

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This project set out to investigate the Fine Art MA show as it is manifested through various courses and colleges at the University of the Arts London (UAL)¹ and 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 to 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 PPD² 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?
- 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?

¹ 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).

² 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 four-part method was developed to capture data to answer these questions:

- 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 19 arts professionals who had attended MA shows at colleges in England and Wales during the period June to September 2007 (in association with Axis Graduates³).
- 'Video diary' style observation and commentary on MA shows at three UAL colleges by arts professionals, followed by audio-recorded interviews.

The research took place between July and November 2007. The key findings and recommendations to emerge from each element of the research will now be summarised.

³ Axis is an on-line database featuring the work of professional visual artists working in the UK (see: 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>).

Interviews with UAL staff

Interviews were conducted with fourteen members of staff, representing different roles, who in some way had an interest in the presentation of MA shows at the UAL. Two particular categories of staff were identified: 'gateway' individuals and individuals concerned with 'communications and development'.

The 'gateway' individuals had the best overview of how the MA shows were staged and co-ordinated within a particular college of the UAL. Interviews were held with representatives of five colleges: Wimbledon, Chelsea, Camberwell, St Martins and London College of Communication. The gateway interviewees had a 'hands on' involvement in the staging of the shows; they were in direct liaison with both postgraduate students and with the other college staff involved in the exhibition.

The 'communications and development' individuals (henceforth just 'development') had a different supportive and strategic relationship to the shows. Their involvement was generally less hands-on, and their interests were less directly student-focussed and more identified with the development priorities of the college or university as a whole. Their roles reflected the university's need to communicate with external stakeholders.

'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. Each offers 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 the colleges. One-size-fits-all solutions which ignore this fact would be less likely to succeed.

Purposes, aims and desired outcomes

The 'gateway' interviewees recognised that the MA shows served multiple interests and agendas. 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.

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, reflecting a sales-oriented tendency within the contemporary art zeitgeist.

The MA show was seen as a marketing opportunity for the college: '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.'

The audience

The perceived audience included: 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.

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.'

Areas and ideas for improvement

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 potential audiences. Two felt their colleges were currently doing a quite an effective job. Three felt that there remained significant room for improvement.

The interviewees offered practical ideas for how things could be taken forward. These included:

'Provide guidelines around the elements of the show ... as part of the course strategy.'

'Firm up the professional practice content ... We get outside people in occasionally, but that's not specifically geared to the show.'

'Establish the MA show committees into the course structure from the beginning of the year.'

'A website which showed all the work ... offers a good way for people outside of the UK to be aware of the work.'

'A link was built up with another UAL college, through a cross campus crit ... the principle [of cross-college collaboration] was established.'

'Some links were formed with curatorial practice, which could be built on.'

'Encourage other exhibitions to take place at the school at the same time ... to bring in a different kind of audience who would find ... an MA show happening at the same time.'

The interviewees mentioned areas for improvement where solutions still needed to be identified, such as:

'Technical provision; the availability of equipment ... navigating people around the space ... front of house and the process for administering sales.'

'Selling work from the show ... We perhaps didn't have the contact with collectors that some other colleges have. Also, the mechanics of selling were quite difficult ... the students sold their own work independent of the college.'

'There needs to be more of a coming together of the courses and the marketing department ... neither of them likes to share their mailing lists ... So, sometimes things break down in terms of communication.'

‘There is no cross college working around the MA shows ...The problem is that the courses are completely non-aligned: they start at different times of the year.’

‘Some MA shows had no external signage promoting the show ... 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 ... in terms of a fully worked out rational system, that’s not clear.’

The need for strategic leadership

The responses pointed to a need for greater strategic leadership, within the individual colleges and within the university as a whole. 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: ‘There is no sense of a strategic point of view from management about what the MA shows want to achieve ... 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

The ‘development’ interviewees recognised that the shows addressed a spectrum of interests. As one 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.’

From the point of view of the students’, a number of desired outcomes were identified:

'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.'

'It's very important for students to show their employability and show their readiness to enter the creative industries.'

'There is a commercial opportunity for students to sell work.'

'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 ... we have to give them the best platform to show what they can do.'

The MA shows also served an important communications function, both within and about the university:

'People from across the university attend the shows ... We could use them as networking events; to promote the college, but also to get internal connections and collaborations to occur.'

'The work itself gives a stamp to the kind of institution that we want to be recognised as.'

'The QAA ... 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 geared towards promotional and pragmatic aims. For example:

'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.'

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

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.'

The audience

The 'development' interviewees produced a long list of potentially interested categories of visitor: 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.

One interviewee said: 'There are particular interest groups with different needs.' Some were currently the subject of specific targeting and customer care, particularly 'higher status' ones. One interviewee remarked: '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.' However, the opportunity to attract other categories of attendees is yet to be fully explored.

The uniqueness of the UAL in having so many student 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 ... audiences will make choices about which [show] to visit.'

But, on the other:

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

The MA shows were 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:

‘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.’

‘We are increasingly in competition with major contemporary art institutions in London and ... it’s hard for us to measure up.’

‘The graduate shows are the most important things that the University does each year and we really undersell them ... 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.’

The quality of the MA show visitor experience across the UAL was perceived to be very uneven, as a consequence, the audience development potential of the shows across the university as a whole could not be fully capitalised upon: ‘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 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. One interviewee remarked:

‘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.’

Current perceptions, and the way forward

There was a general sense that, currently, the potential of the UAL MA shows to meet the identified purposes, or to cater effectively for different audiences, was not being maximised. A greater level of strategically directed co-ordination could help to improve things. 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

Two particular areas that should be addressed were referred to: the sale of students’ work, and the time at which the shows were open to the public. In terms of sales, there were two shades of opinion. The predominant view was that a more professional and commercial approach was needed. Set against this view, 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.

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

Ideas for improvement

A large number of specific proposals were made regarding how the shows’ delivery might be improved. Many of these proposals corresponded closely to the

recommendations for improvement that emerged from the 'arts professionals' element of the 'Maximising the MA Show' research:

'More emphasis needs to be placed on quality control; an independent eye on details of the presentation before the shows open ... 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 ... 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 ... 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 ... with representatives from all aspects of the college: front of house, security, marketing, sponsorship, course directors, student reps, etc.'

'The marketing staff from each college should be involved in audience research. There is a need for standardisation of approaches across the colleges.'

In conclusion: 'reflect, then celebrate'

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.

'A lot of time and effort goes in to putting on the shows ... 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.'

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

Interviews with UAL students

Interviews were held with seven students presenting work at the MA shows at Wimbledon and Chelsea Colleges of Art whilst the students were invigilating. The Wimbledon students represented three pathways of the college's Fine Art MA: Painting, Drawing and Sculpture. At Chelsea, two had followed the Fine Art MA; two had been studying Textile Design.

Purposes, aims and desired outcomes

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.'

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. 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.'

The opportunity presented by the MA show had provided an important incentive to follow the MA programme: '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.'

The students were realistic about the opportunities that might follow from the show. Student 6 remarked: '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.’

Although some positive feedback from visitors was reported, the students felt it was too early to say whether any concrete opportunities might emerge from the show. The students stressed the value of making useful professional connections above the value of achieving sales.

The audience

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

‘First [in order of audience priority] it would be peers and contemporaries in the art world – other MA students from other colleges ... 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.’

‘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.’

‘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 ... My family is just as important as the dealer.’

A ‘VIP’ event organised at Chelsea, attended by gallerists and potential buyers, 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. ‘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.'

Students, from both colleges, commented that there did not seem to be any systematic monitoring of who had attended the shows. There was a sense that the audience priorities of the college might not necessarily tally with those of the students.

Preparedness

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 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.'

Conversely, the Chelsea students remarked that the cancellation of an interim show had been a disappointment. Student 1 remarked: '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.'

The students felt that they had not been systematically prepared by their colleges for staging the shows. The Chelsea students thought that they were expected as a group already to have the necessary skills:

'[The MA show] is incredibly student-led here ... 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.'

Wimbledon students had been offered advice seminars with a limited number of artists representing different career stages. The more experienced artist 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: ‘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.’

Suggestions were made regarding what might help to help prepare students more effectively:

‘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.’

‘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 ... 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 ... 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 ... Links with a curating MA would be particularly useful.’

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 most important relationship forged in the making of the show was with other students. Course managers and tutors were felt to have been helpful and supportive, particularly with regard to curatorial advice, concerning the choice and display of work.

Technicians were helpful in supporting the making of work, building exhibition spaces, and installing work.

The co-operation of estates/maintenance staff was reported to be 'mixed': 'They can be quite helpful, but can also be incredibly stubborn and territorial and obnoxious.' This relationship appeared to work better at Chelsea than at Wimbledon.

The relationship with marketing and communications staff was 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 could have been more supportive and cooperative.'

Other MA shows

MA students 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.

Several students had seen previous shows at their own college which had not left a 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.'

Ideas for maximising the MA shows

On the practical side:

'A more tightly knit show, rather than a labyrinthine scrabble for space, is better ... 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 ... 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 ... 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 ... 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 ... The show and the students are a great asset, as are its staff, and it really needs to be capitalised on.'

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

The Axis advisors' survey

The following is a summary of the findings and recommendations identified through a survey of arts professionals who had attended Fine Art MA shows during the summer or early autumn of 2007. Findings and recommendations are reported for the following key areas of the audience experience: information provision; personal interactions; quality of environment; post visit contact. Recommendations are also included based on 'audience perceptions' and 'ideas for improvements'.

Information provision

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.

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'.

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.

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.

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, catalogues 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.

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.

Personal interactions

'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.

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 had created a positive impression. The artists appeared 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.

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.

Quality of environment

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.

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 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 contact

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. 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'

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.

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.

Audience perceptions and ideas for improvement

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 the show, which is not maintained thereafter, was also alluded to. 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. A shorthand summing up of the more negative findings of the survey as a whole 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.'

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.

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.

Art professionals' 'video diaries' and interviews

Arts professionals with different kinds of expertise and motivation for attending MA shows were asked to visit shows at three different Colleges of the UAL to create a 'video diary' recording aspects of their visitor experience that they would wish to draw attention to. A compilation of clips from these visits, augmented by additional clips taken during my own research visits to MA shows at the UAL, was put together to create a composite 'video diary' for circulation, in CD form, to staff members at the UAL with an involvement in the staging of the MA shows⁴. Interviews conducted with the arts professionals immediately following their 'video diary' visits prompted the following conclusions and recommendations regarding the experience of attending MA shows at the UAL.

What currently works well?

Information on the UAL 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.

⁴ A copy of the CD could be made available, on request by email to p.glinkowski@wimbledon.arts.ac.uk, for a charge of £7 to cover costs of production, administration and postage.

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.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

The data collected enabled conclusions to be drawn regarding each identified research question.

- 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 to it?

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 the college or university as a whole. There was not felt to be a conflict of interests, but a balance of different 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 to help students to move on to other things, and they offered an opportunity to sell work.

The MA show was seen as a promotional opportunity for the university, often geared towards 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 Fine Art show 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.

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.'

- 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 PPD⁵ strategies are followed in its staging and presentation?

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.

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.

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.

⁵ 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.

The students felt that they had not been systematically prepared by their colleges for staging the shows. It was suggested that a more structured 'practice based programme' of activity could be organised to support them 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 (and gallery) shows, to gain ideas about effective exhibitions 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.

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.

- 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?

A 'menu of recommendations' might include the following.

Preparation

Develop a practice-based induction programme for students tied to the development of the MA show.

Establish MA show committees at, or near, the beginning of the course, with representatives from different areas of the college.

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.

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, should be avoided.

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.

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. Eliminate all extraneous or ambiguous signage.

Provide information on individual students and courses that helps to contextualise the work. 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.

Ensure that all equipment is switched on and working at all times whilst the show is open. Monitor the showing spaces to check that they 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.

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.

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 new guidelines geared towards positive change to be implemented effectively, the strategic leadership needs to come from the top.

Each college, or university faculty, will have its own modus operandi for staging MA 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 succeed.