gain an understanding of some of the practices followed in developing and staging the shows for a public audience.

##### **3.1.1 Interviews with UAL staff**

###### **Interviews with UAL staff**

Between 17 July and 30 October 2007, face-to-face interviews were conducted with fourteen members of staff, representing a diverse spectrum of roles, who in some way were identified as having an interest in the presentation of MA shows at the UAL. For the purposes of planning the research and organising the reporting, two particular categories of staff were identified: 'gateway' individuals and individuals concerned with 'communications and development'.

The 'gateway' individuals were people selected for interview because they had been identified as the person with the best overview of how the MA shows were staged and co-ordinated within a particular college of the UAL. The intention was to interview one gateway person for each of the six colleges. In the event, the gateway person for London College of Fashion was not able to be interviewed within the timeframe of the fieldwork. Interviews were therefore held with representatives of just five colleges: Wimbledon, Chelsea, Camberwell, St Martins and London College of

Communication. The gateway interviewee for Camberwell was actually based at Chelsea at the time of the research, leading an AHRC funded research project, but had been responsible for co-ordinating the Camberwell show during the previous several years. Four of the gateway interviewees were, or had been, MA course managers and tutors. At LCC, where there is less central co-ordination of the MA shows (with different and distinct courses presenting shows at different times of the year), the gateway person was the college's exhibitions manager. The gateway interviewees had a 'hands on' involvement in the staging of the shows which meant that they would be in direct liaison with both postgraduate students and with the other members of the college's staff who were involved in the production and facilitation of the exhibition.

The 'communications and development' individuals (henceforth referred to just as 'development') had a different kind of supportive and strategic relationship to the shows. Their involvement was, in general, less hands-on, and their interests were, arguably, less directly student-focussed and were more identified with the development priorities of the college or university as a whole. The roles that they occupied reflected the university's need to communicate with external stakeholders, or potential stakeholders; and, in targeting these 'development' individuals as contributors to the research, it was assumed that the MA shows could offer a means by which their respective concerns might be advanced. Further details regarding who the UAL staff interviewees were are given in Appendix 1.

The interviews were 'semi-structured'. A template of questions had been developed, covering the pre-defined areas for which data was sought. Although this template was followed in each case, the relative emphasis given to the questions depended on the professional roles, interests and opinions, of each of individual staff member. Each interview lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Extensive notes were taken during the interviews, which (with the consent of the interviewees) were also audio-recorded.



## **'Gateway' interviews: summary of findings**

Each college at the UAL has its own modus operandi when it comes to the staging of MA (and other) student shows. This reflects the fact that each college has its specific advantages (such as its reputation with particular niche constituencies), whilst at the same time facing its own peculiar institutional constraints (such as the limitations posed by the architecture and facilities occupied); each has, over time, evolved its own ingrained ways of doing things; and each offers different programmes of learning, based around disciplines that have their own conventions and requirements of public display. In coming up with proposals for how MA shows might, in the future, be staged more effectively, it seemed important to acknowledge that differences of culture, character, and operations exist across the Colleges of the UAL. One-size-fits-all solutions which ignore this basic fact would, I think, be less likely to succeed. It seemed necessary, therefore, that this report should attempt to reflect something of the variety of the situations faced and approaches followed in the different constituent parts of the UAL. I will do so in this section of the report through a series of short 'case studies', based on the transcripts of 'gateway' interviews. These are constructed to give a flavour of the diversity of the MA show culture, and of the practices surrounding it, that currently exist within the university. The individual colleges are not specifically identified here because the point is not to draw attention to a particular institution, or to make or imply judgements, but to make the point that, whilst there are areas of commonality, there are also noteworthy points of distinction that help to give character to the whole.

### **College 1**

There is a very conscious recognition here of how the MA show needs to be supported by professional practice. We have a course unit called Research and Professional Development; ten lectures that look at research methodologies and at professional issues, like the relationship between the gallerist and the artist. That's in the autumn term, so it starts early.

We have an interim show in an external venue in January or February which serves as a practice run for the final show. That is not assessed and it tends to be more rough and developmental, with students showing in an open plan warehouse space. We get about a thousand visitors to that.

In June or July, we run an auction to raise money for the catalogue, signage and poster for the MA show. The auction has become a more and more professional event. It brings in collectors to buy, say, a Gormley, or a Caro. It is a big deal now, with a Sotheby's auctioneer. That pays also for the paint for touching up the walls, and it means that the students don't have to do additional fundraising beyond contributing work to the auction. Their contribution is therefore in kind, rather than in money. A team of them help to run the auction, which is seen as a professional practice experience as well.

Each student defines their own display needs, in terms of space and technical requirements. Then we locate them in the best way possible throughout the building, on five floors. Spaces are very different in different parts of the building. I allocate the spaces, and then there is a few days to discuss and agree. I'm also responsible for making that sure technical workshops are available to the students and that information is communicated to them clearly, which is done through the internet noticeboard, which is a good medium, particularly for the part time students.

The technicians are staggered through the summer to be available to work on the show, getting the spaces ready and helping the students with technical issues. There are also tutorial slots that students can sign up for, probably two over the summer. Summer is a quiet time, so the MA show takes over during that period.

Our Project Co-ordinator deals with the publicity. She organises adverts in Art Monthly, a-n, etc. There is a marketing department in the college but we tend not do work too directly with them, they are happy to let us do our own thing. She also deals with the sponsors. There is a sponsorship committee that the students sit on; we had three main sponsors this year. We find though that the auction is bringing in the money, which makes us less reliant on external sponsors. There is also a committee for the interim show and a catalogue committee. All of which are about professional practice. It is about using the considerable existing skills and contacts that some of the students have already. The Project Co-ordinator and I also sit on the committees. They meet every two weeks, starting from around November for the interim show.

We organise special events whilst the show is on, with gallerists and professionals who lead critique groups and provide professional feedback to the students. So professional practice carries right through to the end.

## **College 2**

We're very different to other UAL colleges, we are very media and commercially driven. Photography is our big MA show of the year. There are shows also for Photojournalism, Graphic Design and Interactive Media. Sound Art, which is a new MA just starting, will have one too. The college also runs a number of MAs, such as Journalism and Script writing, and courses related to administration and the creative industries, which don't have any kind of exhibition.

We're not very fine art driven. It tends to be audio visual or projection work, so of a different type to fine art. We don't have the studios that other colleges have, so all the shows take place in our public spaces. And students can't really prepare in a studio context for the show. They would have to try things out on site. We can't cater for really large installations. So, the nature of the space really determines what it is possible to show. Photography is nearer to a fine art course in that the students are assessed on the show, whereas the Graphic Design show has a different purpose. It is more to promote their work to the outside world and to the industry. There is no assessment at that point.

One of the biggest obstacles to having high quality exhibitions at the LCC is the fact that it lacks a fit-for purpose major space for display, that is flexible and kitted out to cater for a variety of media, that has regulated public access, rather than constant through-flow) and controlled lighting. In this sense, LCC faces more challenges than other colleges in the UAL. The spaces used for MA shows include the Atrium, which marks a route from reception through to the media school, via the cafe. It is used for displays throughout the year. The Upper Street space, which again is used as a thoroughfare, is also a display space. Again, as a thoroughfare it can't really be used for installation work. The Well Gallery is the closest thing we have to a white cube gallery space. It has four white walls and is a self-contained space. That's probably the largest exhibiting space and has quite good lighting. It's good for graphic design and photography. It suits big bold images, and as it is overlooked it gives a range of perspectives. There is also the Eckersley Gallery on the right as you enter the building. But that's not used for MA shows, it's quite awkward. It was used for the MA interim show last year. Its advantage is that it is a shop window space for people looking into the college. So the main difference between us and the fine art based colleges is the availability and limitations of space. Only our interior and spatial design courses have their own studios.

The MA shows are scheduled according to course start and end times. Each MA course develops its own systems and its own show. Photojournalism and Photography are in the same school, but happen at different times to maximise use of the best space. There is no central co-ordination of the shows as a whole. One happens, then another one happens, and then another. That is probably quite unhelpful for the public, who perhaps want to see a good selection of shows at one time. But I suppose we don't really have the facilities to do that in this college.

The strength of the shows here is that each course knows what it wants to achieve. They are very successful courses and students do get people buying their work and they do get jobs and so on. So the MA shows do a job in acting as tools on the road to successful professional progression. The catalogues tend to look highly polished and the students have their own very professional business cards, so there is an impression that the students are ready to make it professionally.

The shows here tend to be addressed to specific niche audiences, representing the particular industries and disciplines. Maybe passers by on the street don't come in as much as they ought to. For those people, more information might be useful. Maybe our contact with the local community is through specific projects rather than through openly advertised events. We are quite involved in the major regeneration of this area, so we are trying to get the local community in, but not necessarily for the degree shows. That is done more through 'widening participation' events.

### **College 3**

There has been a process of rationalisation to bring the MAs here together: to have one curriculum and one timetable across theatre and fine art. There are pathway leaders for each medium: The pathway leaders as a committee co-ordinate the MA show. All have a hand. Our idea is to present one unified show – something that we have been moving increasingly towards. Fine art and theatre have historically always been quite difficult to bring together, but this year more than ever we are presenting an exhibition of MA students, rather than individual pathways. This year all the exhibition spaces are mixed so that we don't demarcate the different disciplines, which for us seemed a very desirable thing to do. It goes back to the question of how the MA wants to present itself: as five separate pathways, or as one MA course in which specialisms can occur, but which is also a place of cross-disciplinary debate? We are moving towards the latter, but how the public or audience understands that is

the key. Is it being communicated clearly enough? Do people know what they are getting when they come to the college?

We try to start the process leading to the show towards the beginning of the Spring term. In March, we had a month long interim exhibition, an external show at Trinity Buoy Wharf. We see the interim show as, in a sense, an embedded piece of professional practice that will not be quite a dry run for the final exhibition, but will raise issues and problems and practical ideas – such as how to achieve sponsorship deals – that can offer a stepping stone towards the final MA show. We open it to all MA students as an inclusive event that allows everyone to contribute. For the first time this year we mixed all the students up, to present four exhibitions that ran on four successive weeks.

In the subsequent term I got an experienced artist in to do a three-hour session with the students to talk about all aspects of planning the show: raising funding, approaching the audience, those sorts of issues. We had further meetings after that, to deal with, for example, the relationship with the college's marketing department. Last year we tried to involve the college gallery and the Engine Room in doing a co-ordinated professional practice programme for the students. But basically we couldn't afford to carry on with it. Our budgets have been cut and we couldn't afford it.

Our vision for this year's show was of everyone working together to present one integrated MA show, not a show of different pathways. It seems to me that that is the best way to use all of our resources, whether human or financial, in the most efficient way to try to present something that appears a coherent whole, rather than somehow fractured.

#### **College 4**

The postgraduate programme director sits on the exhibition committee, working with the publicity team and the students to make sure the shows are as effective as possible. First we had to establish where the shows would be, book the spaces in advance so the students could develop work with spaces in mind. We encouraged the students to have a big say in the process. It should be a dialogue, rather than staff led. It would work differently each year, depending on the student representation, which varied from year to year. For a lot of students, their level of engagement would just be to put up their work.

We had to manage student expectations, emphasising that this was a show within a college, rather than in a west end gallery. There is a certain rawness about student shows which is quite distinct from shows in a space that is generally set up for exhibition. These are studio spaces that are being recreated for exhibition.

Approaches would differ from course to course. There are seven quite small courses. Each course would allocate their space, according to student requirements and would work with technical staff to develop those spaces and present them as a collective presentation. Then above that would be the promotion of the overall shows, involving shared signage, posters, etc. Some courses would additionally put resources into their own publications and publicity. So there was a bit of a mixed economy. We wanted the students to take ownership, so if a group of students wanted to do a catalogue they would have to fund that themselves.

An ongoing problem was that the MA shows followed on from the undergraduate shows with only about a week's gap. So it made logistics quite problematic. We were always working against a very tight deadline. But if the MA shows got pushed further back into July there would be a diminishing audience; students leave and people start to think about holidays. Because the BA show was considered a bigger event, sometimes the MA show felt a bit of an after event; as though the college had peaked for the undergraduate show. We worked to counteract that, but it did feel like a much smaller event.

A number of the courses would have particular activities arranged to coincide with the shows. In printmaking for example they managed to get people to support sponsored prizes and there would be a prize giving event. There could be potential for more sponsorship of various kinds. There wasn't a great budget for the shows; a relatively small amount of additional money could have made quite a big impression.

### **College 5**

The students form themselves into committees: for the staging of the show, the communications, the sponsorship, and the catalogue. So a lot of responsibility is delegated to the students. They get set up almost immediately at the start of the course. This year's students were really good at it. It all really depends on the competencies within the group. But we do expect that level of professionalism when we're recruiting. That's an interesting shift between a BA and an MA student. The MAs are students, but they are also dealing with the professional outside world at the

same time. In some cases students may already have their own galleries and collectors. Others may have had ten years out of education, working as a professional artist. Within a group there will be different interests and levels of activity and the challenge is to create forums where the group can learn trust, and can delegate responsibility within themselves. Learning is less hierarchical when it's via peer learning: working together and learning from the other students. The course director is a kind of sideline figure, who should stand apart to let the group develop its own strategy and level of performance. I give them a timetable and then tell them that it is up to them to take responsibility for how the MA develops that year.

The student forum meetings are geared up to be quite practical. They offer professional practice induction through more informal channels: through sessions with the space manager, or health and safety. That's really useful for the students because you're getting a level of professional discourse from the person responsible for that within the college. And it makes them aware that there is a world outside their small college group. It makes the workings of the institution more visible to them. We hold weekly meetings of all MA course leaders; that is particularly important at the time of the show. Any problems arising can be resolved there. All MA shows happen simultaneously; five at the moment: textiles, fine art, graphic design, curatorial practice, and interior spatial design (ISD). One of the big issues is the allocation of space within the building. That is an important thing to agree. In the past ISD and textiles have been partly on the margins. Fine art, being the biggest course, tended to take priority. We changed the strategy this year and put ISD, graphics and textiles slam in the middle of the main building, so that they were shown alongside fine art; so that when people came to see the shows they would get a sense of the whole MA rather than just be presented with fine art; so that the MA was presented as a totality.

It is the final show of the year, after the BA show, and it is regarded as an important event which attracts masses of curators and dealers. It also attracts a lot of international students. So it's important to have a good show to attract, potentially, a world wide group of people. There was a VIP event, hosted by the head of college, to welcome collectors and curators. Collectors do come to buy work, such as Charles Saatchi and Richard Greer, who bought work this year. The alumni office asked when it would be best to do an alumni event and I said it should be done on the opening of the show. We had four openings in that one day. So it was quite a coordinated strategy and a broad range of audiences we were dealing with, all on

one day. It was important to be done on that day because of the fervour and energy around the opening. It helps to give students a sense of what the professional world is like out there. I told the students to be in at 8 o'clock for the breakfast event and to be around for the whole day. Most responded in that way. There were certainly a number of sales this year. Before the show the students were given a talk about how to price work, but some overpriced it, which was a problem. One important collector wanted to buy two pieces, but the prices were too high. So that's an issue to be addressed next year.

### **Purposes, aims and desired outcomes**

The 'gateway' interviewees recognised that the MA shows served multiple interests and agendas. Most of the interviewees occupied both tutorial and management roles, and were sensitive to the importance of the shows in terms of the professional development and progression of individual student artists, whilst at the same time recognising the 'bigger picture' strategic potential that the shows represented, for their individual colleges and for the university as a whole.

From the point of view of the students' interests, in some of the colleges the principal practical consideration was that the shows represented the culmination of academic assessment: 'First and foremost it is part of the assessment process. On an academic level that was the priority. The external examiners would visit and consider the work in a professional context.'

The shows were also an important launchpad for students: to have their work purchased, and to help them to move on to other things. As one gateway interviewee put it: 'It launches an individual's practice to the art world, and we would expect some opportunities to stem from the degree show. We also expect work to sell; increasingly there is a market for emerging artists, since the success of Frieze [Art Fair].'

The commercial opportunity presented by the shows was a common theme; reflecting what was perceived to be happening in the contemporary art zeitgeist. Other comments on this theme included:

'There is quite a bit of hype about the market at the moment. I think all the London colleges are interested in that. Ours has always been a good selling show, but there is more awareness and appetite for that now.'



And:

'We organised a session on developing relationships with potential buyers, and about things like editioning and pricing work. In terms of student attitudes to this, things have changed and generally they are happy to embrace the idea of selling work. Frieze has had a huge effect on students' perceptions that it's ok for people to buy their work.'

As well serving the interests of the exhibiting students, the MA show was seen as an important marketing opportunity for the college. It was described as: 'an important tool in terms of publicising the courses and driving recruitment', and 'our flagship event for showing the calibre of work presented'. 'Spreading awareness of the success of the course helps recruitment,' said one interviewee, 'and the show helps recruitment more than anything else.'

Beyond their role in publicising students, courses and colleges, there was a suggestion that the MA show also served a function as a vital indicator for the state of emerging contemporary art:

'As a collective thing it is also an indication to the art world as to where the course is at that moment in time. The work collectively contains and manifests the debates and discussions that were raised during the year. It is a barometer of where fine art postgraduate study is currently at.'

### **The audience**

The potential audience was perceived to include: the professional art world and collectors; an academic audience of art school peers, postgraduate students and potential future recruits; family and friends of the exhibitors; and the general public. Comments on who it was hoped would attend the shows included:

'There is a very broad art public: from curators and collectors, through to the general public. There were attempts to engage audiences that would not usually walk into art galleries; events were staged for local audiences to make it as welcoming as possible.'

'I'm glad to see professionals from galleries here; those who are effective in the cultural world. You want those people to come in and see the work.'

'Gallery people and collectors are important in terms of the career aspect of students.'

'There was a broad academic audience. A lot of communication within the HE sector about the standard of courses is communicated through the shows.'

'There are lots of students who come around the show, particularly BA students. Our marketing is to people who are involved in looking at art. But there are also the mums and dads, and the students' friends, so you have a range.'

The stratification of different audience types was reflected in the way that the distribution of publicity for the shows was planned:

'There are various professional worlds that the courses connect with. For example the conservation course targets a very different audience than fine art drawing. Each course would have its own specialist mailing list connected to their area of expertise. This would join with the broad college mailing list and then the mailing list that the students themselves put together.'

None of the gateway interviewees said that visitor information was collected at their event. One commented: 'No, there is no time for that. There are no mechanisms in place, though it would be interesting to do that. We would welcome some central input from the university on that, as long it was done in the right way.'

### **Areas for improvement and initiatives to be further developed**

The gateway interviewees were split on the question of how effectively their colleges were currently managing the shows, and using them to attract and cater for their potential audiences. Two felt that, whilst there was room for improvement, their colleges were currently doing a quite an effective job. Three felt that, although there were some successes in this area, there remained significant room for improvement.

Where areas for development had been identified, there were often practical ideas for how things could be taken forward, some of which had already been piloted, or were in the initial stages of development. These included:

‘We had a website which showed all the work this year. It was the first time that we’d done that this year. It was not hugely successful, but something we would want to work with. It offers a good way for people outside of the UK to be aware of the work.’

‘Some links were formed with curatorial practice, which could be built on. So there is some opening up of boundaries, that’s an ambition that I want to continue.’

‘This year a link was built up with another UAL college, through a cross campus crit. Seven of ours went over there but only four came back here. But the principle was established.’

We decided two years ago to try to encourage other exhibitions to take place at the school at the same time. We asked the then Drawing Fellow if he would curate a show within the MA studios. Basically, we wanted the opportunity to bring in a different kind of audience who would come in and, happily, find that there was an MA show happening at the same time.

‘We do need to provide guidelines around the elements of the show. This is done through weekly student forum meetings. Next year I think I need to firm that up more as part of the course strategy.’

‘We need to firm up the professional practice content. There is a professional practice element to the course, but that’s an area we currently need to develop more. We get outside people in occasionally, but that’s not specifically geared to the show.’

‘It would help to establish the MA show committees into the course structure from the beginning of the year; bringing that much more to the fore.’

The interviewees mentioned other areas for improvement, where deficiencies had been recognised but solutions still needed to be identified, such as:

'We need to look at aspects of the technical provision; the availability of equipment, for example. We need also continually to look at navigating people round the space. And we need to look at front of house and the process for administering sales.'

'There is always quite a problem in terms of selling work from the show. A lot of students put a lot of resources into the work for the shows and we were perhaps less successful than we could have been in marketing their work. We perhaps didn't have the contact with collectors that some other colleges have. Also, the mechanics of selling were quite difficult. In the end the students sold their own work independent of the college.'

'In terms of doing things better, the main things are publicity and marketing. There needs to be more of a coming together of the courses and the marketing department. Mailing lists are very guarded things. We have got our own marketing department to publicise exhibitions and events, in magazine listings for example. But the courses like to do their own thing. And neither of them likes to share their mailing lists. Individual course want to nurture individual clients, patrons and buyers and want to let them know individually when things are going on rather than have them bombarded from other sources with information. So they tend to organise their own publicity, be it by the students or through course leaders. Sometimes you won't see an invite until literally a week before the opening. So, sometimes things break down in terms of communication.'

'At the moment there is no cross college working around the MA shows. This summer there was the first teaching and learning event between the Wimbledon and Chelsea Fine Art courses, which was an exchange visit and group crit to look at certain students' work. The problem is that the courses are completely non-aligned: they start at different times of the year and finish at different times.'

'Some MA shows had no external signage promoting the show. That is the kind of thing that needs to be improved. We should definitely have more information on the front desk because it is a complicated building and you need a sense of where to go. Here there is no sense of a hierarchy of importance for events in terms of the awareness of the people on front desk.'

‘There are still confusions about who does what: about roles, about job descriptions. To say that I could tell you exactly what the systems are in the relation to the MA shows, for a lot of things, is not true. I could tell you what we have done, what we have worked towards. But in terms of a fully worked out rational system, that’s not clear.’

### **The need for strategic leadership**

Some of the latter points listed above point, perhaps, to a need for greater strategic leadership at a management level, within the individual colleges and within the university as a whole. There was certainly a sense from the interviews with the gateway individuals at some colleges that their efforts to ‘maximise the MA show’ would be circumscribed unless there was a change in the management’s understanding of and commitment to the importance of the shows. It seems appropriate to end this section of the report with a testimony of this kind:

‘Taking the MA show seriously, promoting it seriously, saying that this is an important tool for marketing the courses, marketing our college, and our public profile, fighting our corner within the market. In general, I don’t think, that the college has taken that seriously in my time here. There is no sense of a strategic point of view from management about what the MA shows want to achieve.

I’d like to see the college say “look we’re going to use these opportunities; these are our gold standards now, the undergraduate show, the MA show. We want these things to be very public, important times of our year and we’re going to do everything we can to promote that;” so that when people come here to see those shows it feels like the school is putting that as its top priority for that week; so that when you come you feel that there is an event, there is something happening that is important. I would just like a shift in emphasis to say “look we really want to use these things and really promote them.”

## **'Development' interviews: summary of findings**

### **Purposes, aims and desired outcomes**

Questioned about the purposes of and desired outcomes for the MA shows, there was a general recognition amongst the 'development' interviewees that the shows were a means of addressing and serving a nuanced spectrum of interests, beginning with the interests of the students and extending outwards to embrace the interests of the individual MA courses, the respective colleges, the university as a whole and, in certain ways, those of the wider community. As one interviewee put it: 'Everyone has different aims: the students will want their work to reach an audience; the course director will want to show off, and build the reputation of, the course; the institution also has its aims. So, there are slightly differing agendas.' Another interviewee remarked: 'For students, it's the culmination of their degree, it's peer assessment. From our point of view it's about promoting the university; it's the most important thing we do during the year.' A third summed the purposes up thus: 'Recruitment, outreach, profile. Also, it's an opportunity for the students to leave the college with a sense of achievement.'

From the point of view of the students', a number of purposes and desired outcomes were identified:

'It's very important for students to show their employability and show their readiness to enter the creative industries. Some of the product designs shows are very professionally staged and oriented. That helps the students, it helps us in our business [promoting the university], and it helps the institution as well.'

'There is a commercial opportunity for students to sell work. Everyone would like our students' work to be bought by influential people. That would create a win win situation for everybody; both the students and the institution get recognised at the same time.'

'It's key milestone, rather than the end point of their education. It's the point at which they join a broader group of peers. They're not just being pushed out of the door, it's a platform to demonstrate their work: to peers, to business and to industry. If we respect what students are doing then we have to give them the best platform to show what they can do.'

‘The basic question should be the value to the individual students: what it adds to their learning experience, or to the success of their practice and their future employment. On occasions very large sums are spent on exhibitions. If the audience is primarily internal, not the sort of people who would buy work or create opportunities for the students, then we would need to look at the value for money. I don’t think there is anything wrong in investing time and money as long as it produces results for the students.’

The MA shows also served an important communications function both within and about the university (and its constituent colleges):

‘People from across the university attend the shows; that just wouldn’t happen in physics or history departments of universities. So the shows have a very strong communications function within the university. We could use them as networking events; to promote the college, but also to get internal connections and collaborations to occur.’

‘It is partly about saying “this is the tradition and culture of Chelsea [for example]; this is what we do”. The work itself gives a stamp to the kind of institution that we want to be recognised as.’

‘The QAA [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education] is not interested in the actual quality of the work produced here, but it is interested in how we know about the quality of the work, and the MA shows are a significant element of that understanding.’

Much of the external communications function of the MA shows was perceived to be geared towards promotional and pragmatic aims. For example:

‘It’s a time for maximising the exposure of the university and promoting it as much as possible. We aim to get sponsorship for the shows, which will help to bring in new people who can support the university in some way and raise the profile of the colleges.’

‘They are another recruitment tool; an external relations exercise to bring in potential students: to talk to current students and staff, to look at the work, and to

locate us on the arts scene. It's a chance to show potential students what they could achieve.'

'It's about publicity: our own profile within the neighbouring community, our profile in the university, our profile in the wider arts context.'

It was observed that the MA shows represent a promotional opportunity, and advantage, that is perhaps unique within the academic sector:

'A striking feature of arts education compared with other academic disciplines is that it does involve the exposure of the students' work to a much broader public. Educators and other related professionals will come to look at the shows, and that, in turn, gives us a perspective on the institution, as well as on the students. So, it helps to determine our reputation.'

### **The audience**

Questioned about who the audience was for the show, the 'development' interviewees produced a long list of potentially interested categories of visitor, each with their own motivations for attending. It included: other artists, current students, college staff, external examiners, potential students, peers from other colleges, school teachers, alumni, collectors, curators, critics, creative industries professionals, potential sponsors and funders, the press, 'people who want to steal ideas', family and friends, people from the neighbourhood, and people with a general interest in the arts. As one interviewee put it: 'There are particular interest groups with different needs.'

Some of the visitor categories identified were currently the subject of specific targeting and customer care, particularly certain 'higher status' ones. One development interviewee remarked: 'It's a different emphasis for different audiences. I wouldn't say there was a hierarchy, but there are people that we need to take care of very well, such as collectors and potential sponsors. They need one to one attention.' It appeared from some of the comments, however, that the opportunity to attract other categories of attendees is yet to be fully explored. The following interview extracts - responding to the question 'who is the audience for the UAL shows?' - give a sense of the perceived diversity of the audience:



'Everybody's peers: the students' peers', our peers as an institution, gallery owners, collectors, individual buyers, critics and the press. Also alumni, to give a sense of belonging.'

'Key for the students is making sure the creative industries are linked into the shows, people who can help them with their next steps.'

'Examiners are an element of the professional audience for the shows.'

'People working at the college; we want to know what our graduates are producing. It's an opportunity to reinvigorate your personal enthusiasms and passions. It reinforces why you work here.'

'Staff from the institution itself. I don't think we make enough of the chance to draw people in from non academic roles and students from across the university. I'm not sure for example whether our foundation students attend the MA shows. There would be a great opportunity for graduating MA students to pass lessons on to undergraduate or foundation students.'

'There is a broader role in showcasing the colleges' work to a wider public; encouraging local people to come in. Schools and teachers are important too.'

The uniqueness of the UAL in having so many students' shows was seen by one interviewee as a potential weakness and by another as an opportunity. On the one hand:

'We have so many shows here that it is difficult always to get for everybody the kind of audience that they need. That is one of the disadvantages of being such a big university: the danger of having too many, which means that audiences will make choices about which to visit. Inevitably smaller shows, such as at Byam Shaw, will miss out on some of the audiences. If Byam Shaw was in a small rural town, its MA show would be the thing to see. Regional art colleges don't have some of our advantages, such as a large metropolitan audience to draw on, but their show is more of an event in their locality.'

But, on the other:

‘Having a rolling programme of shows is actually a very good advantage that needs to be utilised.’

There was a general sense that the MA shows were taking place within an increasingly competitive and professionalised environment – within Higher Education and within the visual arts - and that, in order to maintain and build on the current status and successes of these events, the colleges of the UAL would need to up their game. The following interview extracts illustrate this perception:

‘In recent years there has been a step change in expectation and demand for degree shows but the university’s practice in catering for that has not kept pace. There are probably hundreds of thousands of people attending the shows over a year and we are just not doing enough to cater for that audience. The college needs to change with the times. Art has become a major commodity and we need to cater for that new demand.’

‘We are increasingly in competition with major contemporary art institutions in London and when you’re competing with the likes of the Serpentine, it’s hard for us to measure up.’

‘From corporate a sponsorship point of view, slick presentation is an important factor. So we would like to see more emphasis given to the slickness of the guest experience. Otherwise audiences cannot be expected to return.’

‘The graduate shows are the most important things that the University does each year and we really undersell them. It seems that the audience is the last thing to be thought of. For example, St Martins is held at the end of August, which is the worst time of the year, when everyone is still on holiday. We have to improve our performance drastically to compete; otherwise we will lose out.’

‘A huge amount of galleries come to the shows to source talent. There is a level of customer care in their operations that is not even thought about at degree show level. In many respects, the MA shows are like art fairs: they are displays of work in a space assigned to you. Maybe an art fair approach would be too far for some people, but it should be considered. Display involves considerations like pricing, and the work should not be considered completed until that less glamorous, admin based stuff has been properly and professionally considered and completed. At

postgraduate level that is a crucial aspect of the professionalism of being an artist. Currently, the students just don't have a clue about many of the important practicalities of being an artist.'

The quality of the MA show visitor experience across the UAL was perceived to be very uneven. One interviewee said: 'It varies so much within each of the colleges, some of whom don't necessarily see it as so important.' As a consequence, the audience development potential of the shows across the university as a whole could not be fully capitalised upon. Another interviewee remarked: 'Because of the varying levels of the shows we cherry pick one or two a year that we can work with. The rest we let go because the hill is too high to climb. So we're missing tons of opportunities to get people in.'

A barrier to being able to understand and improve upon the shows' appeal to visitors was an apparent lack of empirical knowledge across the UAL as a whole about who the current audience actually is and about what it thinks about the visitor experience on offer. The only audience research reported appeared to be of a crude and quantitative nature: 'We do collate some college audience figures; clickers for the big events. We are working to nominal quantitative targets. The indicators will be press coverage, footfall, and attendance at specific events.'

The general practice appeared to be to collect little, or no, information on audiences, as is suggested by the following responses (to the question 'Is any information gathered regarding audiences and their perceptions?'):

'No. At every other arts organisation I've worked for there would be visitor surveys.'

'Only anecdotally from the guests that we invite.'

'There seems to be no data tracking of visitor information. No follow up. That should be initiated.'

'I presume that each college will keep some sort of visitor book but whether anything is done with it I don't know.'

‘There seems to be no marketing follow up to find out who comes, or how satisfactory their experience has been. And no ‘thanks for coming’, provision. The people coming to the shows are effectively customers and there is no customer service. I wonder what the repeat visit ratio is.’

‘From a sponsorship point of view it would be really good for potential funders to be informed by professionally commissioned, or more structured, market research. At the moment it’s just done on hearsay; professional audience research would be really useful.’

### **Current perceptions, and the way forward**

Amongst the development interviewees, there was a general sense that, currently, the potential of the UAL MA shows to meet the multitude of identified purposes, and to cater effectively for a range of different audiences, was not being fully appreciated, or maximised:

‘Across the university there are pockets of good practice, but some of the colleges don’t get anything right. If the best practice were applied uniformly there could be a much better outcome.’

‘I don’t believe the power of the degree shows for engaging external audiences is fully appreciated. The university is just learning about how to nurture the interest of philanthropists, companies, etc. So a level of shared understanding across the university is needed.’

There was a suggestion that a greater level of strategically directed co-ordination could help to improve things:

‘I think both the purposes and the potential of the shows is understood but it is a question of who is going to ‘action’ these. There is a sense that everyone thinks it is someone else’s responsibility. I think it would be more helpful to have one individual nominated to oversee them, and for people to report to.’

For fresh ideas and new guidelines geared towards positive change to be implemented effectively on a university-wide basis, the strategic leadership would need to be clear, and come from the top:

'University Management Team is the body that recommends policy for the University. In terms of dissemination, the heads of college and the deans are key; and that must then filter down via course directors.'

### **Areas for improvement**

The development interviewees identified a number of areas where they felt that practices related to the MA show could, or ought, to be improved. Two particular areas were referred to a number of times: the sale of students' work, and issues to do with the time at which the shows were open to the public.

In terms of the sales issue, there were two shades of opinion. The predominant view was that a more professional and commercial approach needed to be followed. Thus:

'There has to be a commercial aspect to what you do when you come out of art school. There are so many students who want to go down the commercial route and they are completely unprepared by the university for that. Sales [from the MA show] are a really important thing for students, but it is not thought about by the students or the colleges until the last minute. The students don't have price lists, and they often lack contact information. They haven't even thought about editing their work. They don't know about the nuts and bolts things, such as invoices, and that means they can be taken advantage of.'

Set against this view, however, was a recognition that too strong an emphasis on the commercial aspect of the students' work, might be to the detriment of its edginess, or experimental quality. One interviewee observed that: 'Students will have different opinions about the priority of selling, so there are different agendas.' Another felt that: 'Graduate shows are about exciting work, rather than highest quality of polish. Perhaps too much professionalism can sanitise the rough edge. There should be room to include process, rather than just product.'

Regarding the issue of timing, there was a more generally shared view that the current situation would benefit from review:

'We can make the visitor experience better, but there are also those bigger questions of whether we are maximising the opportunity by staging them when we

do. Timing is an issue. The shows are not necessarily scheduled into the best possible slot to get people in, so they attract quite small numbers relative to the BA shows.'

'Only occasionally do we time them well. Chelsea happens in late September, and that I think attracts more attention.'

'There is an issue of when and how long the shows are open. If you come at 10 in the morning, there will be work that is not switched on. It needs to be much more of a partnership between the college and the students. At the moment too much of the responsibility is on the students. It needs one person to take overall responsibility. The shows should be on for a minimum of one working week; professional curators don't work at weekends. Also, the time of year is often bad. St Martins, for example, was in the last week of August which meant effectively missing out on the audience from the city.'

### **Ideas for improvement**

As well as identifying particular issues where it was recommended that current practices might be reviewed and reconsidered, the development interviewees also made a large number of specific proposals regarding how both the generic approach to and the detailed implementation of particular aspects of the shows' delivery might be improved. Collectively, these proposals, which are listed at the end of this paragraph, comprise a professionally informed 'wish list' of ideas, which might warrant further consideration. It should be noted that many of these proposals correspond closely to the recommendations for improvement that emerge from the findings of the 'arts professionals' element of the 'Maximising the MA Show' research, which are reported in section 3.2 of this report:

'More emphasis needs to be placed on quality control; an independent eye on details of the presentation before the shows open. There should perhaps be maybe one person in each college to take responsibility. It is a question of trying to achieve certain standards across the colleges without being too prescriptive.'

'In terms of generic things that could be rolled out across colleges: there should be one single, well informed information desk, the front desk people are really important. And then maybe some basic guidelines advising on things like:

advertised times, shows being open for one working week, a good catalogue, clear signage, etc.'

'There should be: publicity that communicates well the purpose and benefits of attending the event; solid guest lists that include alumni as well as fundraising prospects and other key audiences; invites sent out six weeks in advance; dates that don't conflict with other colleges within the university; a terrific visitor experience: from greeting, to signage, to ease in buying work, etc; organised and clean visitor areas; students on hand and prepared to talk with members of the public about their work; a professional-looking presentation.'

'More signage; better front of house; consistent pricing of works; maps, brochures or pamphlets on the work shown; a slick appearance; private tours/talks by artists and/or course directors, to give more information on the art produced.'

'Small degree show committees could be formed with representatives from all aspects of the college: front of house, security, marketing, sponsorship, course directors, student reps, etc.'

'We are competing for philanthropic gifts with the Tate, etc. We could look at the standards of their Patrons events and how to adapt that to the context of an art college, to deliver an experience that is personal and memorable. A level of professionalism and a personal touch for our important 'prospects' is important.'

'The marketing staff from each college should be involved in audience research. There is a need for standardisation of approaches across the colleges. From a marketing point of view, we would like to have more of a lead in to the show with the students; to feed ideas in much earlier.'

'Guiding people around exhibitions is not something we do particularly well. If students are on site, near their work and willing to talk about it, it makes it more interesting for people. To have students proactively seeking conversation would be a good idea.'

'The shows are organised by space allocation rather than by curatorial practice; how work can be crammed into space, rather than working out how the show could best be presented curatorially.'

### **In conclusion: 'reflect, then celebrate'**

If the message of the development interviewees regarding the way forward for the MA shows could be summed up in a short phrase, it might be 'reflect, then celebrate'. By common consensus, the MA shows represent a ready-made opportunity to propound the achievements of the UAL, its students and its staff; but, although much effort is at present invested in them, current practices needed to be systematically reviewed in order that a more consistent and informed approach can be developed that could take this important aspect of the university's outward-facing mission on to the next level. The need to 'reflect, then celebrate' comes across strongly in this final series of development interviewee extracts:

'A lot of time and effort goes in to putting on the shows; it amounts to a sizeable investment in staff time, as well as financial resources. So it is important for us to be able to attract a sizeable audience in order to justify the investment from a college perspective. The emphasis at the moment is more on the quantitative rather than the qualitative. We don't currently have a forum to discuss internally how things are working, so that we could really start to articulate in a more structured and formal way what the work we are doing is all about. There is very little staff and academic discussion about that.'

'We don't think enough about what we can do to maximise the impact for each individual student. It's about the ease and the least expense of the college, rather than taking the view that it's the one opportunity in a young artist's career when you can guarantee that there is an audience for their work.'

'It's the easiest way for us to blow our trumpets. It's amazing that we don't do more to maximise it.'



### **3.1.2 Interviews with UAL students**

During September 2007, face-to-face interviews were conducted with seven students who were presenting work at the MA shows held at two Colleges of the UAL: Wimbledon and Chelsea. In each case, the interviews were held during the later stages of the show, whilst the students were on campus for the purposes of invigilation, or for other business relating to the event. At Wimbledon, the interviews were arranged in advance, with the co-operation of an MA 'pathway leader'. At Chelsea, with the prior consent of the MA course director, four students were identified for interview on a 'drop by' basis; they were approached and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed for the research whilst they were invigilating at their show. This approach enabled a balance to be achieved within the survey sample overall, reflecting a range of situations in terms of respondents' subject interests, gender, nationality, and (to some degree) age. The three Wimbledon students who volunteered to be interviewed represented three different pathways of the college's Fine Art MA: painting, drawing and sculpture. Two of the students at Chelsea had been following the Fine Art MA; two had been studying for an MA in Textile Design. Overall: three of the interviewees were male and four were female; five were UK students, two were from overseas; the students were either in their twenties or in their thirties. The interviews were 'semi-structured'. A template of questions had been developed, covering the pre-defined areas for which data was sought. Although this template was followed in each case, the relative emphasis given to the questions depended on the character, interests and opinions, of each of the individual students. Each interview lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Notes were taken during the interviews, which (with the consent of the interviewees) were also audio-recorded.

#### **Purposes, aims and desired outcomes**

Each student was questioned about their perceptions of the purposes, aims and desired outcomes of the MA show. The show was regarded by all the students as a major milestone in their professional development. Student 1 summed up this view in describing the show as: 'A one off opportunity for a big outward facing event to set ourselves up for what we want to do for the future ... After this, no show for the next couple of years will draw so many people. So it's a really big event in that way.'

Staging the show seemed generally to be understood as an integral part of the learning process of the MA course as a whole; helping to prepare students for the professional work of being an artist thereafter. The show was perceived to create a framework and an incentive to develop work on a more ambitious scale than had been possible before. Linked to this was the challenge involved in staging the work as effectively and professionally as possible. A third significant aim or purpose of the show, from the students' perspective, was that their work should communicate with an audience in such a way that further opportunities for making and showing work might result.

The potential benefits and challenges associated with the show were variously described. Three distinct but related phases in its evolution were alluded to: the making (of art work); the staging (of the exhibition); and the response (of viewers). This triumvirate of considerations was articulated by student 1: 'First, it's an opportunity to display the work. You spend so much time making work, but you can really kill it if you don't display it well. So it's a way to practice that public display element. Secondly there is the hope that you may get another show or opportunity out of it. That is more important than, say, selling work. Then there is the exhibition of your work to your contemporaries, to those on who you might hope to have an impact.'

Student 7 stressed the sense of ambition that the show had stimulated: 'I had been to see the other MA shows in London, some students had really gone for it, others not. I said "this is your chance to really go for it". So I made an ambitious series of works ... I'm conscious, for the show, of making paintings that other people are going to see; people I admire, including my peers and the general public, who I want to impress.'

Student 6 emphasised that the opportunity presented by the MA show had provided an important incentive to follow the MA programme: 'Making work in a studio that may not be seen is different from making work for a show that all your peers are going to see. It's a good kind of pressure to have that event to work towards. Otherwise you may just have spent the money [course fees] on having a studio. Getting the work out into the public domain is an important part of why people are here.'

For student 4, the purpose of the show was 'first and foremost to improve the way I am able to stage work. Developing curatorial sensitivity and decision making, having

the experience of making mistakes and going through things, reflecting on what didn't go as well as it could.'

In terms of the opportunities that might follow from the show, the students had quite moderate ambitions. The realism of their expectations was conveyed in student 6's remark that: 'I don't think I every really expected the Serpentine to come and offer a show, but I'd like other curators or artists to come around and if they like my work to get in touch with me. Part of the function of the MA as a whole is to find like minded people to work with.' Student 4 observed that: 'Any kind of feedback would be helpful at this stage. The important thing is to get connections to help the next step.' Student 7 remarked that 'The MA show is an important platform in terms of visibility. I have quite realistic expectations however; I know that making your way in painting is a slow thing. An MA is both a benchmark and a way of slowly moving things forward.'

Although some positive feedback from visitors was reported, all the students felt that it was too early to comment on whether any concrete opportunities might emerge from the show. The students stressed the value to them of making useful professional connections above the value of achieving sales from the show. None had at that stage sold any work. One had arranged for a commercial gallerist to visit his space on the following day. Some of the students remarked that the value of the show would extend beyond its staging; it would have a useful afterlife in the form of the documentation produced from it.

The Textiles students MA show experience was somewhat different from the others in that they were participating, effectively, in an interim show; the final presentation of their work would take place two months later. For these students the experience was 'more of a taster for what might happen in November.' Having an additional public exhibition as part of the wider Chelsea MA show was seen as both a benefit and a distraction. Although seen as a good learning opportunity, which had produced a satisfying result, student 3 commented that 'it has been a huge distraction to do this now while I am still exploring ideas.'

### **The audience**

The students were asked who they considered to be the audience for the UAL show and whether they had a hierarchy of preferences. Three specific categories of

audience were described as being particularly important: arts professionals; peer group; and family and friends.

The following interview extracts are representative of the range of views expressed:

‘First [in order of audience priority] it would be peers and contemporaries in the art world – other MA students from other colleges (there is a really important post-graduate community in London). Then, perhaps, more established artists, and minor galleries; anything above that would probably be pie in the sky. Family and friends, because of the support they’ve given you; it’s a chance for them to see where that support has come in helpful.’

‘The professional audience is who we would hope to come. Industry professionals [first], followed by design-interested people. There are also a lot of students and tutors from other colleges. And prospective students have been asking about the course.’

‘The main audience would be art professionals. I’m expecting that the school would invite those kinds of people. I’m interested in both commercial and public galleries. It would be nice for other artists to come and give a response. Also, my friends who have not seen a proper presentation of my art.’

‘There will always be a certain amount of general public attendance, and friends and family. But, naturally at this point in our careers, first and foremost in terms of the people we’d want as our audience are people who could further the chance for us to make work ... My aims are not to sell work; they’re to get opportunities to make more work ... Facilitating professionals are the top priority. Artists are also useful because they offer an informed opinion.’

‘I’m interested for other artists to see my work at the moment. I’m at a point of wanting to do some group shows, and so I’d be most interested in meeting other artists. People of like mind and probably of a similar career stage.’

‘I’m pleased my family came. Friends developed through art are an important audience, peer group artists ... I have a gallerist coming tomorrow; I’d be happy just to talk to them. I don’t have long term goals other than to keep on doing what I’m enjoying doing. My family is just as important as the dealer.’

The Chelsea students spoke of a 'VIP' event, organised by the college and attended by gallerists and potential buyers, that was perceived to have been successful. The Wimbledon students felt that it was less easy for their college to attract a professional, art-specialist audience. 'Somewhere like the Royal College has a certain association as an institution,' remarked Student 5. 'It has quite a large audience made up of people with particular interests, such as to buy work, or to represent a gallery. The impression I have is that there is less focus on that here [WCA]. I don't really know what the reputation of the college is, or what kind of audience its likely to bring in.' Student 6 remarked: 'The problem I think we have here is that Wimbledon doesn't quite have the reputation of being at the forefront of contemporary art ... Promotion by the college seems a bit low key. The work being made here is really good, and the tuition is as good as at any of the colleges of the UAL. But perhaps that's not being communicated to the outside world at present. Maybe it's the responsibility of the students to come up with something that is going to be more controversial or newsworthy.'

The Wimbledon students had, as a group, compiled, and distributed information to, a 'wish list' of people in the art world who collectively they wanted to attract, but there was little confidence that many of those would have attended the show. A number of students, from both colleges, commented that there did not seem to be any systematic monitoring by the colleges of who had, in fact, attended.

There was a sense that the audience priorities of the college might not necessarily tally with those of the students. Student 5 remarked: 'I didn't really get much of an impression about who the college targeted. They have mailing lists of one kind or another. The marketing person talked about prospective MA students, but for current students they are low down on our list of priorities.'

### **Preparedness**

The students were asked how much previous experience they had had of presenting exhibitions, and were questioned about how well they thought they had been prepared by their college for the work involved in putting on the MA show. All but one of the students had had some previous experience of showing in and helping to prepare exhibitions. The Wimbledon students noted that a show facilitated by the college, at a space in Trinity Buoy Wharf, which they had participated in earlier in the

year, had been a valuable preparatory experience. 'That show,' said student 5, 'helped us to work as a team. We had to use skills that weren't just about making work. It was a useful preparation for the MA show ... quite eye-opening. It posed challenges in making and putting up the work and in getting people there. We had total control over marketing, fundraising (or lack of), and catering, etc. We made the decisions and the mistakes were ours to make and learn from.' Student 6 concurred: 'The Trinity Buoy Wharf show was a very positive experience. Probably more realistic to an emerging artist than the degree show ... It made me completely change how I made work, and that fed into the work that I made for the degree show. It was important for giving us hands-on experience of putting on a show. It was also a useful creative stimulus.'

Conversely, the Chelsea students remarked that the cancellation of an interim show that had been planned for them had been a disappointment. Student 1 observed: 'that was one element where there was a shortage. Although it worked out well in the end, it would have been better to have dry run interim shows during the year. There was supposed to be a show, but it didn't work out. And there were a couple of people who suffered through that lack.' Interim shows were widely considered to be of value, but students recognised that the time constraints involved in completing the MA programme made such shows difficult to fit in.

The Textiles students commented that they felt that they had been under-prepared for the work involved in their show and unsupported during the installation of it. More advice would have been appreciated. Student 3 remarked: 'There was no real direction given. We were given this space to work with and then just pretty much left to get on with it.'

There was a consensus amongst the students that they had not been systematically prepared by their college for the business of staging the shows. The perception of the Chelsea students, in particular, was that they were expected as a group already to have the necessary skills:

[The MA show] is incredibly student-led here. The organisation proceeds on the basis of student led committees. Tutor input is minimal. We had a committee for all of the signage, for distribution lists, an installation committee, and a private view committee. It worked really well because there was a huge input from the artists who were showing ... [but] It is very much reliant on the students having their own background knowledge in this area. Some people on the current year

group have very strong experience on managing and organising shows. A year group that lacked those people would be relying a lot more on the tutors.'

At Wimbledon, 'it was a case of learning by doing. But I don't think that is such a bad thing, at MA stage you shouldn't have to have your hand held.'

The value of learning how to be resourceful and self-reliant as an artist, allied to a need to co-operate with your peers, was also recognised by another student: 'As a fine artist you have to learn to be independent and there are only so many things that the school can do. It is more important to work with and learn from other artists on the course. It was a really good experience to work with the other students.'

At Wimbledon, the students had been offered advice seminars with a limited number of artists representing different career stages. The more experienced artist brought in for this purpose was considered 'a bit of a one off phenomenon – opportunistic, phenomenally organised. While I did find some of it really useful, some of it was just too over the top for me.' Another student remarked that: 'The most useful thing for me was having an ex-student come in to talk to us. She was able to pre-warn us and to make suggestions about how we could organise ourselves, and make arrangements for documentation ... she came in about six weeks before the show.'

Asked about what else might be considered to help prepare students more effectively to stage the show, the following suggestions were made:

'Not something more formal, in terms of lectures or an academic programme, but a practice based programme, such as a rolling programme of shows where two or three artists showed together spread throughout the course of the year. Getting curators in wouldn't necessarily be good as each display is specific, so a general theory wouldn't necessarily be helpful.'

'The visiting tutor sort of input could have happened once or twice more and could have happened throughout the year, rather than at the end, and from a variety of different people, or people who performed different roles.'

'Perhaps more of a critique of the interim show. There was a critique on the day of installing but a specific, group orientated tutorial about the breadth of the experience as a whole: from our decisions about funding, to how we dealt with

marketing, through to how the work was installed, and especially through to how we document the work, would have been a useful addition. Something holistic and critical.'

'Visiting another student show could be a useful addition to professional practice. We could, for example, have some kind of an exchange with another college ... One thing that this institution could provide would be access to other colleges and courses; from the UAL and outside. Links with a curating MA would be particularly useful.'

Several students agreed that building a relationship with student curators could potentially have added value to the experience of preparing for the MA show. Not having forged links with curating courses, at the UAL or at other London colleges, was felt to be 'a missed opportunity'.

### **Other people**

The students were questioned about their experience of working with people at their college during the organisation of the show. Course managers and tutors were generally felt to have been helpful and supportive, particularly with regard to curatorial advice, concerning the choice and display of work.

Technicians were said to have been helpful in supporting the making of work. Some had assisted in the building of exhibition spaces and the installation of work, which was highly valued.

The co-operation of estates/maintenance staff was reported to be 'mixed', and at times fraught: 'They can be quite helpful, but can also be incredibly stubborn and territorial and obnoxious. They moved some of my equipment for no evident reason. Another student had plugs pulled from the wall, which caused carnage with her motion sensors. Generally the relationship was quite frustrating.' This relationship appeared to work better at Chelsea than at Wimbledon.

The relationship with marketing and communications staff was recognised to be important. At one college it appeared to work well; at the other, the experience was less positive: 'I found the marketing department very frustrating to deal with. They sat in on most of our meetings and I found them a very antagonistic presence. They



were quite condescending and I was quite unclear about what their role was. They seemed to be there to suggest that some of the ways we were going about things were not suitably imaginative and we should make a lot of effort to do things differently. But there were no real offers for support, or instigating of innovative marketing strategies ... There were also confusions about how things were funded and who would have responsibility for distribution. They could have been more supportive and cooperative.'

The most important relationship forged in the making of the show was with other students. As one student put it: 'Your peer group comes in very useful. You can become blind to your own work so there is as high level of trust in other peoples opinions.'

### **Other MA shows**

The students were asked which other MA shows they had taken an interest in, and whether there were examples that the UAL could learn from. The responses indicated that MA students do take an active interest in what their peers at other colleges are doing. The Royal College of Art (RCA), Goldsmiths, St Martins and the Royal Academy (RA) were the postgraduate shows most frequently cited in their replies. The most analytical comment, which echoed observations made by other students about the balance of 'commodity versus criticality' in the show, was that:

'People this year have particularly talked about the RCA and RA shows; about how easy it was to navigate the work, particularly the RCA sculpture show. They both benefited from having fewer students. The Slade and Goldsmiths have a slightly different feel to them as there is a less slick and polished feeling to the overall show. But it's up to the students to determine the feel. There is a balance to achieve; I prefer a less commodity feel to the show. Being slick can lose edginess. Though the RCA show was pleasing to navigate and experience, I personally left feeling somewhat underwhelmed by the lack of edginess to the overall show. I got more of that from Goldsmiths.'

### **Influence of the MA shows on UAL student recruitment**

Students were asked whether they had attended UAL MA shows prior to joining courses at the university and whether this had had any influence on their decision to

do so. Several had seen previous shows at their college which had not left a particularly good impression. One noted that: 'That experience slightly worried me and put me off a bit the idea of joining the course. I was not encouraged by the experience, but it did make me more determined to do a better show this year.' Another remarked: 'although the show wasn't that great, it didn't really sway me either way. I have a relative who works here, so I was able to get positive information about what the college was like, without needing to rely on the information from the shows.' A third observed that: 'I was more interested in the variety of work [than in the quality of the show] and that to me was a positive thing; that people were working on such different projects. And that influenced me to try a variety of approaches when I joined the course.'

A fourth had seen two MA shows at Wimbledon prior to joining the college. 'I came two years ago specifically when considering WCA as an MA possibility,' he said, 'and that show was definitely a factor in convincing me to study here. I came to get an impression of the place as a whole and of the kind of work being made. The impression I got was that it was a small institution, I felt quite welcome as a visitor, and there was a good breadth of different ways of making work. It seemed a fairly serious place ... [however] Last year's show was significantly worse, I didn't see anything I was particularly interested in.'

### **Ideas for maximising the MA shows**

The students were asked what they thought could be done differently to improve the effectiveness of the shows, or the student experience of staging them. Some of the responses focused on practical details. Others emphasised the need for more commitment and leadership, at a strategic level, from the college.

On the practical side:

'A more tightly knit show, rather than a labyrinthine scrabble for space, is better. A number of people had two spaces in different areas of the building, which wasn't necessarily for the best. More editing would be preferable.'

'Small technical things from the gallery sector that make a difference to how people will view it would be useful, such as how to approach wiring a show.'

The college should increase its ability to facilitate the show's installation, and give students more interim opportunities to practice display.

'Being able to get in to the space earlier and having clearer information about who was around to help us [would make things easier].'

In terms of commitment and leadership:

'More professionalism [is needed] from the college from the top down ... the impression that we got was that once the BA students had left, the college went to sleep ... There was a general lack of cohesive support from the college ... It doesn't seem to be given the priority that it deserves.'

'I would like the college to say "we're leading this, we're taking this on as a responsibility" ... There is too much onus on the students at the moment ... When it comes to putting on an MA exhibition the institution really needs to ask itself what kind of profile it wants to have as a London college ... To place an ad in Frieze magazine might not get more people in, but it would help to position Wimbledon as an ambitious college with ambitious students ... Some of us have been a bit disappointed with the lack of any great ambition to make this show something that would benefit us as students and the college as well. PR is minimal to say the least ... It should be something that the institution automatically does to a greater extent. Out of all the London postgraduate colleges it really has to work harder because its profile isn't as high as its competitors, because they are in a competitive market place. The show and the students are a great asset, as are its staff, and it really needs to be capitalised on.'

### **3.2 The arts professionals' perspective: how user-friendly are Fine Art MA shows and how could they be improved?**

In order to answer this question, two approaches to gathering data were developed. The first was an email survey designed to capture retrospective feedback on the experiences of 19 arts professionals who had attended MA Fine Art shows in England and Wales in the capacity of advisors for the Axis Graduates project. The second approach was developed as a more immediate way of recording the perceptions of a small sample of arts professionals who were asked to attend MA shows at three Colleges of the UAL (Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon) and, during and immediately following their visit, to reflect on various aspects of their audience experience: through 'video diaries' recorded on site; and through audio recorded interviews undertaken at the completion of their visit.

#### **3.2.1 The Axis advisors' survey**

The survey was carried out by email between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 2007. The total survey sample comprised 28 arts professionals who had been asked to visit MA shows, during the summer and early autumn of 2007, to nominate students graduating from those shows who they considered worthy to be profiled on the Axis website. Nineteen individuals responded to the survey (68%). The survey was designed to capture a mix of quantitative and qualitative information regarding three different aspects of the visitor experience: the quality and utility of information provided; the quality of the personal interactions experienced at the show; and the quality of the environment in which the show was staged. Respondents were also asked to state: whether they felt encouraged to maintain contact with the college/university or with the exhibiting artists post their visit; their perceptions of the professionalism of the show's staging; and their suggestions regarding how the visitor experience could have been improved.

#### **The quality of the information provided**

##### **Information accessed prior to the visit:**

Seventeen advisors received or looked up information about the show before attending (i.e. did some pre-visit research/preparation, or were on a mailing list). Three rated the advance info/website 'very good'; 6 rated the advance info/website

'good'; 4 rated the advance info/website 'satisfactory'; 3 rated the advance info/website 'unsatisfactory'; 3 did not comment. – more than half who commented were positive; less than 20% were negative.

#### *Positive comments on advance information*

- The design of the information was professional. The short text in the leaflet was by an established artist- which sparked interest in attending

#### *Negative comments on advance information*

- Information about the show was not clear or easy to find on the website. The printmaking MA exhibition show was located in London and not in Brighton, this was a major disappointment as this was not made clear. I would have gone to this if I had known sooner.
- The website was advertising the dates of the show but the opening times were not published ... it is important to mention the opening times. There was no information about the PV [Private View] published.
- More info generally should have been available, especially on-line.
- .I would have preferred more information on the artists graduating this year and on how they had decided to proceed with the business of the MA show so that I could know what and who to look out for.
- Details of this year's artists [would have improved it].

#### *Pre-information: summary and recommendation*

The college/university website is seen as a crucial vehicle for advance information, and appears, from this survey, to be a more common point of reference than print-based publicity. Visitors like on-line information to be clear, accurate, up-to-date and comprehensive. Current on-line provision could be improved by including more information on the exhibiting students.

### **Signposting**

On arrival, thirteen respondents found their show clearly advertised and signposted; 5 did not. Two rated the on-site advertising/signage 'very good'; 5 rated it 'good'; 5 rated it 'satisfactory'; 5 rated it 'unsatisfactory'; 2 did not comment.

#### *Positive comments on signage*

- Signage was consistent and colour coded according to course – both helpful. A visual trail to follow along the floor would have been good addition.
- It was clear, consistent, continuous and easy to spot.

#### *Negative comments on signage*

- The general signage was poorly positioned around the building. I did manage to get lost. However, artist's individual signage was good.
- This wasn't well thought out. If I hadn't known this art school previously I wouldn't have managed to see all the work. More signposting and perhaps more people to ask for info and directions [would have helped].
- It was not clear where some artists were located and it was easy to miss artists out.
- I do think that you can never have enough signage. College shows are often very difficult for visitors to navigate as the buildings aren't designed for that purpose.
- There was some uncertainty as to what was work in the MA show and what was artwork already hanging in the venue.
- There were some nice banners – but not much information on the students that were showing, or any type of division of the different departments.
- There was no visible signage outside the University regarding the MA show. Once at reception I had to ask two people where the show was (one of them didn't know). One of them escorted me to the Fine Art department. I did see a few small signs en route – but I don't think I would have easily found the exhibition by myself.
- The labelling inside the show itself was poor, not all the artists had labelled their areas, so if I had not had prior knowledge of their work I would not have been aware of who's work I was looking at. Some artists had left statements, but these were overly-long and the font size made them hard to read in the low lighting conditions.
- It was not quickly clear as to which artists had made which work
- The separate MA courses could have been more clearly defined. The distinct subject areas were not easy to find

#### *Signage: summary and recommendations*

Signage and signposting are an important factor in ensuring a positive and user-friendly audience experience. It seems clear from the proliferation of 'negative' comments (and experiences) that many MA shows are not currently providing

adequate signage. To be effective, signage should be 'clear, consistent, continuous and easy to spot'.

### **The map, or plan**

Eleven shows provided a map or a plan; 7 did not. One respondent found the map/plan 'very good'; 4 found it 'good'; 4 found it 'satisfactory'; 2 found it 'unsatisfactory'; 8 did not comment.

#### *Positive comments on the map*

- A plan was available for the most complex space/course: Contemporary Visual Arts. It enabled an easy overview of which artists were located where in a three story building, and how to access them.
- It is generally helpful if floor plans are the 'right way' round in relation to the entrance where you collect the floor plan.

#### *Negative comments on the map*

- There was a plan, which was fine in itself but perhaps needed backup with signs and pointers around the building itself. The map could have contained a lot more information about the artists as there was no catalogue.
- There was a site plan but I wanted detailed information of artist locations.
- There was one but there were none available on the day I visited.
- There were two versions of an exhibition plan. However, I found it hard to locate some of the work in corridor spaces etc. (It turned out that one artist's work had been removed from the exhibition altogether – I think for health and safety reasons – but there was no sign to explain this and I only found out after speaking to four members of staff!)
- Showing works in different locations made the overall presentation less cohesive. A few landmarks to look out for would have helped.

#### *The map: summary and recommendations*

A map or floor plan is seen as a useful component of the overall signposting material. To be effective, it should be accurate, comprehensive and kept up-to-date. It should include clear information on the whereabouts of the work of each artist featured in the show.

### **The catalogue**

Ten shows had catalogues available, 8 did not. Four shows offered free catalogues; 6 offered catalogues for a charge. Four shows charged £2 for a catalogue, 1 charged £5. Two, out of 10, catalogues were rated 'very good'; 4 were rated 'good'; 4 were 'satisfactory'.

#### *Positive comments and suggestions regarding the catalogue*

- The catalogue provided two 'artists pages' for each artist, which usually provided a useful reminder of the work seen. Some artists had used text to give a sense of their projects/thinking. A list of artists contacts were provided at the back.
- The catalogue was very professionally printed in full-colour and therefore looked very impressive. It contained large images of all the artists' work.
- It was very high quality/well produced and very good as a handbook to take round the show – all artists' work was clearly illustrated.
- A format with a number of critical contributions and statements by all artists maybe in an interview form [would have been preferred].
- It was simple and effective. Colour may have been a good addition but obviously it was made on a budget.
- £2 seemed a fair price.

#### *Negative comments on the catalogue*

- No catalogue was available, which was a missed opportunity.
- It could have had more info on the courses – something to give the students pages more context. Also it was rather confusing regarding which courses were represented.
- An introductory essay did not provide much additional illumination. The catalogue served its purpose, but a bit more contextual info from artists, and a more relevant essay would have helped.
- There was very little text. The catalogue didn't contain any contact details of the students i.e. phone numbers, email or website addresses, which I think is a missed opportunity for marketing their students.
- It was fairly light on supporting information/details of work, although many artists had included contact details/website addresses on their pages.
- It presented the M.A. students as a group naturally enough for this purpose but I did wonder about its usefulness beyond the degree show – there was little space for developing individual profiles and other works.



- The catalogue didn't have texts on the artists. It was very minimal in style and only featured a single image on each artist with a contact email. The catalogue could have been created through the course as part of the professional development aspect. In its current form it does not represent the merits and values of the artists and the course. Previously, the catalogue was something with a greater sense of esteem and aesthetically related to the college.

*The catalogue: summary and recommendations*

Well produced catalogues are regarded by arts professionals who attend MA Fine Art shows as a useful tool. They help to communicate a sense of the professionalism of the event and of the participating students. Ideally they should include: illustrations of the work of featured artists; artists' contact details; and artists' statements and/or some other appropriate contextualising text. Some colleges currently provide MA show catalogues free of charge, more often a modest fee is charged. Two pounds is considered a fair price to ask for a publication of this kind.

**Other information provided on the exhibiting students and their work**

Twelve respondents noted that additional information was available on students and their work. No respondents rated the information available 'very good'; 3 rated it 'good'; 8 rated it satisfactory; 1 rated it unsatisfactory.

*Positive comments and suggestions on student information*

- The info that was provided, by individual students, at their discretion, was generally good and offered useful, extra insight into the processes and ideas that had informed their work. I would have preferred it if it had been more uniformly available
- Each student had a very brief statement and contact details printed on the course information sheet. Students had also left postcards and business cards at the information desk. It would have been very useful for students to provide a fuller statement and a full CV.
- Whilst I would not expect students to have set up websites it is very useful to be able to see images of other work. It would be good if all students could have a portfolio of photographs available to view at the course information desk.

- The student that I spoke to in person was very professional and even had a website which enabled me to see more of his work.
- One artist produced her own catalogue, which I did buy. This was great because it helped me to remember the work in order to write about it.
- Most students had put up their own statement near their work. I think it would have been better and more professional if these statements were standardised in their appearance. Very few had copies that could be taken away. Some students had their own business cards and contact details in their space.
- I would have found it interesting/useful to have been provided some background on the show itself: How had they found working together? Why had they decided to show off-site? What was the meaning of the show's title? Etc. This would have helped perhaps give the exhibition more cohesion and give it a clearer framework.
- I would have liked to see information by the artists in their space or ideally at a central information point. A desk with information was available on a reception/artist meet day but it was only for a few artists and was mainly contact details in a different format. A series of artist's folders would have been useful at an information point.
- A small catalogue/leaflet with all student contact information would have been very helpful.
- There was a statement for each student. Also personal cards and info was available from some students. A catalogue would have been useful.

#### *Negative comments on student information*

- They used to have folder with previous work, which was very helpful, because the visitors could actually find out where the artist is coming from, how he/she developed. Now its all little white cubes, with a little card in the corner. The institutionalisation of the grad show! I don't think that this 'professionalisation' is doing the artist any good. I miss the folders! How can I judge a (very) young artist by one or two works?
- It was a bit inconsistent. I understand instructors have a lot to do during the final year show – but perhaps a student committee that would help with the organisation of the final show might help with creating a cohesive look to the exhibition.
- Some students had provided statements on their work. For those who did, I found them a bit too long and wordy.

- The print I saw at the show which was the pre show catalogue did not present the works in any real depth or context and I felt the underpinning ideas of the works were not accessible in any form other than direct engagement with the artist on the opening evening.
- The information about individual artists is sometimes a bit vague. The artists should be taught how to write a mini press release.
- It was difficult to decipher whose work was whose.
- A real lost opportunity.

*Student information: summary and recommendations*

Arts professionals attending Fine Art MA shows like to have access to information which helps to contextualise and enable an expanded understanding of the exhibiting students and their work. Currently, there is a sense that the information provided falls short of what is required. The information would be improved if it was more consistently available and of a more uniform quality. One way of achieving this would be for each student to make available a folder or information pack containing: an artists' statement, a CV, contact details; and documentation of additional work. A monitoring/checking mechanism should be put in place to ensure that overall quality of the information provided is consistent and of a high standard.

**Information about the college/university and about the courses featured in the show**

Eight respondents noted the availability of information on the college and/or its courses; 10 did not.. Four rated the college/course information 'very good'; 2 rated it good; 3 rated it satisfactory. The others did not comment (many had not seen such information).

*Positive comments on college information*

- At the entrance to the spaces representing each of the featured courses (there were 5 in all) there was a 'welcome' banner which provided brief info on the purpose/key points about the course. This provided a useful entry point into/context for what the students were trying to achieve, which made an evaluation of their success more possible.
- As always, the college is good at providing information about the courses and displays of this information are always available as you enter the space, and it gets sent out with info about the college's shows.

- The prospectuses I have seen have been clear, comprehensive and good with graphics.

#### *Negative comments on college information*

- I didn't notice any. It seems a chance wasted.
- I came across no information about the courses in general.
- The reception desk in the foyer had some of this information but the course was not promoted through the MA degree show.

#### *College information: summary and recommendations*

The MA show provides an opportunity for the host college to promote its courses, and the ideas and aspirations which underpin them, to the visiting audience. At present this opportunity seems to be under-utilised. Well considered information of this kind can provide a useful context for what the students were working towards, which makes an evaluation of their achievements more possible.

### **Quality of personal interactions**

#### **The reception**

At 17 shows there was a reception point at the entrance; at 2 there was not. Five respondents rated the welcome received at reception 'very good'; 3 rated it 'good'; 7 rated it 'satisfactory'; 2 rated it 'unsatisfactory'.

#### *Positive comments on the reception*

- The info given at the main reception was welcoming and helpful. In addition, students were on hand at the entrance to three of the four venues used and offered a polite and informative welcome.
- Friendly member of staff – helpful and went out of his way to find someone to answer my questions about the work that I couldn't find in the exhibition.
- I was asked if I wanted any help, but I didn't feel ambushed- which was ideal. I felt able to look at the show at my own pace and approach someone if I needed to.

#### *Negative comments on the reception*

- It was very helpful and friendly, when I found it. However, it was possible to miss it. I spoke to the reception / security desk first as this was the first point

of contact I came to, they tried to help but didn't have the info and didn't point me to the welcome point which was just around the corner.

- No one was present at the entrance to direct or answer questions.
- I don't recall anyone greeting me or telling me where to go/find the work.
- I found it hard to find anyone to point me in the right direction. The receptionist was helpful but obviously had not been supplied with the right info.
- There could have been more meet and greet.
- I think that they just have a security guard on the door.
- It was being run by an undergraduate student – so did not have much information to give on the MA show. But he was very nice.
- There was a table with the catalogues on it and an A4 sheet of information about the course. However, the desk wasn't manned and I think it would have been better to be greeted by someone. I then had to assume that the catalogue was free.
- Reception staff at the entrance were quite indifferent.
- A more open, aware reception would have been good.
- There wasn't an entrance desk.
- The main reception point at the entrance to the college could have been improved - I was trying to work out which way to go and they didn't really take much notice!

#### *The reception: summary and recommendations*

'Meet and greet' is an important element of the visitor experience that should be properly prepared for. Too often it appears that the reception at MA shows either creates an impression of indifference to the visitor's needs, or of unfamiliarity with the work on show. To be effective the reception should be: easy to locate; well informed about the event taking place; friendly and welcoming in its approach to visitors; aware of the importance of MA shows from a public relations point of view, as a bridge between the college and the wider community.

#### **Contact with other members of staff**

Nine respondents reported contact with university/college staff (other than at reception) during their visit; 10 reported no staff contact. Three rated their contact with non-reception staff 'very good'; 3 rated it 'good'; 3 rated it 'satisfactory'; none found it 'unsatisfactory'.

#### *Positive comments and suggestions regarding contact with staff*

- There was a general sense of friendliness and hospitality, which created a very favourable impression of the 'atmosphere' of the institution.
- Name badges would have been useful so one could identify staff.
- Staff tended to be a little pre-occupied with the demands and rigour of reaching the end of year and final shows, but were happy to talk in general about the quality of work and curating.

#### *Negative comments on contact with staff*

- I spoke to three members of staff who did their best to give me the info I needed but a fourth person was unhelpful, rude and dismissive (didn't seem to think it was her role to help or provide any info at all – even to point me in the direction of another member of staff).

#### *Contact with staff: summary and recommendation*

The main points of contact for visitors to the MA show are reception staff, invigilators and student artists (the latter two tend to be the same). However, all members of staff present in and around the exhibiting spaces whilst the MA shows are taking place should be mindful of their role as ambassadors for the courses and the students whose work is being presented and for the college as a whole.

### **Contact with invigilators/exhibiting students**

Sixteen respondents came into contact with invigilators/exhibiting students at the show; 3 did not. Six rated their contact with invigilators/students 'very good'; 8 rated it 'good'; 2 rated it 'satisfactory'; none found it 'unsatisfactory'.

#### *Positive comments and suggestions on invigilation*

- They were open and willing to engage.
- A high proportion of exhibiting students appeared to be around and available in, or in the vicinity of their spaces. I had several useful conversations, which helped to provide greater insight into the work on display and the ideas which

had informed it. The students were articulate and enthusiastic to talk about their work.

- I did get good verbal information from the students manning the information desk for the specific course that I was looking at.
- It is always a great opportunity to talk with the artist in person so that you can get a better understanding of the work – and get contact information.
- Some of the students were very helpful, while others understandably were less confident about discussing their work. The students generally didn't have the same level of experience as say a Live Guide, who would have been trained. What I was interested in was a personal insight to individual practice. It is not easy for artists to talk about other artists work and I maybe this invigilation role could be done by a younger student, one graduating in the following year, part of a mentoring role with students pairing up on the installation process and nurturing peer relationships.
- I wouldn't have been able to identify any of the artists. It might have been useful if they wore badges to identify themselves.

#### *Negative comments on invigilation*

- When I wanted to find the artists I wanted to nominate, it was impossible to find someone to ask. Very frustrating! Also, students appeared to go home before the end.
- Not all students were invigilating their work, very few in fact.
- I wanted to speak to two of the exhibiting students but only one of them was available.
- There was one student invigilator who was helpful but they were not that well informed about any of the work other than their own.
- Not all the students were there and there wasn't any interaction from the invigilators.
- There was no-one invigilating the exhibition in any of the spaces – this did give it a rather abandoned feel; no one was on hand to answer questions, etc.
- There was one video piece that wasn't working.

#### *Invigilation: summary and recommendation*

Arts professionals visiting MA shows value the opportunity to meet and converse with exhibiting artists. As one respondent said: 'It is always a great opportunity to talk with the artist in person so that you can get a better understanding of the work – and get contact information.' Generally, the artists' presence in the showing spaces created a

positive impression. The artists were less confident, however, in discussing or providing information about the work of their peers, as opposed to their own work. Student invigilators should be encouraged to assimilate and be prepared to impart at least a basic level of information (including contact details and where to find out more) about the work of those they are exhibiting alongside. A lack of student invigilation at MA shows can give a negative impression and create a sense of abandonment.

## **Quality of environment**

### **Quality of the exhibiting spaces**

Six respondents rated the spaces allocated for the MA show 'very good'; 8 rated them good; 4 rated them 'satisfactory'; 1 rated them 'unsatisfactory'.

#### *Positive comments on exhibiting spaces*

- Large spaces, well presented, didn't get in the way of experiencing the work.
- A gallery space was made available to some MA exhibitors which is a good space; studios were adequate and sizable but not as well presented.
- This was well considered. Spaces suited the work and there was no need to cram students into small spaces. The whole Art School was used, including out buildings, which was refreshing.
- Students were each given quite sizeable spaces, which gave their presentations the quality of mini solo shows. This provided both a challenge and opportunity to the students to exhibit their work and their ideas in some depth. The students rose admirably to the challenge. The work was of a high standard (of finish and of complexity) and the spaces have been well and thoughtfully prepared, giving a sense of professionalism, seriousness and commitment.
- The MA was shown at an outside venue, not in the main galleries, but in the areas allocated to student studios. These are of high spec and had been prepared well. The show looked great.
- It was generally in good quality spaces. They had the use of all of the spaces at the Gallery for the presentation of their work.
- The most successful spaces were those where the artists had constructed or located the work in its own space/environment.



### *Negative comments on exhibiting spaces*

- The work was sited in the Physics Building and it felt as if this was because there was space rather than the space would show the work off well. One artist's work was displayed in two very different places and I didn't at first realise it was by the same person. The work could have much better labelled.
- Locations too far apart, ridiculous amounts of walking involved.
- The venue was the modern extension to the Grand Theatre in the city and as a venue for displaying art it is not that great, all the exhibits were displayed in the foyer/stairwell area and one small room. I would recommend that the show is somewhere else next time. It does not benefit the students' work being shown in a venue like this.
- As the building was off-site, the quality of the actual space was always going to be limited- i.e. old warehouses leak in wet weather. However overall the students dealt with the space well.
- The size of the individual spaces were fine. However, the space didn't look particularly well presented
- The specific show that I looked at was very professional but they could have done with more room.
- Mixed: work shown in the Gallery and Atrium spaces was helped by the quality of the surroundings but work shown in corridors, landings and in more 'make-shift' spaces was not helped by its location.
- Certain students seemed to take over larger amounts of space than others, and I wondered why that was? From talking to a student it seemed they had not all got on during the planning of the exhibition. Unfortunately this seemed to be apparent in the exhibition's execution.
- The college decided to hold an event more spectacular than usual in a huge outdoor tent. However, what was gained in additional space (400 students representing all the key disciplines showing at once) was lost in the quality of visitor experience. This was more trade fair – work of individual students too close together creating confusion and distraction, unstable wooden floors, flimsy trestles – than final degree show.
- Having the show in two locations was problematic in reading the show as a whole. I would have preferred to see it in one venue, ideally off site.

### *Exhibiting spaces: summary and recommendation*

Arts professionals tend to be alert to the quality and character of the exhibiting space (or spaces), which is an important modifier of the students' work and determinant of

the viewing experience. Generously proportioned, fit-for-purpose spaces should be aimed for. 'Make shift' spaces, such as corridors, or external buildings not designed for the display of art, tend to create a detrimental impression. Imaginative response to and use of space can enhance the viewing experience. The dispersal of work over too large an area can inhibit a sense of coherence. If an 'off site' venue is preferred to an on campus exhibition, it should be properly equipped for the professional display of art.

### **Quality of the general environment**

Two respondents rated the general environment in which the show was staged 'very good'; 7 rated it 'good'; 8 rated it 'satisfactory'; 1 rated it 'unsatisfactory'. Twelve reported that there was somewhere within the environment to relax. 6 reported that there was not a space where they could relax. Fifteen reported that there was somewhere in the environment to get refreshments. 3 reported that there was not.

#### *Positive comments and suggestions regarding the general environment*

- The shows, spread across two adjacent campuses and several buildings gave visitors the chance to get a flavour of the general environment of the college, which was very favourable. It helped that there was a well appointed, affordable café on site (well signposted) which provided an opportunity for rest and reflection. Again, the general environment which was pleasing and well maintained gave a very positive sense of the institution.
- The show was spread across different buildings, making it a bit difficult to find all the sections, but then there was a map, signs and helpful students.
- It seemed more like a party for artists and families. This is fine, but a separate event that targets other artists/arts professionals would be useful.
- It would be very good to have somewhere where you can get a decent cup of coffee, sit down and write notes etc.
- Visitors could relax outside in the Gardens and buy refreshments from an outdoor booth with a few tables and chairs.

#### *Negative comments on the general environment*

- I visited on the penultimate day of the exhibition and it was also the end of term, so it felt as if the show had just been left to its own devices. One person's work was missing altogether, with no explanation (until I enquired of several staff); one artist had created a sound piece but it became clear that

you needed to borrow an MP3 to listen to it and this was no longer available; I missed seeing film pieces by three artists because the lecture theatre in which they were supposed to be screened all day was being used for a completely separate and closed event on the day when I visited. The staff I encountered, with one exception, did their best to help me but weren't briefed/informed about what was going on or about work in the show.

- There was quite a lot of noise coming from building work opposite the space which made it hard to listen to the videos. I don't know if this could have been foreseen/planned for.
- There was maintenance being done in one area which made some areas of the show scruffy.
- There were some messy areas.
- The environment of the tent was not pleasant: far too large, overwhelming and impersonal.
- The bar was in the exhibition show and I prefer to view works in isolation.

#### *The general environment: summary and recommendation*

The general environment within which the show is situated helps to create a positive (or in some cases negative) sense of the institution as a whole. Clutter or noise evident in the general environment of a college is noticed by visitors and tends to impair their enjoyment of the MA show. Building works should be avoided and the college environment should appear uncluttered and well maintained throughout the period whilst the shows are in progress. Spaces should be created and facilities provided where visitors can relax and take refreshments. These should be well-signposted.

### **Post visit**

#### **The collection of visitor information/audience feedback**

Eight respondents reported that some visitor information was gathered at the show they attended; 10 reported that no visitor information was gathered.

#### *Comments on mechanisms for audience feedback*

- Some students might have had comments books – but there was nothing generic to the show that I saw.

- Some students put notebooks in their own space but there was no general movement in this direction.
- A few students had 'comments' books for visitors to sign. There was info from the college which sought to recruit new alumni. There was not, however, any opportunity to sign up to a college mailing list and there was no sense that any formal monitoring of audiences was taking place.
- There was a general comments book and visitor numbers were noted. [at an external venue, this does not necessarily mean that visitors were being monitored by the university]
- There was a comments or visitors book at the entrance desk at the Gallery. [again, this was a public exhibitions' venue].

#### *Audience feedback mechanisms: summary and recommendation*

Surprisingly, the survey found very little evidence to suggest that colleges or universities regard the MA shows as an opportunity to collect visitor feedback or to provide mechanisms to build an ongoing relationship with those attending. The main channel for visitor feedback was the 'comments book' provided by some of the exhibiting artists, presumably for their own information. This appears to be an area where practice could and ought to be improved. At a minimum, visitors should be provided with an opportunity to sign up to join a mailing list to be informed of future events. Mechanisms for learning about the audience's profile, interests and perceptions, such as visitor surveys, ought also to be considered.

#### **Information to take away**

Eighteen respondents reported that they took away information that would enable them to follow up on their visit. One said that they did not.

#### *Comments on the information taken away*

- I took away a catalogue which is very comprehensive: details of courses, entries for individual students and useful contact details
- A number of artists had left postcards/business cards in their spaces, to facilitate future contact.
- I take the artist's card and check their web site, which is very handy.
- I took printed sheets on all students on course, business cards, and postcards.

- [a dozen respondents indicated that they had taken away information that corresponds to that described in the above bullet points]
- Prospectuses had been left at an information point, which would have been of interest to potential students.
- Not all students had information or even an email address.
- I had to ask for information which was emailed to me after my visit.
- There was a leaflet which contained a website address. However when I went to the website- it contained only the same info as the leaflet and statements that were in the show, there was nothing additional, no more background info.

*Information to take away: summary and recommendation*

Arts professionals like to take away from their visit information which can be used for future reference, such as a catalogue, or an artist's business card. Information of this kind should be made uniformly available, along with 'signposting' type information (such as website addresses) which will enable visitors to carry out follow-up research to develop a more in-depth understanding of either an artist and their work, or else of a particular course featured in the show.

**Following up on the visit**

Five respondents reported that they had had reason to follow up on their visit to the show; 13 reported that they had not.

*Comments on follow up activities*

- I had a dialogue, by email with the selected artists about their work prior to publishing my advisor's texts.
- I am in contact with some of the artists now. I did check the artists' websites.
- I have been in contact with the two artists I chose for Axis
- I sent and received emails from both my selected artists to explain who I was and to ask for their statements. I had spoken to one of the artist's face-to-face at the show.
- I interviewed the artists that I nominated and have had informal talks.
- Attended the 'VIP' meet the artists day on the following Tuesday.
- Not yet, but I'm keeping the work in mind for future possibilities and have talked to other people about it.

### *Follow up activities summary and recommendation*

Arts professionals do see the MA shows as an opportunity to 'talent spot' for emerging artists. Some may have occasion to seek immediate follow up contact with artists whom they deem to be of interest, others will store information about artists with a mind to 'future possibilities'.

### **Enthusiasm to repeat the visit**

Eight respondents reported that based on their experience at the MA show they would be 'very' enthusiastic to attend a future event at the same institution; 8 reported that they would be 'reasonably' keen to do so; 3 said they would be 'not very' enthusiastic to return.

### *Positive comments regarding respondent's interest in visiting future events*

- Yes. It was an enjoyable and stimulating experience (for the reasons described above). Both the college and the individual students seem to have gone to a lot of trouble to make sure that the event was of a high quality, was a user-friendly experience, and was rewarding to visit. I would definitely be interested to return.
- Yes, based mainly on the quality of the work seen at the show, rather than anything else, although the friendly atmosphere generated by the students helped.

### *Negative comments regarding respondent's interest in visiting future events*

- The whole event seemed to lack inspiration and effort and although I found some interesting artists I didn't feel anyone really cared whether I had enjoyed the show. Disappointing.
- This year the standard of some of the work and its presentation was very poor, however I would go back to see the more promising students.
- I will go as it is on my doorstep and I may know some of the artists.
- In spite of experiencing some problems when viewing this year's show, I would certainly attend again because, as a curator working in the city I think it's important to see work by MA students who've studied here.
- I would be interested in attending another MA show here, but to be honest this would be more out of curiosity and because I live in the city rather than the quality of this year show, or the work shown in it.

- While critical of the environment of the 2007 MA degree show, I would not be deterred to visit an event at the same institution in the future.
- Given my time restrictions, I would probably not make an extra effort to go back.
- I always enjoy going to graduate shows especially when they are held within the college. It is however very time consuming and I probably wouldn't go unless I was asked to.
- The institution itself is very good however the off-site venue really needs to be rethought.
- Although I have been critical of some aspects of the presentation and space, I am always very keen to see students' work. These criticisms are not a reflection on the students' involved.

#### *Encouraging repeat visits: summary and recommendation*

A strong impression created by the survey respondents is that, in many instances, they are likely to be somewhat reluctant returners to future MA shows. A significant number seem to feel duty-bound to return - out of an obligation to the students, or else to their profession - rather than because the MA show had provided a satisfying experience that would encourage them to revisit. Perhaps the most telling comment of this kind was: 'I didn't feel anyone really cared whether I had enjoyed the show. Disappointing.' This suggests that colleges and universities should not take their MA show audience for granted, but should take stock of current practices (and audience perceptions) and seek ways to make the visitor experience a more rewarding one.

### **Impressions of preparedness and professionalism**

#### **Effectiveness in catering for audience needs**

Two respondents reported that their audience needs were catered for 'very' effectively; 11 reported that their audience needs were catered for 'reasonably'; 4 reported that their audience needs were 'not very' effectively catered for; 1 reported that their needs were not catered for 'at all'.

#### **Understanding of the audience development potential of the MA show**

Four respondents thought that the host institution had understood the audience development potential of the show 'very' well; 7 thought that they had understood the

audience development potential 'reasonably' well; 8 thought that they had understood the audience development potential of the event 'not very' well.

*Positive comments on understanding the audience development potential*

- Details such as clear signage, clear visitor information, a welcoming reception, signposting to the café all suggest that the College had properly considered the needs of its audience.
- Today MA shows are totally professionalised - so they do know how to play the audience game. Catalogue, reception... everything is there
- A very professional presentation. Ambitious, aware attitude.

*Negative comments on understanding the audience development potential*

- There was no place for feedback or to join lists for future events.
- No effort was made to generate a future audience by collecting data or feedback about visitor experience at the time. No mailing list was available to add your name to, nor any face-to-face contact with staff or students at the entrance.
- They clearly thought about audience development as they had commissioned work by well known artists to be exhibited alongside [the students]. But there seemed to be no idea about how to maximise the experience for visitors.
- I don't think staff or students really believed that any one who came to the show would have anything to offer the students.
- Difficult to judge but I thought they would have stopped maintenance work being carried out on site.
- I can imagine that staff from the individual courses understand their own particular audience but how an institution targets that as a whole is another matter.
- There was not enough information or signage to give the work a presence and as such the show missed an opportunity to reach a new audience.
- It was good that they had produced a well-presented catalogue, but again feel it was a missed opportunity for the students involved, as it didn't provide any contact information. Luckily most of the students had provided their own business cards.
- It felt as if all the energy had gone in to advertising and launching the show, but that little thought had really been given to what happened to it - and to its visitors/visitor experience - beyond the private view (which I was unfortunately unable to attend because of an event at my place of work). So this gave the



impression that it was really just aimed at an internal or academic audience (which I'm sure wasn't the case or intention) and I felt I had to work quite hard to locate work/find information about it.

- The exhibition was held outside the institution in a city centre warehouse building and it felt very much like the students had 'been left to it' without a lot of support from the University. I am also aware that the students had to raise the majority of funding for the show themselves. This leads me to believe the University is not aware of the audience development potential of the MA show, particularly with reference to attracting future students for the course or gaining publicity for it.
- The course could be more pro-active in developing relationships. It needs to develop an enhanced relationship with arts organisations and companies involved in the creative industries and the local authority.

#### *Understanding the audience development potential: summary and recommendation*

Nearly half of respondents felt that the host institution had understood the audience development potential of the MA show 'not very well'; only a relatively small minority felt that they had understood it 'very well'. Even fewer felt that their audience needs had been catered for 'very effectively'. A greater proportion of the respondents felt that their needs were 'not very effectively' catered for, or else were not catered for at all. Some regarded the show as a 'missed opportunity', for the institution as well as for the students. Some alluded to the absence of mechanisms for visitor feedback and ongoing visitor contact as evidence of the perceived lack of institutional understanding. The tendency towards focussing a great deal of effort on the opening of show, which is not maintained thereafter, was also alluded to here (as it was elsewhere in the survey data). These findings point to the need for institutions to work harder to understand their MA show audiences and to develop a greater capacity to cater for their needs and thereby to build their interest and loyalty as repeat visitors.

#### **The preparation of the students**

Seven respondents thought that the exhibiting students appeared 'very' effectively prepared to stage the show; 8 thought that the students appeared to have been prepared 'reasonably' effectively; 3 thought that it appeared that the students had been 'not very' effectively prepared.

### *Positive comments on*

- The work and thought (and resources) that had gone into the students' displays was evident and appreciated. The standards of curatorial presentation were high. The info provided (although at the discretion of each student) tended to be clear and well considered. Contact details were included in the catalogue and many students had provided postcards within their spaces.
- This particular group of MA students had shown together a number of times at other venues and were practised at professional, profiled presentation and marketing.
- The presentation of work was extremely professional (in spite of the trade fair props). Many students were present and understood the importance of talking with individual visitors and providing additional information. I also noticed that students 'covered' for their absent colleagues and could talk intelligently about their work also.
- The branding and title of the show was interesting and suggested/made visible to audiences that students had been fully involved in all aspects of the exhibition. I contacted three artists to find out more about their work – they all responded quickly, enthusiastically and professionally. Two sent me further information (including DVDs of work I'd missed). One referred me to her website. This gave me a more rounded experience of their work than I was able to get from the exhibition alone.

### *Negative comments on*

- Due to variations in apparent preparedness, I would guess that there was not a great deal of input in this area, the student's may have relied more on their own previous knowledge.
- Not enough students were invigilating their own work.
- The work was reasonably displayed, but I do not think the students had had any guidance on how to interact with visitors.
- There was no reference to the sale of work. This was clearly not a feature of the planning and preparation (and was not a problem in terms of my own interest in attending the show).
- Procedures were in place for buying work. However I did feel the show overall lack cohesion. I feel the students could have worked together more as a group. The fact they did not was evident in the staging of the show. I think more information should have been provided on certain student's work and

more could have been done to provide the show with a longevity - a catalogue, more links/ info on the website etc.

### *Preparation of students: summary and recommendation*

In some cases, respondents reported clear evidence that students had been well prepared for the staging of the show and for their role within it. A number of respondents pointed to areas where greater preparation seemed to be needed, such as in the promotion of students' work for sale, or in their ability to interact effectively with visitors. There was a sense that preparation may in some cases have been self-initiated, i.e. was more of a reflection of the existing skills of the student cohort than of structured professional induction provided by the college. Where students were known to have exhibited together before, there was evidence of coherence and professionalism in the collective presentation of their work.

### **Ideas for improvement**

Respondents were invited to recommend one measure that would improve the effectiveness and/or user-friendliness of the MA show they had visited. Their suggestions were as follows:

- Improve front-of-house (reception and information) and web site information.
- Good signage of work, information sheets to take away, name badges for artists, who should be present with their work to answer questions.
- Encourage each student to provide a bit of additional info to contextualise their work and ideas. Some students did so, but others did not.
- A simple detailed guide to where students are located and their pathway.
- Focus on one part of the campus and on one level ideally. Better signs needed.
- Students to make available a full statement and full CV, and to have a portfolio (of photographs) available to view.
- Different venue. More information. Signage. Live guide.
- Get a student committee to prepare a catalogue or leaflet of all the students showing, with contact info and brief bio.
- A plan of the space with the students' names clearly marked would have been useful. Some of students' work could not be identified.
- Better signage/ labelling on the artists and their work.

- A simple detailed guide to where students are located and very user-friendly map.
- Someone in the space throughout the exhibition's run, who is fully-briefed and able to provide background information, point out where work is located, ensure that equipment is working/the spaces are maintained etc. In other words, a bridge between the (of course essential!) academic side of an MA show and the outside world/wider public.
- Having students to guide visitors during the day. Minimal supporting material was provided on the artist (same text repeated as statement and in the supporting mini guide).
- Site the show outside the college. Produce a catalogue through the course, researching existing exhibition catalogues and having 2 or 3 critical texts and texts by each artist. Site the bar outside the exhibiting area. Have other students briefed on the works as guides who would inform key visitors. Plan marketing and promotion at an earlier point, signing off 12 weeks before to allow concentration on installation
- Better signage. Free catalogue if possible. Some people would probably like contact details, but maybe not enough to pay for it, unfortunately.
- Going through the process of making a catalogue might change the whole attitude of the show.
- Provide opportunities for visitors to join mailing lists and thereby build an ongoing relationship to the institution.
- There is scope for other kinds of audience/artist interaction rather than just the gallery, go and look, model. Conversation spaces? Debates?
- I miss the good old days, when show were not 'user-friendly', when it was a bit of a jungle, with lots of bibs and bobs and my beloved messy artists' folders...

*Improvements: summary and recommendation*

The survey respondents suggested a variety of ideas for how the MA show might be improved, the majority of the ideas proposed were centred on information provision of one kind or another. It would appear from these suggestions that a menu of items to meet basic information requirements might consist of: a clear and intelligible plan, available at reception, indicating which students were exhibiting where; clear and consistent signage and labelling throughout the exhibition venue/s; contact information for the artists and contextual information on the artists' work, that was available to take away (possibly in the form of a catalogue); well briefed individuals

on hand in and around the exhibition (at the reception and in the showing spaces) to answer audience queries.

### **Additional comments**

Respondents were asked whether there was anything additional they wished to add regarding their perceptions of the MA show they visited, or about MA shows in general. The following comments seemed worthy to record:

- I think the event was a missed opportunity – the art world is very competitive and the show represents the artists' hard work over a prolonged period. It should therefore have been given all the attention that a gallery exhibition requires.
- I know MA shows are personal for the students (in regards to the fact that the show is graded), but, equally, learning how to place priority on the audience and their needs has to be done.
- Usually MA shows aren't particularly stunning, this was no exception.
- It was a shame I couldn't attend the opening evening. I only visited two days after the show had opened. All the works were functioning and works were well displayed. But I missed not meeting and talking to the artists and also the course tutors, who on this occasion were not around.
- The quality of work was great – but the display could have been worked on a bit more. It was essential that they should have a leaflet or catalogue for the show – it took me about 25 minutes to find the contact information for one of the students. This could have been avoided with a small postcard or leaflet.
- Universities in London seem a lot more geared to the MA exhibition being a real chance for students to use it as a platform to enter the professional art world. This does not seem to happen elsewhere. I do not know if this outlook is stemming from the Universities or the students themselves? There are so many Fine Art MAs and so many MA students that it could do with addressing.
- The material, physical quality of the venue – walls, floors lighting etc – can have a dramatic effect on how the work and exhibition as a whole is perceived. MA Fine Art show I visited benefited from its choice of external venue. It would be good if other courses were able to source/fund good venues.

- It is difficult to create links and relationships between works when artists are working in a multitude of media and influenced by different ideas, and impossible to curate in any real sense other than placement relationships. The show had many interesting pieces, the most successful when the presentation move beyond being perceived as being in the college environment.
- A decision had been taken to mix up all the art forms, so that Fine Art was interspersed with Graphic Design, Product Design, Fashion and Textiles etc. I'm usually all for an interdisciplinary approach to curating and exhibiting but felt it didn't quite work in this instance. The display requirements and aesthetics of the Fine Art in the show were so different from that of the other disciplines, that this approach didn't serve the Fine Art well – it became a bit lost in the overall 'busy-ness' of the show.

*Additional comments: summary and recommendation*

The 'additional comments' volunteered by respondents were very varied in nature and did not point to a particular theme or cluster of themes. There was, however, a greater emphasis here on issues relating to the importance of place and to conventions of curatorial display than was evident in the 'ideas for improvement' comments. The first bullet point above could, perhaps, serve as a shorthand summing up of the more negative findings of the survey as a whole: 'I think the event was a missed opportunity – the art world is very competitive and the show represents the artists' hard work over a prolonged period. It should therefore have been given all the attention that a gallery exhibition requires.'

### **3.2.2 Art Professionals' 'video diaries' and interviews**

It was planned that three arts professionals, each with a specific and different kind of expertise and motivation for attending MA shows, would attend one MA show at a college of the UAL and create a 'video diary' which recorded aspects of their visitor experience that they wished to draw attention to. It was suggested to them that, in so doing, they might wish to consider (but not be circumscribed by) the same three broad categories of the experience as formed the basis of the questioning for the Axis advisors' survey: information provision; personal interactions; and quality of environment. They were asked to comment not on individual students' work, but on aspects of their visit that seemed to them to exemplify either good practice in terms of catering for their audience needs, or else had appeared to them to be a barrier to their enjoyment and understanding of the show. The 'video diary' was chosen as a research method as it would give an immediate sense, in real time, of the experience of visiting an MA show, from an arts professional's point of view. This would provide a useful contrast with the Axis survey, where respondents were asked to provide their reflections, with several weeks or months of hindsight, on particular aspects of the shows they had visited.

The art professionals chosen occupied the following roles: an artist and Higher Education digital arts tutor who was also preparing for her own MA Fine Art show at a regional art college; the director of a university-based art gallery in the Greater London area; and a specialist in audience development working at a senior level for a National arts funding body. The shows visited were: Camberwell College of Art (July 5<sup>th</sup>); Wimbledon College of Art (10<sup>th</sup> September); and Chelsea College of Art (21<sup>st</sup> September). In the event, the audience development specialist had to pull out of the project at short notice; the artist and Higher Education tutor agreed to step into the breach. The obvious disadvantage of this unforeseen development was that the range of distinct professional perspectives brought to this element of the study was reduced from three to two. A potential plus point, however, was that the artist/tutor would be able to bring to her second 'video diary' the experience of having already visited and made a 'video diary' of a previous show, which might bring advantages of experience and of comparison.

Immediately following each visit, the arts professionals were interviewed about their experience of visiting the show and about the elements of the visitor experience that they had chosen to draw attention to.

With the help of a video editor, a compilation of clips from each arts professionals' visit was later put together to create a 32 minute long composite 'video diary' of the UAL shows visited which could be circulated, in CD form, to staff members at the UAL with an involvement in the staging of the MA shows<sup>5</sup>. This 'video diary' was augmented by additional clips taken during my own research visits to MA shows at the UAL: at London College of Communication (6<sup>th</sup> September); at Chelsea (21<sup>st</sup> September); and at Byam Shaw, Central Saint Martins (20<sup>th</sup> September). The 'video diary' CD was conceived of as a stand-alone method of reporting in itself, and will not be subject to additional interpretation within this research report. The following section of the report summarises the findings that emerged from the interviews conducted with the arts professionals immediately following their three 'video diary' visits. Edited transcripts of these interviews form Appendix 3 of this report.

### **Perceptions of advance information**

Two of the three visits were preceded by research on the College/UAL websites. Though lacking specific detail about the exhibiting students and the courses profiled, the information was felt to be clear and sufficient for the purposes of planning a visit. A map which showed how to get to the college which indicated a clear entry point to the show was considered useful.

### **Perceptions of information provided at the show**

Floor/building plans were available at each show, although at one college they were not distributed at reception, which contributed to an initial sense of disorientation. As the college campuses were generally felt to be confusing to the unfamiliar visitor, these plans were felt to be not just helpful, but essential. Signage at two of the colleges was felt to be effective; colour coded signage, consistently and clearly applied appeared to be a successful formula. At one college, it was noted that signage was, perhaps, a bit too small and discreet. Any signage or visible publicity which is used should be clear and unambiguous. At one college, a series of large

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<sup>5</sup> A copy of the CD could be made available, on request by email to [p.glinkowski@wimbledon.arts.ac.uk](mailto:p.glinkowski@wimbledon.arts.ac.uk), for a charge of £7 to cover costs of production, administration and postage.



banners proclaiming 'Summer Show', which carried no further information about dates, times or locations were perceived as baffling and counterproductive.

Freely available information provided to contextualise students' work was felt, at all colleges, to be minimal. This was considered a barrier to an understanding of the work. Where information was provided it seemed to be at the discretion of individual students and, consequently, was inconsistent in format and uneven in content. At two of the colleges catalogues had been produced for individual courses, these were available for a charge. One was purchased, for £2. It was felt to be of good quality, which reflected well on the perceived professionalism of the students. Information on how to contact students was felt to be an expected (if not universally observed) convention. The business card or post card left in the proximity of the work, which also provided a visual reminder of the artists work, was felt to be an effective means of communicating this.

At two of the colleges there was felt to be a lack of information about the featured courses. This lack was considered to hinder an understanding and appraisal of the shows. As an example, there was some confusion about how to interpret the work displayed by the students following the Visual Language of Performance pathway at Wimbledon: was the work on show stand-alone art work devised for exhibition in a visual art context, or was it meant to be read as documentation, or illustration of the *mis en scene* for theatrical, or other, performance? At the third college, course information was provided, but this did not seem to be tailored to the context of the show.

The lack of an option for visitors to join mailing lists for future events was commented upon; as an opportunity missed. A further piece of information that was observed to be missing was pricing information for students' work.

### **Perceptions of the environment of the show**

At two of the three colleges, the quality of the exhibiting spaces was – and the use that had been made of them - was praised. This was felt to be a distinct strength of the show.

A significant problem encountered at two of the colleges was that a lot of audio visual equipment was found to be either not switched on, or not working. This was attributed to the relatively early hour of the visit; in both cases, the visits commenced

about half an hour after the advertised opening time. There was an absence of students in some of the spaces at this hour, which meant that the work in question remained unseen.

Perceptions regarding the overall environments in which the shows were staged were mixed. One college had been perceived as 'smart ... a nice place to come to.' There was a recognition that holding an exhibition within a working college situation presented particular challenges. However, it was felt that the college's needed to be proactive to ensure that the normal working business and patterns of the institution didn't impede the visitor experience. Examples of where this had not been the case were: the failure at one of the college's to ensure that general mess and clutter were minimised; the failure at another to ensure that there was a facility on site where visitors could take a break for refreshments. At another college the fact that there were places to 'get a cup of coffee' was remarked upon as a plus point.

### **Perceptions of personal interactions at the shows [reception and invigilation]**

It was reported that the main reception at each college had been approachable and helpful. However, at one college there was a clear failure of synchronisation between the main reception and a special reception point that had been set up for the purposes of the show. The result was that the visitor had inadvertently been sent off in the wrong direction and without the information that was, in fact, available to help them to navigate the show.

At all colleges, the students were found to be approachable, open to conversation, and willing to help. Interaction with these students was, in all cases, seen as important to a fuller understanding both of the work on show and of the character of the individual courses and colleges. A downside of the students' openness, from the institution's point of view, was that some had been willing to be frankly critical about their study experience, which had help to confirm in the visitor a negative overall impression of one of the college's.

### **What currently works well?**

Information on the college websites seemed adequate for purpose, though there was a suggestion that more contextual information, about the students and the courses, could have been included here.

Clear, consistent, colour-coded signage, supplemented by clear maps and/or floor plans made available at reception, was felt to offer an effective aid to navigation.

An emphasis on a clean, curatorial presentation in generous sized spaces was felt to have created beneficial viewing conditions for the students' work.

Students were found to be approachable, helpful and willing to talk about the show, their work and their study experience.

### **Possible means through which the visitor experience could be improved**

The first reception point encountered by visitors needs to be fully appraised of and supplied with all of the information available to assist the understanding and enjoyment of the show.

Extraneous or ambiguous signage should be eliminated.

More contextual information, on individual students and on courses, would appear to be required. It is recommended that the presentation of all information should be consistent and should be quality assured.

Arrangements should be made to ensure that all equipment is switched on and working at all times whilst the show is open. Showing spaces should be adequately maintained and continuously invigilated.

Colleges should ensure that their facilities are open and well maintained during visiting hours. Obtrusive maintenance works and unnecessary clutter should be avoided.

More effective systems for promoting the availability of work for sale should be developed. Mechanisms for capturing visitor feedback, including mailing list details, should also be developed.

#### 4 Conclusion and recommendations

The fieldwork produced interview and survey data that enabled conclusions to be drawn regarding each of the identified research questions.

- How is the MA show currently regarded by a] the staff and b] post-graduate students of the Colleges of the UAL: what are its roles; what expectations are attached it?

Both staff and students at the UAL recognised that multiple roles and expectations were attached to the MA shows. They were important in terms of the professional development and progression of individual student artists, whilst at the same time fulfilling 'bigger picture' strategic aims, for their individual colleges and for the university as a whole. There was not felt to be a conflict of interests, but it was clear that a balance of interests needed to be negotiated and attained.

In terms of the students' interests, in some of the colleges the shows represented the culmination of academic assessment. The shows were also an important launchpad for students: to have their work purchased, and to help them to move on to other things. The commercial opportunity presented by the shows was a common theme.

The MA show was seen as a marketing opportunity for the university. Much of the external communications function of the MA shows was geared towards promotional and pragmatic aims. For example, as: 'an important tool in terms of publicising the courses and driving recruitment'. The MA show was also seen as a vital indicator for the state of emerging contemporary art: 'a barometer of where fine art postgraduate study is currently at.'

MA shows represent a promotional opportunity, and advantage, that is unique within the academic sector, because: 'A striking feature of arts education compared with other academic disciplines is that it does involve the exposure of the students' work to a much broader public.'

Staging the show was understood to be an integral part of the learning process of the MA; helping to prepare students for the professional work of being an artist. The show was regarded by all the students as a major milestone in their professional development: 'A one off opportunity for a big outward facing event to set ourselves

up for what we want to do for the future ... After this, no show for the next couple of years will draw so many people. So it's a really big event.'

The students were realistic about the opportunities that might follow: 'Any kind of feedback would be helpful at this stage. The important thing is to get connections to help the next step.' The students stressed the value of making useful professional connections above the value of achieving sales.

- To what extent is the MA show regarded as a public facing event, as part of the 'knowledge transfer' and 'outreach' agendas of the UAL, and what audience development practices, and artist/student PPD<sup>6</sup> strategies are followed in its staging and presentation?

It was recognised, by both students and staff, that the MA shows represented a major opportunity to attract a wide range of visitors to the university. A long list of potentially interested categories of visitor was suggested: other artists, current students, college staff, external examiners, potential students, peers from other colleges, school teachers, alumni, collectors, curators, critics, creative industries professionals, potential sponsors and funders, the press, 'people who want to steal ideas', family and friends, people from the neighbourhood, and people with a general interest in the arts. The pragmatic opportunities associated with attracting visitors to MA shows, and their related events - such as to sell work, to raise sponsorship, or to recruit students - were well understood by both students and staff.

It was recognised that: 'There are particular interest groups with different needs.' Doubts were expressed as to whether, currently, these needs were being well met. The quality of the MA show visitor experience across the UAL was reported as being 'very uneven'. As a consequence, the audience development potential of the shows across the university as a whole could not be fully capitalised upon. The MA shows were perceived to be taking place within an increasingly competitive and professionalised environment – within Higher Education and within the visual arts – and to build on current successes the UAL would need to up its game.

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<sup>6</sup> Within the UAL, the term 'PPD', or Personal and Professional Development, refers to learning activities that are designed to equip students, or staff, to operate more effectively in their chosen professional milieu.

A barrier to being able to understand and improve upon the shows' appeal to visitors was a lack of knowledge about who the current audience actually is and about what it thinks of the visitor experience. The general practice appeared to be to collect little, or no, information on audiences.

The students felt that they had not been systematically prepared by their colleges for staging the shows. To a degree, this was because, at MA level, they were expected as a group already to have the necessary skills. The students were given some 'professional practice' type preparation, in the form (at one college) of the opportunity to organise an interim show, and through the input of a limited number of visiting lecturers brought in to talk about aspects of the shows delivery. It was suggested that a more structured 'practice based programme' of activity could be organised to support the students in preparing for the MA show. It might include: working on, and critically analysing, the delivery of interim shows; more regular external input, from people representing different roles within the exhibition process; links with postgraduate curatorial programmes; and visits to other student shows, to gain ideas about effective practice.

- What is the current audience experience of arts professionals attending MA shows at the UAL, and more broadly across art colleges and university art departments in England and Wales?

The audience experience of attending MA shows, both at the UAL and at colleges across England and Wales, was found to be mixed. Some reported examples of very good and effective practice, which catered well for their audience needs. The experience of many, however, was that their needs had not been well understood, and were not being well met. Nearly half of the respondents to the Axis survey, for example, felt that the host institution had understood the audience development potential of the MA show 'not very well'; only a relatively small minority felt that they had understood it 'very well'. Even fewer felt that their audience needs had been catered for 'very effectively'. A greater proportion of the respondents felt that their needs were 'not very effectively' catered for, or else were not catered for at all. Some regarded the show as a 'missed opportunity', for the institution as well as for the students.

A number of respondents to the Axis advisors survey reported that they would be somewhat reluctant returners to future MA shows. A significant number seem to feel

duty-bound to return - out of an obligation to the students, or else to their profession - rather than because the MA show had provided a satisfying experience that would encourage them to revisit. This suggests that colleges and universities should not take their MA show audience for granted, but should take stock of current practices (and audience perceptions) and seek ways to make the visitor experience a more rewarding one.

The survey findings as a whole, point to the need for some institutions to work harder to understand their MA show audiences and to develop a greater capacity to cater for their needs and thereby to build their interest and loyalty as repeat visitors. Lessons might be learned from the audience practices followed elsewhere within the visual arts, such as in the galleries sector. A shorthand summing up of the more negative findings of the Axis advisors survey is contained in the following comment: 'I think the event was a missed opportunity – the art world is very competitive and the show represents the artists' hard work over a prolonged period. It should therefore have been given all the attention that a gallery exhibition requires.'

- From the findings of the above, is it possible to identify examples of current good practice and suggestions for future practice that could be disseminated to benefit both staff and students at UAL and the broader Higher Education-based Fine Art community in the UK?

Each element of the four-part programme of research – interviews with staff; interviews with students; a survey of arts professionals; and arts professionals' 'video diaries' – brought forward a range of positive ideas and suggestions for what might constitute effective practice in the staging of MA shows. A condensed 'menu of recommendations' might include the following.

### **Preparation**

Develop a practice-based induction programme for students tied to the development of the MA show. This might include: working on, and critically analysing, the delivery of interim shows; regular visiting lectures from people representing different roles within the exhibition process; links with postgraduate curatorial programmes; and visits to other student shows (and public galleries), to gain ideas about effective exhibitions practice.

Establish MA show committees at, or near, the beginning of the course, with representatives from different areas of the college: such as front of house, marketing, technicians, course directors, student reps, etc.'

Schedule the show at a time which fits best with the time constraints of the course and ensures that the target audience is most likely to be free to attend.

Provide appropriate guidelines around the different constituent elements of the show. These should include information about who is responsible for doing what.

Introduce quality control mechanisms, an independent eye to monitor details of the presentation before the shows open, to achieve consistent standards.

Develop targeted mailing lists and produce publicity that communicates well the purpose and benefits of attending. On-line information should be clear, accurate, and up-to-date.

## **Presentation**

Aim to achieve a clean, curatorial presentation in generous-sized, fit-for-purpose exhibiting spaces. 'Makeshift' spaces, such as corridors, or external venues not designed for the display of art, tend to create a detrimental impression.

Ensure that the first reception point encountered by visitors is fully appraised of and supplied with all of the information available to assist the understanding and enjoyment of the show. The reception should be: easy to locate; friendly and welcoming in its approach to visitors; aware of the importance of MA shows from a public relations point of view, as a bridge between the college and the wider community.

Provide a map which includes clear information on the whereabouts of the work of each artist.

Provide internal and external signage which is clear, consistent, continuous and easy to spot. Colour coding can help this. Eliminate all extraneous or ambiguous signage.



Provide information on individual students and courses that helps to contextualise and enable an expanded understanding of the exhibiting students and their work. A monitoring/checking mechanism should be put in place to ensure that the overall quality of the information provided is consistent and of a high standard.

Provide well produced catalogues, or other forms of 'take away' publicity, that includes: illustrations of the work of featured artists; artists' contact details (including URLs); and artists' statements.

Make arrangements to ensure that all equipment is switched on and working at all times whilst the show is open.

Ensure, and monitor, that showing spaces are adequately maintained and continuously invigilated.

Encourage and prepare students to be approachable, helpful and willing to talk about the show, their work and their study experience. As well as being prepared to talk confidently about their own work, student invigilators should be encouraged to assimilate and be prepared to impart at least a basic level of information (including contact details and where to find out more) about the work of their fellow students.

Develop effective systems for promoting the availability of work for sale, and for administering purchases.

Provide well-signposted spaces and facilities where visitors can relax and take refreshments.

Ensure that college facilities are open and well maintained during visiting hours. Avoid obtrusive maintenance works and unnecessary clutter.

## **Review**

Develop mechanisms for capturing audience data and feedback. Visitors should be given an opportunity to join a mailing list. Mechanisms for learning about the audience's profile, interests and perceptions, such as visitor surveys, should be considered.

Establish review forums, which should include senior managers, to discuss how well things are working, and to develop proposals for future change.

Ensure clear strategic leadership. For fresh ideas and new guidelines geared towards positive change to be implemented effectively, the strategic leadership needs to come from the top.

I would add one final cautionary observation: there can be no catch-all blueprint for how to stage the definitive MA show. Each college, or university faculty, will have its own modus operandi when it comes to the staging of MA (and other) student shows. Each will offer different programmes of learning, based around disciplines that have their own conventions and requirements of public display. Proposals for how MA shows might, in the future, be staged more effectively, must acknowledge that differences of culture, character, and operations exist across different colleges. One-size-fits-all solutions which ignore this fact will be less likely to be effective.

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## **Appendix 1: Interviews held 17 July – 30 October 2007**

### **University of the Arts London (UAL) staff**

Caroline Archer, Head of Corporate Development, UAL Communications and Development, 17 July

Lynette Brooks, Head of Development, UAL Communications and Development, 17 July

Brian Chalkley, Course Director, MA Fine Art, CCA, 2 October

Medeia Cohan, Assistant Curator, University Art Collection UAL, 21 Sept

Paul Coldwell, FADE Project Leader, Chelsea College of Art, 25 October

Geraint Evans, Pathway Leader, Painting MA, WCA, 30 August

Joanna Greenhill, Course Director, MA Fine Art, Central St. Martins College of Art, 30 October

Kate James, Student Recruitment Manager, Wimbledon College of Art, 9 October

Eamonn Maxwell, Curator, University Art Collection, 17 July & 21 Sept

Anthony Petrou, Exhibitions Organiser, London College of Communication, 16 October

Suzi Randjelovic - Head of Events, UAL Communications and Development, 17 July

Elizabeth Rouse, UAL, Pro Rector, Academic Development & Quality (ADQ), 22 October

Sian Stirling, Head of External Relations for Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges, 9 October

David Whittaker, Head of Alumni Relations, UAL Communications and Development, 17 July

### **UAL MA post-graduate students**

Wimbledon College of Art students x 3, 10 September

Chelsea College of Art students x 4, 21 September

### **Other arts professionals**

Jane Bailey, Artist/Lecturer South Bank University, 5 July & 21 Sept

David Falkner, Director, Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston University, 10 September

Timandra Gustafson, Executive Director, Axis, 5 September

Julian Lister, Artist Services Co-ordinator, Axis, 5 September

## **Appendix 2: Axis advisors survey - locating the respondents and the shows**

### **Respondents' 'arts professional' roles and employment:**

#### **Roles:**

Artist: 12

Curator: 4

Lecturer: 3

Researcher: 2

Arts Manager: 5

Writer: 2

Respondents often indicated multiple roles, one of which was usually 'artist'

#### **Employer:**

Self-employed: 11

Gallery: 2

University: 4

Arts Organisation: 4

### **Location of the shows visited**

London, UAL: 5

London, other: 2

England, North of: 3

England, South of: 5

England, Midlands: 2

Wales: 2

### Appendix 3: Edited transcripts of Arts Professional's interviews

These were semi-structured interviews based around the following questions/areas of questioning:

How did you find: -

- Advance information/website
- Literature/publicity [pv cards, labels, student information, explanatory text, catalogue]
- Environment and navigations [signage, getting around, spaces, use of space]
- Front of house/personal interactions [reception, invigilation]

Do you have any thoughts about/examples of what currently works well?

What are your thoughts about areas for possible improvement?

How effective do you think the UAL MA shows currently are in reaching and catering for a professional audience?

What impressions did the show leave you with of the MA courses at the College and of the UAL in general?

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Edited transcript of interview 1: Camberwell College of Art, 5 July 2007

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The first thing I noticed, even before arriving at the show, was some big banners saying 'Summer Show', which wasn't terribly useful. They just said 'Summer Show', but didn't let you know that it was an MA show, or where it was, or when it was on. If you didn't already know that the MA show was happening it would have been quite puzzling. It was lacking both dates and times and one banner was on a wall which was not near to the buildings where the show was on, which was quite baffling.

I arrived early, about half past nine. There was someone at reception when I arrived who was helpful and approachable and was able to answer my initial basic queries. There was a big table there full of information. But not much of it was what I was looking for, i.e. specific to the show. There was a lot of information on courses, which was of limited interest to me. The most useful thing was a map. It is quite a complicated building and a colour coded map directed you to different courses within the building. But the information generally just told you that these courses existed, they didn't prepare me or inform me about the show in any way.

The route was colour coded according to course and that was absolutely essential because it is a complicated building. There were times when the signage was a little bit lacking, but mostly it was ok. The building itself though wasn't ideal. It was a rather rambling, messy space. It did really detract from the work. Although the building is something that you cannot entirely get around, it could have been dealt with better. It just wasn't handled very well. It was very messy, there was stuff left all around, piles of chairs and things, in the corridors and stairway spaces, but it carried on also into some of the showing spaces. It felt like things had just been left there, things like rollers and paint had been just left after the spaces had been prepared, which was a distraction from the viewing experience really.

I arrived quite early and a lot of the things were not yet up and running, so that left a bad first impression. There were a lot of blank screens and monitors. Then, in terms of information, it wasn't always clear which course work you were looking at. At times the courses seemed to bleed from one into the other without the boundaries being clear, which was a bit confusing. In general the presentation felt a bit haphazard. I didn't perceive any consistency that would have held together the coursework within a particular space.

There were some courses where they had obviously thought about the presentation to the extent that students' labels were generally consistent, and that helped. It enabled you to just focus on the work. But the information given was generally very inconsistent and there was no information on what they were trying to achieve within a particular course. That lack of context was unhelpful in terms of an understanding of the show.

Also, there were issues about the quality of the information provided. It wasn't always easy to get to the sense of what individuals were trying to say about their work. Perhaps there was a stage there that was lacking, of checking what had been presented. It would have benefited from proofreading and spellchecking; fairly basic really. Obviously you have to allow the students to present the work in a way that is in keeping with what they are doing, but it could be made more smooth and consistent so that you didn't have to keep thinking 'what am I looking at here, what course am I in', and so on.

There was a catalogue for one of the courses and some individual students had put out business cards, but that was more the exception than the rule. Generally, there was not as much information as I would have liked on the exhibiting students. I looked up basic information about the show before I went, online – time and dates, etc - and that was fine.

In quite a lot of cases there was a student present in the space and I spoke to a few of them. They were very helpful and on the whole seemed approachable. As well as getting an impression from them about their work and their level of engagement with the course, you also form an impression about the course as a whole. They confirmed that some of the spaces were messy because someone had forgotten to clear up after an opening night party and they confirmed my sense of things being a bit disorganised.

The experience overall was of a sense of fragmentation. I didn't get a coherent sense of a course of students working together to put forward a show, more of individuals putting their work in a space. From some conversations I got a sense of a kind of distance from the course; some were overtly negative about the experience of studying at Camberwell. They mentioned difficulties, lack of contact with tutors, and a clear sense that the course hadn't lived up to their expectations. From a student point of view, before joining my own MA course I had chosen to visit the college's MA show the year before. And that was a positive experience, looking around the show and speaking to students there. One of my chief impressions walking out of Camberwell was that if I had gone to that show at the point of deciding whether to study there, I would almost certainly have chosen not to go to Camberwell. If I was in a position of deciding at that point, that experience would swing it. Not just in terms of levels of presentation and professionalism, but in terms of a sense of the course, of people trying to work together, it just didn't come across at all well.

I looked up information in advance on the College website. It was my first visit to the UAL site. There was not a great deal to see: just the dates, nothing about the courses or the individuals who were showing. It was a well designed site: smart and professional, with enough basic information for my initial needs.

I was given a folded A4 site map when I arrived at reception. It had a list of buildings and showed who was showing where. That was fine; a good start to the visit, simple to understand. The receptionist was friendly. She handed me some information and a map and asked if I knew the building.

I arrived quite early, at around 10.15 [the show was advertised as being open from 10am]. A lot of the rooms hadn't got lighting on. It didn't feel as though the show was quite ready: the painting studio building wasn't properly lit, probably more than half of the audio equipment wasn't switched on. I was told by one graduate that each artist was responsible for looking after their own work. In a gallery, that would be a job for one specified individual.

There was no one around at all in the first buildings I went in. The lights and equipment were switched off. That might have been off putting to some people. By 11 o'clock there were more people around. In the sculpture and drawing buildings there were quite a few students, who were generally quite proactive about welcoming me. I found them quite open and communicative.

I started picking up different bits of information as I went along. I had some confusion about the work that seemed to be performance-based, when it was working, which much of it wasn't. With the Visual Language of Performance (VLP) pathway presentations I was not sure what I was looking at. Was it work in itself, or was it for performance? It was unclear and there was nothing to help me to interpret it.

There was virtually no contextual information available either on the exhibiting artists or on the courses featured. There was nothing available alongside the exhibits. Individual students had address labels, which were presented in uniform style. But they just gave the name of the student and their 'pathway'. It was hard to get a sense of the nature of the courses. Some students had put up titles, but there was no coherent format to the way that was done. One student told me that she did that herself because it wasn't going to be provided. There was no consistency. 95% had no titles. There were no student statements. Overall, there was an absolute minimum of information about students' and courses.

There was no catalogue. A catalogue would have been helpful to me in retrospect, rather than during my actual visit on the day. It could have included more information on the courses, and some artists' statements. A 'clean' approach to presenting the work is understandable, to make it look like a museum space. It's a question, I suppose, of how much WCA and the UAL want to promote the courses and the school. A catalogue would have been helpful as an *aide memoir*.

In terms of navigating around the show, the map was fine. It was a Monday morning and not many people were around. Signage was quite discreet and could have been clearer: for example, in indicating where access was permitted, and where it was not. The signs could have been larger, offering a clearer motif to follow around the campus. But it is quite a compact site, so navigation was not too difficult.

A couple of the students had produced floor plan of particular rooms, where graduates were exhibiting together. That was helpful. There was also information on the media of the work, etc, which was a lot better than just having titles. It would be more useful to have everything stapled together in one plan at the start of the visit. For people who are not familiar with buildings, it is better to have all the information, together, at the start.

I would assume that the graduates might hope to sell their work. There was a little bit of information about this at the beginning. I assumed a price list would be available at reception but there wasn't. I was told that you would have to contact each individual student. That would put a lot of people off. So you've probably lost your sale because of that. The chances are that even if they were to be contacted, the student's would not know about how to price their work anyway.

Generally, it was a pleasant environment to walk around. I didn't feel like I wasn't welcome to wander around the building. The overall impression was that the work was incredibly well displayed; the works themselves were doing their job. The spaces were more than adequate. It was just the lack of information that was a barrier. But the building was smart; it was a nice place to come to. But it is a trek and you do have to make the effort, you're not going to get people dropping in for just half an hour. Another comment I would make was that there was nowhere in the college where I could sit and have a cup of coffee. The canteen was closed during my visit and the drinks machine was not working. Given that there is no where else in the vicinity of the college where one can easily get refreshments, this did seem an oversight.

There was nowhere within the show to leave contact details to join the college mailing list. The only visitors' book I saw was in the College art gallery, where a separate show seemed to be going on. It was not clear what relationship there was between the gallery and the MA show.

Overall, I enjoyed looking at the work, which was well presented. So, the bulk of the students work is done, and well done, but it does need to be better packaged as an experience overall, otherwise your trying to put together the pieces of the jigsaw as you go around. The nature of courses and their interrelationship was obscure. Even now, I'm still unclear about the relationship of VLP to Fine Art. The information provided is really important. I want to be able to see the work, that's the most important thing. But if people were looking with a view to study at the college it's really difficult to get a real sense of the course. You would need another layer of information, that isn't currently provided. So the MA show could be used better as a way to promote the student experience, rather than just the individual students' work.



Before attending I checked on line for times and dates and how to get to the show. That was all clear and easily available. There was a map on the website which showed what entrance to use, which was helpful. Outside the building there were a number of visual cues, small posters, to get to the right place. They didn't have a lot of information on them, but they signalled that an event was happening.

So finding the right part of the building initially was fine, but then I went a bit awry. I asked at the first desk, the security desk, for some information and they pointed me in the general direction, but I asked about a map and there wasn't one. So I headed off without all the information that I should have had at that stage. Then later on I came across a special MA show desk, to welcome people and to give them maps and information. That had been just hidden around the corner. I hadn't seen it and the initial desk had pointed me in the other direction. So all the information I had wanted was there but there needed to be more co-ordination at the front desk. I got a bit lost at the beginning when really it should have been quite easy.

The student information point was very helpful, they were very keen to help with any questions and they had a map. And then it got a lot easier. The building and campus is quite complex and the show was split over a number of blocks. The map did help a bit but the main thing was colour coded signage, which was well placed and easy to follow throughout.

The welcome point had catalogues for sale for £2. It was well produced, with a lot of work in it, so that seemed very reasonable. In the student spaces it varied from student to student, but most people had left a card with contact details on. Some people had statements and when they were done they seemed to be generally quite well done. And labels were done in a consistent way: the same font and font size, and printed out quite neat. Some students had floor plans in their rooms to show who's work was who's.

I didn't come across much information on the individual courses, but I wasn't really looking out for that and I was really concentrating on the MA Fine Art show. In a way that was quite nice because sometimes you come across shows where you get a lot of information which you feel is there to advertise the course. I felt that this really did focus you on the students' work, which I liked.

The spaces struck me as very good: the way that they were presented and finished. One of the first spaces that I walked in to, I wasn't sure whether it was part of the MA show because the presentation was very professional. The wall text made it look like a gallery show. And in general the standard of presentation was very high; the finish and presentation of the work, and the look of the spaces themselves. They looked like they were good spaces to begin with, but the students' had taken the trouble to make them look slick and they worked very well, I thought.

The difficult side, and this isn't a criticism of the show at Chelsea, is that there are several shows going on at the same time within a busy place with lots of other things happening. Unlike going to a gallery where you just walk in and you are in the right place automatically, you can go to the wrong place and you have to make a little bit more effort to find things. But that is unavoidable and there are many things that can be done to make that as easy as possible. Apart from the signs and the map the other thing that struck me was how helpful the students were when I spoke to them. There were quite a few students around and they were keen to engage in conversation and they all seemed quite positive and were all very helpful.

And there were one or two points where you could stop and get a cup of coffee, which was good. So the general feeling I got was very positive actually. I was very interested in the Fine Art course and I got a very positive sense of the place too. I've already completed an MA and wasn't looking at the show as a prospective student, but the experience of visiting the show built up a positive sense of the course. From the results that I'd seen, I was very impressed with it and gained an even more positive sense of the course through speaking to the students.

I wasn't thinking of joining the college mailing list – I hadn't really thought about it – but if given the opportunity I might have been interested to have left details to have heard about future public events organised by the college. I didn't see anywhere to do that, which was perhaps an opportunity missed.

The potential to buy work wasn't very evident. That wasn't something that seemed obvious, or generally available. But it wasn't something that I was looking for. A professional presentation that foregrounds the work is different from a slick presentation. I don't see that that necessarily goes hand in hand with the commodification of the work. There is plenty of scope for people who are looking for other things: to work with partners, to develop relationships and set projects up. Ways of working that are not necessarily about selling objects. Presenting work well is obviously still important. It is important that work should be well and appropriately presented. And I was impressed by the way that that was done at this show. I don't think that has to go hand in hand with selling work. For some students it is appropriate to think about selling their work. But for other students there is scope to be thinking about how they can use that time and that space to promote what they are doing; to build relationships, make connections with the visitors coming in; for thinking in a way that isn't about just putting up prices, but that could be beneficial for the next step that that person is wanting to take.

When we were organising our own MA show we gave some thought to having some kind of communal space that was outside the individual showing spaces, but was a space to stop and have conversations and find out more about the work; where students can provide more information about their practice, and about how and where they see themselves taking that practice: the kind of places they might be working in, the kind of people they might want to work with. Maybe a website could have that function, possibly available to view on site whilst visiting the show. That kind of space needs some thinking about. The 'comments book' format, where people scribble a few comments and maybe leave an email address, isn't quite able to do that.

#### **Appendix 4: MA show events attended: July – November 2007**

Camberwell College of Art MA show, 5th July

Goldsmiths College MA show, 16th July

Central St Martins College of Art and Design MA show, 31st August

London College of Communication Interactive Media MA show, 6th September

Wimbledon College of Art MA show, 10th September

University College Falmouth MA show, 11th September

Byam Shaw MA show, Central St Martin's College of Art and Design, 20th  
September

Chelsea College of Art MA show, 21st September

London College of Communication Photography MA show, 27th November