



**A Lived Activity,
Not an Abstract Pastime**
Joanne Laws

It’s Very New School seeks to address what curator Jennie Guy calls a ‘crisis’ in post-primary education. Using the stagnation of the Leaving Certificate Art curriculum and other perceived educational deficiencies as points of departure, *It’s Very New School* asserts an important role for contemporary artists in society. Whether as a site of research-based and experiential learning, or as a vehicle to promote criticality and questioning, contemporary art has the inherent capacity for philosophical inquiry and imagining alternative realities. *It’s Very New School* has found vibrant ways to transpose these assertions into the gallery setting.

Towards a Critical Pedagogy

Art-as-research is grounded in the notion that art making is a form of inquiry; a kind of open-ended, artist/researcher-driven learning process in which new knowledge is discovered or constructed. This re-framing of art practice as research represents a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand research, art and artists. (Marshall & D’Adamo 2011: 12)¹

In his book *Developing Critical Thinkers*, British educational theorist Stephen Brookfield describes critical thinking as a “lived activity, not an abstract academic pastime” and suggests that critical thinkers are “actively engaged with life”.² He makes a case for critical thinking as being central to

personal development, civic life and a flexible, adaptable labour force. As well as denoting the ability to think in reflective and independent ways, critical thinking also describes a set of skills which allow a person to: understand rational connections between ideas; evaluate arguments; challenge the importance of context; detect flaws; highlight relevant material and reflect on their own values as part of a bigger picture of collective action. Central to the process of critical thinking outlined by Brookfield, are two main activities, namely a capacity to “identify and challenge assumptions” and the ability to “imagine and explore alternatives to existing ways of thinking and living”. Brookfield highlights a lack of critical thinking across school curriculums, which fail to equip young people with the skills and tools for divergent and critical reflection. The role of an educator, Brookfield argues, is to encourage critical thinking by discussing, sharing, provoking, and questioning the foundations of our thoughts and feelings.

The artists participating in this exhibition display a range of different approaches to artistic research. Priscila Fernandes’ research into the Modern School gathers together important theoretical strands which offer necessary historical context to the evolution of twentieth century education. *A friend in common* presents fictionalised correspondence between Spanish educator and anarchist Francisco Ferrer Guardia and prominent artists of early twentieth century. These intimate letters anchor the radical art movements within a politically turbulent era, when fascism was on the rise across Europe and World War I was on the horizon.

The Modern School pinpoints a fleeting, yet significant, period in history when attempts were made to create counter-cultures to the so-called ‘factory model’ of nineteenth century education. Established in Barcelona in 1901, the short-lived Ferrer schools aimed to educate working class children in non-coercive settings, with the aim of eradicating inequality, instigating social change and equipping young students with the critical vision and skills to lead a workers’ revolution. Ferrer school were later established in America, where they formed part of broader socialist and labour movements.³

Reflecting a lifelong mission to educate members of the ‘subaltern classes’ (so that they might not remain on the periphery of political life), Antonio Gramsci’s writings on ‘the State’ and ‘Civil Society’ strongly convey his critique of educational establishments. Gramsci believed that schools and other educational institutions are not ‘neutral’ but serve to cement the existing hegemony because they are intimately tied to the interests of the most powerful social groups, namely the bourgeoisie.⁴ The politics of education in Western capitalist societies were central to Gramsci’s formulation of the concept of Cultural Hegemony, and pivotal in his strategy for social transformation in all spheres of life. Drawing on Gramsci’s belief that ‘every relationship of hegemony is an educational one’,⁵ Paulo Freire developed a practice-based movement and educational philosophy of ‘Critical Pedagogy’, aimed at consciousness-raising by helping learners to recognize ‘authoritarian tendencies’, while making connections between ‘knowledge and power’.⁶

**Understanding Complexity:
Looking, Playing, Questioning**

Self-directed and reflective learning equips students with the resources needed to create a rich educational experience for themselves, while promoting ownership of the experience. Over the course of a residency at Blessington Community College, Sarah Pierce used experimental methods to prompt philosophical reflection among transition year students across a range of seemingly complex artistic concepts. The group discussed what it means to make an artwork and to put something out in the world that risks being misunderstood. Students were asked to carry out a self-directed group activity of painting a large black square without measuring. The group later took turns in addressing this artwork with a chorus of chants – “you are patchy... you are black...you are a mistake...you are a rainbow...dark, dark, dark... you are not square” – and made physical gestures in response to the geometric shape, forming horizontal and vertical lines with their limbs and bodies. The group delivered a one-off performance, *Black Square*, using methods borrowed from Brechtian theatre, including the use of signage, chorus, abstract scenic design and breaking the invisible ‘fourth wall’ which separates the actors from the audience. Such experimental approaches to learning encouraged intuitive and explorative activity in the students. In this way, Pierce could be best described as facilitator and co-conspirator in the learning process, rather than the holder of definitive ‘answers’.

Of course, as in any area of philosophy, aesthetics is often a good deal more successful in posing questions than in reaching answers... But of course, this discomfort is part of genuine education: Aesthetic issues are not easy ones. After all, it is just this sort of questioning which may, ultimately, have a profound effect on the way in which a future adult views, creates and values art. (Battin 1994: 103)⁷

John Beattie and Ella de Búrca worked with students of the Dublin 7 Educate Together National School in the Grangegorman area of Dublin. The artists used a range of experimental approaches, with the use of questions prompting significant reflections and dialogue within the group. School students tend to be least familiar with rhetorical or seemingly ‘unanswerable’ questions, possibly because they are accustomed to there being one correct answer, rather than a range of subjective possibilities.⁸ The posing of subjective questions allows students to evaluate potential meaning in philosophical and open-ended ways. It allows them to reflect on potential answers, even if they cannot articulate them. The group developed *The Masterplan*, a spoken-word opera built around a chorus of questions – What is school for? What was school for? and What’ll school be for? – which scrutinised the purpose of education in past, present and future societies.

Taking a different approach, Maria McKinney commenced her residency at Blessington Community College by presenting one of her existing artworks to the students. A sculpture from her body of work ‘Sire’ – which explores correlations between modern genomics and pre-Christian fertility rituals – functioned as a discerning teaching aid and prompted group discussions across a range of topics. Inspired by the complex structural patterns of DNA and new scientific research asserting the stomach as the ‘second brain’, the students performed *The Student Body* – a procession through the school grounds. As highly visible group formations in the public realm, processions have long been associated with various forms of civic collectivity, from cultural celebrations to religious rituals and political resistance. The processional formation is understood as an expression of egalitarian or democratic relationships, because it allows participants to experience camaraderie or connectedness by appearing alongside one another in some ceremonial or recreational way.

Notions of collectivity are common-place in political activism and the project alludes to the power students have if they present themselves as a unified body. The procession was adorned with the ephemera of pageantry, including several handmade banners and long nets filled with coloured balloons, which were held above the students’ heads like buoyant rainbows. What is also interesting about this particular art project is the fact that there was a degree of cross-over with other subjects on the senior cycle curriculum, not least Biology, Home Economics, Agricultural Science and Civic, Social & Political Education (CPSE). However, such interdisciplinarity can rarely be prescribed or predicted and if it is, it can feel trite.

Into the Unknown: Visual Thinking & Experiential Learning

Probing similar notions of collectivity and collective representation, Mark O’Kelly worked with Transition Year students in Our Lady’s School, Terenure, to examine the art historical conventions of group portraiture – a central and ongoing inquiry within O’Kelly’s wider artistic practice. Following discussions on how images and artworks influence the formation of group identities within society, the group embarked on a singular, large-scale class portrait. Students were invited to proceed without a formal plan and decision-making about the work was very much informed by the process of painting directly. This ‘performance of painting’ empowered students to carry out quick and loose sketches, guided by immediate gauges, such as the scale of their own bodies. They were encouraged to “make a gesture and stand back and look at it” ushering a process of learning through doing, or more specifically, learning through *reflection* on doing, which is the benchmark of experiential learning that places learners in a constant state of creation and evaluation. This focus on the types of thinking that emerge through making art also produces sophisticated forms of metacognition, imparting important knowledge on when and how to apply certain problem-solving strategies.

Along with the traditional family photo album, the genre of group portraiture has declined in the digital age, in favour of the seemingly omnipresent self-taken portraits that are circulated online via social media platforms. Named as Oxford English Dictionary’s word of the year in 2013, the digital ‘selfie’ phenomenon has been accused of manifesting superficial, narcissistic and impulsive behaviour. In contrast, the finished group portrait, entitled *Image of the self with and amongst others*, is deeply contemplative, authentic, generous (in its acknowledgment of the individual’s place within a group) and is the product of rich and durational processes.

Extending this concept of experiential learning, Sarah Browne carried out the project *How to Swim on Dry Land* with students to explore a range of inquiries. In one session, Browne showed students examples of contemporary art, with an emphasis on moving image work, particularly ones that parody popular forms of televisual and digital broadcasting. Such works posited contemporary art as one of the few remaining democratic spaces for critique and questioning. The group also explored the multi-faceted ways in which people learn, which can variously include: through peer interaction, self-reflection, visual media, verbal or non-verbal sounds, motion, touch, elicited performance, the printed or spoken word and the use of realia – tangible, everyday objects that enhance motor and cognitive skills.

Temporarily instilled with autonomy over their own education, the students compiled a list of things they want to ‘learn or unlearn’, which provided the basis for subsequent activities including a series of pantoums (structured poems), improvised gestures and Avant-garde-style film-poems. These statements also generated a range of far-reaching sub-questions which straddled the complex territories of Existentialism

(We want to learn how people exist: How was space created? How was the sea formed?) and Cultural Anthropology (We want to learn about musical instruments: What gave people the idea? out of boredom; to lift depression; to help motivate work?), while alluding to challenges for the Millennial Generation (We want to unlearn social media: The judgement needs to stop; We don’t do anything unexpectedly anymore; We need to learn to interact without it). Arguably this last statement is both distressing and heartening: it describes the modern condition, whereby our nervous systems are so overstimulated that our capacity for human interaction, absorption, even boredom, is now under attack; yet it simultaneously offers hope that we will someday transcend the commands of capitalist cyberspace.⁹

Nuanced Encounters

Despite the fact that young people are living in a fast-paced, highly technological world, the current models, ideologies and mechanisms of education have remained largely unchanged for decades. If we are to equip young people with the skills to cope with the uncertainties of modern life, we must fundamentally transform how we think about learning.¹⁰ Rather than ‘teachers’, the artists participating in *It’s Very New School* could be more accurately described as guides, facilitators or provocateurs of artistic research. In these school settings, the artists prioritised conceptual skills and research, with an emphasis on open-ended, self-guided and grouped-based inquiries motivated by student interest. However, such sensitive, nuanced and unmediated encounters do not just happen. In this case, they are the result of long and trustful working relationships between schools, staff, funders and project curator Jennie Guy, whose ongoing curatorial platform Art School has established a reputation for excellence among educators and the arts community alike. As producer and mediator of these encounters, Guy’s contribution is imperative: she consistently demonstrates discerning judgement in pairing leading arts practitioners with schools who are willing to take risks by participating in highly ambitious and experimental contemporary art projects.

Returning to Brookfield’s theorisation of critical thinking, it could be widely argued that as students, teachers and citizens, we need to continually challenge what we learn. Critical thinking gives us the theoretical tools to examine what we are learning with critical intent. It is a process based on the promotion of problem solving. As we have seen, the artists participating in *It’s Very New School* advocate methods that embody experiential learning and explore new ways to be creative. Learning in groups can be a healthy and effective strategy for young people, as they learn to be more democratic, more inclusive and aware of other people’s views. Questioning is also another important device that broadens participation and encourages philosophical reflection. We can see how the multi-faceted strategies of artistic research have challenged assumptions (about the purpose of education and the role of the artist), encouraged more active involvement from students and prompted them to imagine alternatives, evident in their confessed desire to ‘unlearn’ the all-encompassing habits of social media. We don’t always have to be content with the structures that exist; rather,

as the exhibition suggests, we can use critical reflection to question these structures and to bring about change.

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1 — Julia Marshall and Kimberly D’Adamo, ‘Art Practice as Research in the Classroom: A New Paradigm in Art Education’, Art Education, Vol. 64, No. 5 (September 2011).

2 — Stephen D. Brookfield, Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).

3 — A decade after the execution of Ferrer in 1909, Rudolf Steiner established the first Waldorf school in Germany, with the aim of devising a pedagogy for holistic, practical and artistic development. This new focus on creative play, artistic expression and critical reasoning influenced a range of other philosophies focusing on human potential. These included: the post-war Reggio Emilia approach (with a focus on self-guided curricula); the philosophy of ‘unschooling’ or natural schooling, developed by American educator John Holt in the 1970s; and the groundbreaking Theory of Multiple Intelligences, proposed by Harvard Professor Howard Gardner in his 1983 book Frames of Mind, which outlined a model for education based on the principle that learners have unique capabilities and skills.

4 — Peter Mayo, Gramsci, Freire and Adult Education, Possibilities for Transformative Action, (London: Zed Books, 1999).

5 — See Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, trans. Q. Hoare, & G. Nowell Smith, eds. (New York: International Publishers, 1971) p.350.

6 — Henry Giroux, Schooling and the struggle for public life: Critical pedagogy in the modern age, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

7 — Margaret P. Battin ‘Using Puzzles to Teach Aesthetics to Children’ in ‘Aesthetics for Young People’ ed. Ronald Moore (University of Illinois, 1994).

8 — Questioning is a highly-undervalued teaching method that, if used with dexterity, can not only test levels of recall and comprehension, but can broaden the parameters of the learning experience. For example, classification-style questioning can prompt learners to consider their own knowledge-base, experiences and observations of their changing visual environment, thus demonstrating a capacity to formulate complex comparisons. Conversely, analytical questions allow young people to make inferences in the absence of concrete answers.

9 — Mark Fisher ‘No One is Bored, Everything is Boring’, Visual Artists’ News Sheet, May/June 2014.

10 — Ellen McCabe ‘Leaving Cert fails to equip young people for a post-truth world’, Irish Times, Feb 21, 2017.

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