

Exploring the 'vernacular of honesty' in the intersection between academic life and external work

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1. ABSTRACT

At the moment, I have two personas. On the one hand, I am an academic, interested in a creative and academic research. Conversely, I have been involved for a number of years with an organisation called 'Pedestrian', a non-profit organisation, which aims to find a means to draw disaffected young people into society through Emergent urban Arts (EuA). In Cardiff School of Art & Design my role has developed to be focused on administration and undergraduate programme development. The concerns in 'Pedestrian' are more generally defined and appears to be developmentally divergent from my academic practice. I am interested in developing some convergence between these two seemingly disparate areas.

This research aims to create understanding that will outline these two fields and some of the possibilities for connectivity between them and to start a dialogue with other emerging researchers, as to how the situation in which I find myself can be resolved in a productive way. I hope that my particular dilemma would be something that other emerging researchers might have some empathy with. As a consequence, this paper outlines some of the factors that might form a research project; explores in a rather informal and discursive way some of the ideas that might shape the research and concludes with a form of creative intellectual meandering which explores some of the more speculative and rhizomatic directions the research might take.

2. OUTLINE

This paper will set out the parameters of the proposed research, it will then outline the two organisations and the relationship I have with them. It will then define and analyse how visual metaphors could aid the research and explore some of the boundaries of widening participation with particular reference to EuAs. Finally, this paper will discuss some intellectual meanderings pertinent to the EuAs in an attempt to find a method that could possibly aid the engagement of disaffected and alienated young people.

3. INTRODUCTION

Through the course of this paper I want to develop a 'vernacular of honesty'. This is not a formal paper, the research is not at that stage yet. This is more of a discursive paper written to provoke the reader to consider a project outline and the perhaps dichotomous positions that I have. However, it is at a stage where it is possible to set out some of the parameters by which further, more formal, research might form. It is likely that some forms of sociological, anthropological, sonic and pedagogic theories will be used to outline this paper. A 'Jazz' model might be employed in order to contextualise and further analyse Emergent urban Arts. At this stage these are rather speculative instincts, while the research is orientated and a direction is found for it to be productive and useful. The term 'vernacular of honesty' has been used, because it highlights the emergent nature of the research enquiry, and it is hoped that the reflexive and honest development will form a solid foundation for future research.

Although at first sight, it might appear to be better to have the research undertaken by someone who could keep these worlds apart and who could view them dispassionately, this paper explores how the research might be better undertaken by someone situated in its own enquiry. It explores how the researcher is familiar with the nuances of the projects under scrutiny and how that familiarity might inform the enquiry. Before we start to explore this, we perhaps need to outline these places in turn.

4. UWIC

The University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC) employs me as a Senior Lecturer, where my daily functions are that of a Programme Director of the BA/BSc (hons) Mobile, Web and Game Design degree (MWGD) within the Department of Creative Communication, and part of the Cardiff School of Art and Design. Apart from my main role as a Programme Director other daily roles have also affected my understanding of Learning and Teaching these include: Module Leader, Technician, Technical Demonstrator, Recruitment Officer and Programme Counsellor.

Other attributes that could be seen to have some bearing on pedagogic understandings have also been driven from other areas of work that I do though the university. I have found that my work as an external moderator has given me a broader understanding of how pedagogic differences can traverse the divide between privately funded Institutions, Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). My work as a validation panellist for several Degree and Masters programmes has given me an insight into a vast array of programmes structures, pedagogic practices and development. The MWGD degree, is distinct from a large majority of undergraduate programmes, in that, it has an informal and fluid structure, and can be seen as more reminiscent of a Masters postgraduate programme, this is due to small cohort numbers and a conscious pedagogic realisation that our students have a different understanding and relationships with how they learn. This is something I will explore with greater depth later in this paper.

5. PEDESTRIAN

Pedestrian is a not-for-profit community arts organisation which provides education and training in a wide range of EuA forms, Street Sports, and New Media. With over 5,000 workshops completed in its first decade, Pedestrian has a good feel for engagement with disaffected youth. Pedestrian was originally founded with the aspiration of helping young musical artists, and was promoted with the strap-line of 'Pedestrian, engaging with the feet on the street'. During the constitutional and organisational change during the summer of 2008, Pedestrian then adopted a new more focused out-look, 'Pioneering Potential'.

"Pedestrian's experience of working with young people in enabling them to take a lead role and make their own decisions, is of great importance to the Arts Council. Your work gave us great fuel for thought." (Peter Hewitt, Chief Executive Arts Council England, 2008).

"I was really impressed with not only the young people involved in this project, but also with Pedestrian's ability to achieve an end result that the group learnt from and can use to further their skills in the future." (Rhodri Jones of BBC 1Xtra at a 'Positive Activities for Young People' workshop series, 2008).

My role as a Director of Education is to oversee and develop the pedagogical elements of Pedestrian, to ensure that the learning and teaching is delivered, developed and assessed. Our future for the organisation envisages that this area will be increasingly pertinent to the success of the organisation.

6. A CREATIVE RESEARCH: THE POWER OF VISUAL METAPHOR

This research involves creative people. The research could call upon creative techniques and in that way make it meaningful to its subjects. One way of doing this could be to use a form of information design practice, shaping "...an experience, or view, of data with a particular aim in mind" (Van Heerden. 2008 :6). Writing particularly about data flow, Van Heerden suggests that: "The visual form we adopt becomes driven by the tool or the topic we are presenting" (Van Heerden. 2008 :6). Here for example, in this paper, I have made a multitude of notes into a small A6 size notebook. Throughout this practice, we can see an emergent relationship building between note-taking and diagrammatic practice. Data flow diagrams and visually laden metaphors can be usefully employed to aid the visualisation of complex interacting problems and can help understand the research and to sort through some kind of empirical

method.

“Visual metaphors are a powerful aid to human thinking. From Sanskrit through hieroglyphics to the modern alphabet, we have used ciphers, objects, and illustrations to share meaning with other people, thus enabling collective and collaborative thought. As our experience of the world has become more complex and nuanced, the demands to our thinking aids have increased proportionally. Diagrams, data graphics, and visual confections have become the language we resort to in this abstract and complex world. They help us understand, create, and completely experience reality” (Van Heerden, 2008: 5).

Using the notebook as a tool for reflexive research practice has enacted it as a springboard that facilitates the generation of new ideas. It records, stores, and generates lines of enquiry, but more importantly, it holds an intimate level of immediacy.¹

7. WIDENING PARTICIPATION

This research will in some way aid the engagement of disaffected and alienated young people. On a more pragmatic note, this research could provide some desperately needed, meaningful data with respect to the development of widening participation strategies in Higher Education with a particular focus on the provision for EuAs. There are a number of texts that have attempted to understand and construct pedagogies for disaffected youth, for example Goodman (1999). These will be useful, but they don't really appear on an initial survey, to cover the subtle sensitivities of EuAs.

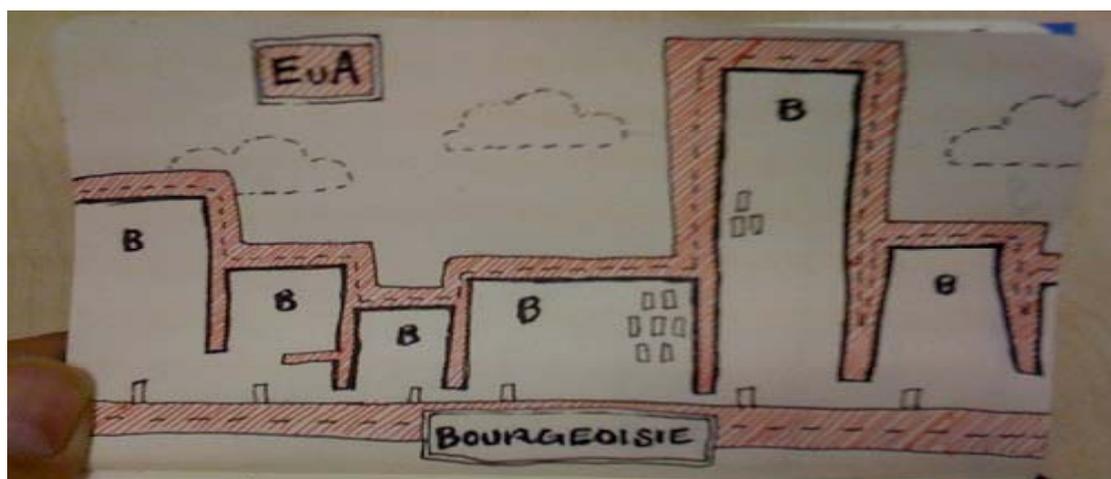


fig.1 The urban landscape (Neil, 2009)

Emergent urban Arts has divisively placed itself at the interface of the life, wrapping itself around the landscape and environments in which the 'bourgeoisie' live (fig .1). At the other end, a disaffected child is not able to engage with the pragmatic world of secondary education (See for example, Goodman,1999). As Parkour 'runners' and Graffiti 'writers' use our walls, roofs and street corners, the Turntablists (Katz, 2005: 115), DJ's and MC's sounds resound our streets from house party to 'pimped' hatchback cars. Walls, roofs, shopping centres and street corners are not galleries or altars of high art or the outcry of a wayward hoodie, but they can be thought of as the face and voices of the city (fig.1).

This research could usefully enquire whether analogy can be a useful means of generating an

¹ I have a love of blogging; from micro-blogging for social context to overblown, sensory simulating and metadata laden, interactive blogs. All my MWGD students' blog as it is part of their practice. Blogging has formed an intrinsic relationship with my research development, specifically with relationship to working with others; sharing ideas, communicating to aid somatic and peer reflexivity, socially enabling a connectivity with dissemination through online publication.

approach to the particular kind of data that EuAs produce, or obscure. For example, the 'tunnel' (fig.2) The tunnel analogy is an attempt to understand the relationship between a participant in Pedestrian and my undergraduate students, both of whom are involved in the EuAs. The tunnel could be viewed as the underpass in our urban landscape that we fear to tread. We might be able to utilise empirical methods to quantify as a measurable entity the factors that the 'tunnel' makes visible. At the moment of course we cannot say with any degree of certainty what those factors are except that they somehow represent a distance between the Higher Education (HE) EuA student and that of the 'Pedestrian' student in terms of pedagogic requirements.

Stripped of a social and political face and voice, propaganda for the EuA street lives in the hands of the spin and politician pundits. Marginalised for its *"economic wealth for the benefit of the bourgeoisie and the exploitation of the proletariat"* (Shepherd, 2008).² The Royal Academy of course enjoys an unrivalled reputation as a venue for exhibitions of international importance (RAoA, 2009) and is recognised as a private HE institution of significant value and esteemed recognition. In reply to a question of whether he would consider development of more interesting art-forms such as graffiti being studied, taught and exhibited in the Royal Academy of Art, Charles Saumarez-Smith, couldn't imagine doing it in the Museum of Mankind or the main building "... especially as I have had my fingers burnt when I curated an exhibition of pavement art" (Saumarez-Smith, 2009)

One speculative idea is that this notion of the so-called *"disaffected-ness and alienation of young people has something to do with the particular nature of the formal and pragmatic world of education systems in which, frameworks are constructed"* (Goodman, 1999)

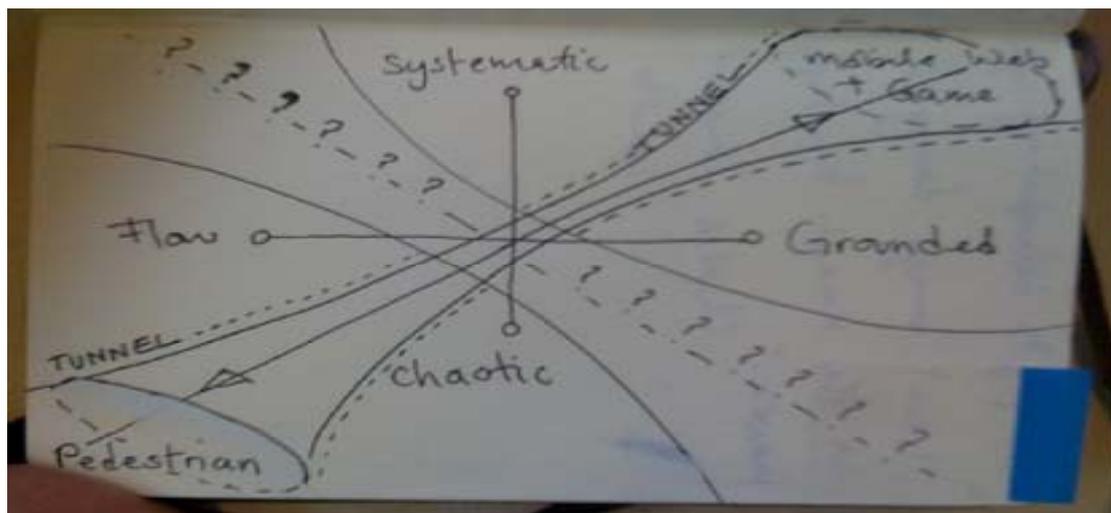


Fig .2 'System Correlations' and 'Tunnel' (Neil, 2009)

At the moment, my work within Pedestrian could be seen as rather ad-hoc and that my work in MWGD could be seen as more pragmatic. In the Systems Correlations diagram (fig.2), EuAs (represented by Pedestrian) sit on the conjoined axis between the 'flow' and 'chaotic', and the MWGD part of the diagram sits on the conjoined axis between the 'systematic' and 'grounded'. Some kind of line runs through from each of these EuAs areas, from MWGD students to Pedestrian students. The research will question the relationship between these two sets of EuA students and examine the boundaries that surround it and work out what this line represents.

Furthermore, the research may enquire why Pedestrian students appear to be fascinated with Hip-Hop culture. Are they looking for an attainable form of peer acceptance or are they fascinated with being 'kool'? (Pountain and Robins, 2000) or is something else going on? Why do these EuA students wish to study Graffiti but not painting, Parkour and not

² Of course, terms such as these are not really used anymore but I wanted to get to the heart of the concept that the terms proletariat and bourgeois describe so well.

gymnastics or dance? Turntablism or DJ skills and not music production? In a similar vein, I would like to enquire why the MWGD students are fascinated with video/console gaming. I would hope that the development of research data would enable a clear picture of the reasons why the EuA students are drawn to particular mediums of enquiry to emerge.

8. INTELLECTUAL MEANDERINGS

The research will need to develop a critical language to both describe and understand its problem without necessarily being forced to resort to a rather unproductive politically laden description of alienation. Alienation is not something the community of EuA sense in themselves necessarily, nor is it something I sense in the people I work with. I have a suspicion that a language may emerge through a research lead by a philosophical discourse centred about embodied interaction. To date, much research in the EuAs has taken a philosophical and theoretical stance that analyses its digitally driven systems by means of a rather narrow understanding of sociological or psychological determinants. An alternative approach might be to seek a method that is sufficiently subtle in its terms to engage with the open complexity of the people enacting it.

There is a culture – but is it a culture of habitat? Like the Amazonian Indians (Quechua), have a culture of living in the middle of great big trees – these people similarly live in a place they didn't make nor have had a part in making – it is as if they are some people who came after another civilisation. This is of course overstating things greatly. The people I work with do exist in a culture, they do have a sense of themselves as being British as well as being part of an insular world. Arguably, this is a common struggle. Classical musicians seem to be just as identifiably different in some way or other to Rock musicians and Jazz musicians. The question resides in the pertaining political landscape – but that is not the question this research is seeking to uncover. This research is looking for a way to find critical and academic value in their practice of being.

We can study Jazz, because we understand how to build an academic critical framework – we can not study EuAs because we do not yet have that framework – and I suspect have no means yet to give it a voice, because we exclude any voice it does have from mainstream social conversation.

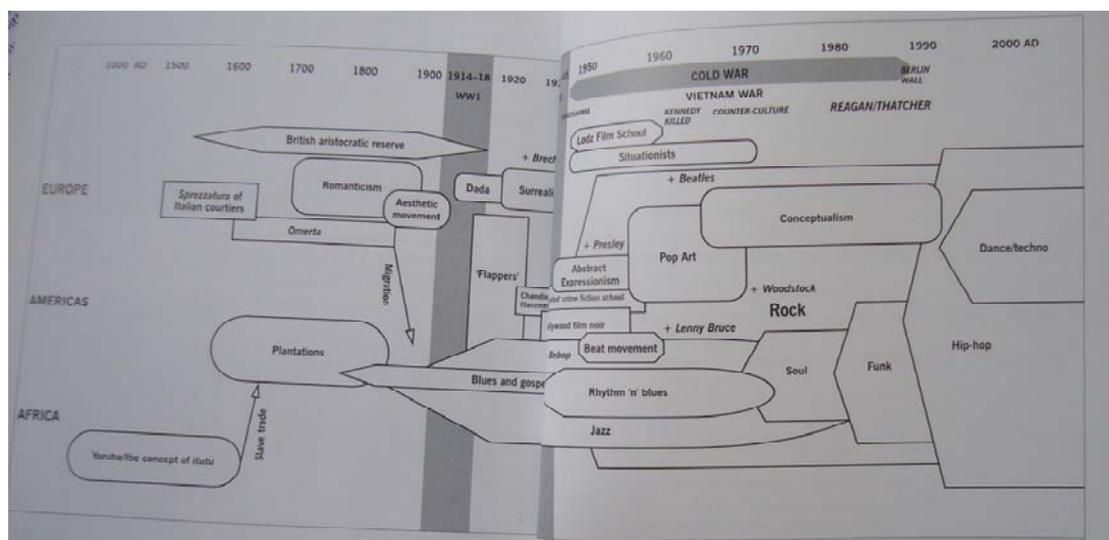


Fig .3, (Pountain, D. and Robins, D. 2000: 180)

Jazz is tied to the aesthetic of modernism. (Bebop) Jazz is form without narrative – modernism in art and design is form without narrative. I would like to investigate how Jazz has moved from the fringes to being acceptable in society (fig.3) within America from the early 1900's to a fully accepted mainstream movement by the 1940's, then becoming a marginalised elitist form of high-art by the 1960's, which rapidly becomes a movement of craft by the 1970's. It is hoped that by examining this model of Jazz and integrating findings from the empirical data, that a new model could be formulated for EuAs pedagogic requirements,

with the notion of creating a framework for the EuAs to develop from street, to Higher Education.

9. (W)RAP-UP

I have a deeply held personal desire that this research will in some way aid the engagement of disaffected and alienated young people. On a more pragmatic note, this research could provide some desperately needed meaningful data with the respect of widening participation strategies in HE, with particular focus on the provision for EuAs. This paper is an expression of my initial interest in pedagogic development, widening participation, development of a critical language, and development of an open, accessible and honest method that will engage EuA students. I would hope that this research would lead to some meaningful output.

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