

Research Field Station #8

Case Studies

FINE ART
FINAL PROJECT CRITIQUES RECORD

2013

name

by Harry Meadley

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"The thing about the old days:

They the old days."

- Slim Charles¹

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Contradiction and hypocrisy are very hard things to avoid.

For example, I regularly find myself reminding students of the importance of reflective writing: to reflect on their work, on their own learning, on their ongoing experiences; yet I have never done this myself.

I have talked in the past about utilising myself as a case study—using vulnerability and the confessional in an attempt to expose some of the complexities and realities of being a contemporary artist—but am inherently biased when it comes to myself. It also annoys me how self-obsessed artists can be, yet some of my favourite artworks by other artists are super self-referential or hyper-personal. For the first decade or so of being an artist I made hundreds of primarily object-based works, a practice I eventually decided to completely discard, but have still kept everything with the knowledge it may one day all become some sort of super-work.

With all that in mind, what I am honoured to have the chance to present here is the beginnings of a project that in the future may hopefully develop into a much larger exhibition or publication. Playing to the limitations of the number and size of the display cases that make up the LARC Research Field Station, though going way over the usual word limit of the accompanying publication, exhibited here are a selection of items and artworks each with a corresponding text. Loosely chronological, these short texts are reflections, anecdotes, memories—at best fables, or at least—cautionary tales.

Sports Day

One of the few distinct memories I have of primary school is of the immaculately carved life-size wooden eagle on the desk of the deputy headteacher to whose office I was referred to quite frequently, usually whilst ignoring whatever I was being told off for, or whilst I was supposed to be writing lines, I would stare at and study this eagle—it really was quite an amazing carving. Possibly as an attempt to divert the deputy head's attention away from my misbehaviour, though also out of genuine curiosity, one day I asked him about it. His face immediately lit up (it worked!).

The eagle was a gift, handmade and given to him by a pupil of his from years ago. This pupil, he told me, had the absolute conviction, even as a primary school student, to become a master wood carver. Apparently one year, during sports day, this pupil asked the deputy head (then just a young teacher) if they could be excused from participating in the tug-of-war event as they did not want to risk injuring their hands and potentially effecting their future ability to carve wood. Overwhelmed by this young pupil's artistic resolve, they were excused from the event (I'll try that one next sports day I thought). Then years later, when this pupil had grown up, and had in fact become a skilled wood carver, they carved this magnificent eagle and gifted it to the now deputy head as a token of thanks for this very moment in their young life. Understanding the intention behind the moral of the story I had just been told, and holding my own hands up to my eyes, I couldn't help thinking—what an incredibly precarious life pursuit.

Little did I know that years later I would find myself choosing to pursue being an artist; and little did I know I would now have early onset degenerative disease in my hands as a result of multiple injuries.

If you've ever gone to art school yourself, or had a family member who did, chances are there will have been at least one other family member who voiced an almost universally established concern about the professional precarity of such a pursuit. For me this was my grandad. He himself had also been a primary school teacher, and certainly would not have let any pupil out of a tug-of-war citing wood carving ambitions. He was a man of sport, of science², and a firm believer in the socially transformative power of education; and though still supportive through his bewildered curiosity of my artistic pursuits, would share his concern for my long-term financial security. Though neither of us could ever convince the other, stubbornness I'm sure being hereditary, these conversations were wonderful explorations for both involved.

During these conversations, originally in his home, then when being cared for at my parents' house, and finally in a care home, he would point to a small wooden bird he had carved in school as a child and kept on a mantelpiece his whole life. Affectionately referred to as *Birdie Birdie*, presumably what he had first called it at an early age, it would stand in as the de facto art object. "It's all well and good making artworks," he would start, "but what good does it do? How does it help people?" his concerns revealed to be more about the wider social impact of art, than my actual individual livelihood.

These questions have always remained with me (as too has the notion of not being too dependent on the dexterity your own hands), but I realise only now that the answer was there in front of us the whole time—Birdie Birdie.



Don't Mess with Yorkshire

There are many complex factors why a person might end up as an artist, I know this is the case for myself, and I presume many others; yet there is one key influence I really do owe it to—skateboarding.

It is rare I talk about or cite this in relation to my being or becoming an artist, as when in more professional artistic circles I have at *times* felt this might either be negatively judged, misunderstood, or alter whatever misperceptions someone might already have of me; or rather, it is something I feel quite protective of, as it is another hugely significant part of my life—and sometimes you don't want these things to mix.

There is an irony to this, as for at least much of my generation of art students, so many had in fact previously skated. A couple of important distinctions: this predominantly being the case for only male students, and that they *used* to skate. Currently being a 34-year-old, the fact I still skateboard (in some people's eyes) comes with a degree of uncertainty as to why maybe I haven't *grown up*, as in many cases it is something they had long grown out of (and also to quickly qualify: nowadays far more female and non-binary art students skate than male ones, something I find very encouraging, for both the future of skateboarding and the future of art).

I know I should not be ashamed of being a skateboarder—and in essence I am not; though the impulse to conceal it is still there, one factor being many galleries (and universities) also happen to be good skate spots, so there isn't always the most positive of attitude towards skateboarders within those institutions (it also adds a unique dimension of embarrassment to being kicked out by security if they recognise you). Thankfully attitudes are slowly changing, yet there are still a lot of negative perceptions towards skateboarding, and more and more I feel a growing sense of responsibility to attempt to challenge them. So, what I would like to offer to begin with, like with so many others, is how it led me to art school:

To fully explain the intricacies of skateboard culture I would need far more words than I have now, but in short, skateboarding and the act of filming skateboarding are inherently linked³. *Skate videos*, as they are known, are the primary medium through which skateboarding is seen, shared, learnt, progressed, defined, and of course—advertised. For a professional skateboarder, your *job* as such is primarily the task of producing *video parts* (traditionally a song-length section within a full skate video, or, as has emerged in the last decade, an individual standalone *part*). Though the rise of Instagram has, in a very similar way to the artworld, accelerated the rate of demand for daily content, professional skateboarders are still ultimately judged, and as a result valued by their companies, depending on the reception to their latest part (also called a *section*, even if it's a solo feature, which I'm only just realising now sounds a bit nonsensical). Your average video part is about three minutes long and would usually take at least a year or two to film, though can sometimes be many more years in the making. It is not uncommon that a few seconds of footage may have taken hours, days, weeks, or even years to achieve—and as you may have guessed by now—someone else must film it.

As a young skateboarder, you realise the one thing you need after a skateboard is a video camera; or at least someone else with one. There is a natural desire to want to record landing a new trick that you might have spent months or even years trying to learn, but within skateboarding culture it almost doesn't count



if it hasn't been filmed. Pre-internet and pre social media, for a young talented skateboarder with the aspiration to become sponsored, their main route to doing so, unless they lived geographically near to someone already in the skate industry, would be to make a *sponsor me tape* or have a part in a *scene vid* (a local independent video). Beyond that, however, was also just an overwhelming drive to emulate the medium.

I had an interest in photography since being taught in the homebuilt dark room of the elderly Austrian post-war refugee who lived a couple of terraces up from us (a story for another day.) Once skateboarding took hold of me, I was desperate to get a video camera, but it was not something easily afforded. Over the years my mother had slowly been saving a little bit of money from her wage for my older brother, and then for me, with the intention that it would help us when we were older. Interestingly in both our cases we prematurely requested access to this limited fund to purchase equipment, that we argued would be a far more beneficial investment in the long term. She eventually agreed to it, something that must have been quite difficult, and thankfully in both cases it proved to be right: I got a JVC GR-FXM37 camcorder, and my brother got an AKAI MPC2000 (which if you know what that is, you will know what profession he now has).

From skating and filming with my friends locally in Harehills, to doing work experience in and subsequently being employed by Wisdom skate shop, this lead on to skating and filming with some of, if not, *the* best young skaters in West Yorkshire (now considered a sort of golden generation / era⁴). By the age of 16, by being part of that community, and by teaching myself video editing, photoshop, and web design (though with a lot of support from older skateboarders) I already had multiple income streams: shifts in the skate shop, writing for *Sidewalk* magazine (at 12p a word, which even by today's journalistic standards is rare), and online advertising revenue / t-shirt line from a pre-YouTube early-internet skateboarding website I ran called *Don't Mess with Yorkshire*⁵. Oddly enough *Don't Mess with Yorkshire* now exists as a surprisingly popular clothing and merchandise line, beer, Welcome to Yorkshire collaborator⁶ and registered trademark (though I can't take too much credit for these later developments).

It wasn't a big income, but for a kid from Harehills, I was making about the same as my friends who were selling drugs—the local industry⁷. I put most of it towards getting better cameras and continued for a couple of years during sixth form skating as much as I could, travelling around the country filming (plus a few jaunts to Barcelona) as I further established what would have been a very promising start to a career in the skate industry. I admittedly did somewhat have an interest in art, I was doing a Fine Art A Level for example, but I went on to do a Foundation course in Art & Design as I wanted to get my hands on better AV equipment and computer software with the intention to increase my skate video production levels. It seemed a conducive environment to get access to higher education whilst still being able to skate as much as I wanted; plus, my older brother had done it, and it seemed like a lot of fun.

I'm still not quite sure what happened...

The Old Days

“The thing about the old days: They the old days.”

– Slim Charles⁸

Not too long ago a friend had reminded me that I had actually got into a somewhat physical fight with another student after the opening of our degree show. “No, that was when I was in first year; wasn’t it?”

It had happened twice...

The first time, a minor skirmish inside the degree show itself, was brought on by my retort to the culmination of several months’ worth of overtly homophobic handwritten notes left in my studio space and occasional hallway jibes made by a couple of third year students. They both very much subscribed to the abstract expressionist machismo approach to art making and I think maybe they had taken offence to a small exhibition I had done in the course project space titled *The Death of Painting*. It featured, amongst other works, a life-size projection of myself dry-humping a blank canvas wearing nothing but cowboy boots and a leather strap-on where the dildo had been replaced with a paintbrush (which as archetypal bad first year work goes is pretty up there).

I’m not really 100% sure how I ended up thinking that work was a good idea, but it was certainly informed by a string of heated arguments with certain lecturers, who, at least from my position at the time, seemed to deny any legitimacy to what might have deemed a more ‘conceptual’ approach to art making. There were essentially two factions, split across both the staff and the students, who seemed to be playing out this ideological battle. Over the years I have found myself rather hyperbolically referring to my degree experience as being like a war zone—but have honestly struggled to find a better term. It was surprisingly normalised to engage in hostile debate with really no intention, or at least belief, in changing one another’s opinion. It was an environment where you just had to become ever more informed to make your case, which ultimately made you believe more strongly in your own stance, and ultimately your own work. A strong sense of camaraderie was cultivated amongst ally students, and for myself, those friendships have continued to play a hugely significant role in my personal and artistic life. It was a formative, interesting and highly productive educational model—yet not the most inclusive, it must be said.

As fondly as I may look back at that time, and as much as I got out of it—I’m very glad it’s not that way anymore. When it came to my degree show two years after this first incident, it coincided with the imminent demolition of the University’s art and design building commonly referred to as H Block (a bit like a prison). This was the first degree show following the financial collapse of September 2008, and along with the general global sense of the party being over, when H Block was subsequently knocked down, this now feels like what was maybe an end to that era of overly confrontational art education. Many UK institutions throughout the 1990s and early 2000s had seemingly adopted this model, maybe not quite to the extreme of the course I was on, and I feel both equally thankful and relieved to be amongst one of the last generations to experience it.

When a building is demolished, there is also sometimes a sense that its history can also be lost. I didn’t quite grasp the significance of a work I made just before this—part of the final exhibition to be hosted at the University’s gallery (also within H Block) titled *Souvenir*. It was a group show marking the end of the gallery, and I had spent a month sanding all the years of layers of paint off a feature wall in the gallery, returning it to the original plaster board. The paint dust was then gathered up and pressed into 1Kg bricks *a la* TV drug scenes (admittedly I had been binge watching *The Wire*⁹ at the time). Years later, it feels incredibly precious to have this part of the building.

Many of the other bricks (there were 24 in total) I have stashed under floorboards, in ceilings, studio walls, and other good hiding spots in different art school buildings around the country. I like the idea that one day, if any of those buildings are demolished or redeveloped, that during that process a brick might be discovered and, at the very least, cause a moment of confusion.

As for the second time...



Making Memories (a methodology)

I generally consider myself to have a bad memory. It would be a real struggle, for instance, for me to remember more than a handful of names of other kids I went to primary or secondary school with, various places I apparently went to, or things I supposedly did. In the *Birdie Birdie* text for instance, I have no idea what the name of the deputy head teacher was, and at best I can remember one of the other teachers' names—the incredible Mr. Morris who taught steel pan. A lot of the time when people might say “remember when...” it takes me a while to figure it out, or I really have no memory of it at all. There are big swathes of my early life I honestly have very little recollection of and details of the last couple of decades are pretty intermittent.

Conversely, there are a lot of things I can remember incredibly well. One observation I was able to eventually make about this was that these memories would almost always centre around an object. If I can visualise a certain object in my mind then it somehow unlocks relatively crystal-clear memories of that time, place, who was there, and what may or may not have been said. Maybe this is not that uncommon, but one thing I discovered when I started making artworks, was that all of a sudden I had a method for creating objects that anthologised my memories (not to mention the convenience of dating artworks by year)—the more artworks I made, the more comprehensively I was able to mentally document my experiences, whilst also being able to recall all sorts of associated ideas, information and references that went along with each work. I started making a lot of work.

On top of this, I eventually dispensed with making written notes about any developing idea for future works. I discerned that if the idea wasn't memorable enough for my own brain to recall it, it probably wasn't a worthwhile idea. I realise now we might call this a *methodology*—utilising the limitations of one own's memory to selectively edit out unmemorable ideas. However, this was not without its fallibilities: mainly that, but virtue of the fact I remembered the idea, I presumed it must be worthwhile; there probably were some good ideas I did just forget; that this limited me to mainly making objects, and ones that I could pre-visualise at that (hence a lot of *readymades*).

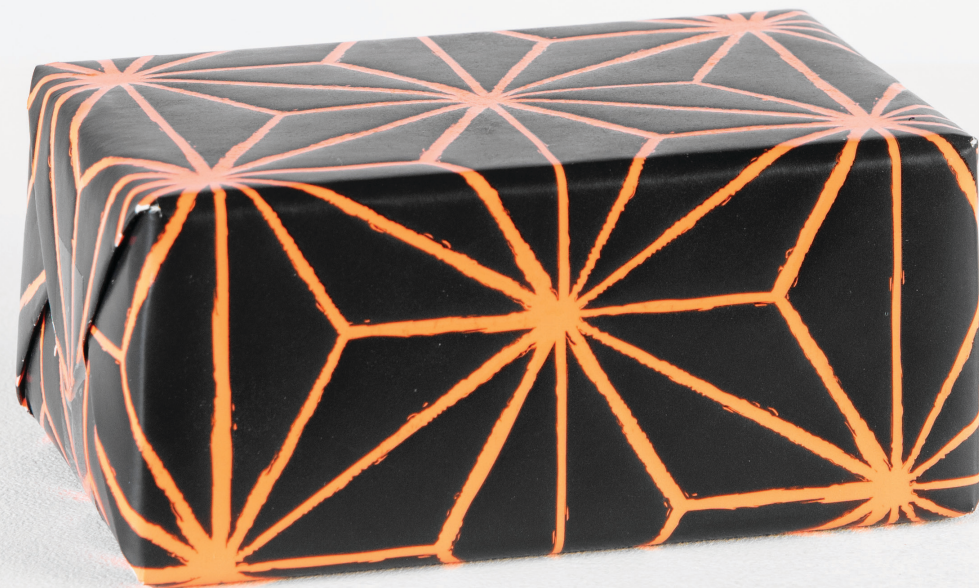
I became overtaken by the appeal of imbuing objects with memories and as such they became more and more cryptic. I convinced myself that there were enough hints in each work (or more commonly in its title) that a savvy viewer could somewhat de-code the work or make the connections between multiple works to extract some semblance of a story from them. I made a lot of work that was probably not very memorable.

Then the inevitable started to happen. After about three hundred works made with this approach over a decade or so I found myself getting confused when someone might say “remember that work when you...” or “what was that work...”. Even worse, some of the more cryptic works I had made, started to make less sense to me than they used to, and in one particular case, a small, wrapped present whose media description I wrote as ‘wrapping paper, altered undisclosed contents within undisclosed contents’—I can't remember what's inside it*.

This work, I do know, contains another earlier work, whose media description I gave as ‘4 sun kuroasa himitsu-bako, undisclosed contents’, a Japanese wooden puzzle box with something hidden inside. As a clue, the wrapping paper of the later work features a design which Paperchase had somewhat appropriated from the same traditional asanoha pattern¹⁰ also adorning the puzzle box itself. I can't open the present without damaging the work, and I think I'd really struggle to solve the puzzle box without the piece of paper explaining the various steps to opening it (which I probably threw away). I'd like to think I created this puzzle for myself to attempt to solve years later, but instead it now serves more of a reminder as to the blindness of my thinking at that time. Maybe not coincidentally, it is titled **no more hints**.

* I have been able to deduce what I think is inside it by the fact I recently spent a few months trying to find said object for this project, but to no avail. When I dug this artwork out for the purpose of this project, and shook it, I think I *unlocked* the memory. That being said, it could be one of two very similar objects / works and the dilemma I have is that, if it's the one I think it is, the object inside is possibly far more interesting, attached to far more memories, and really quite special to me but I can't quite bring myself to open it. I could also be wrong.

4



Technical Education

Avoiding the urge to make this text into a script, a recurring idea that seems to emerge amongst technicians—the people who generally handle and install artworks, build exhibition spaces, and complain about the artworld—is that it is a perfect context in which you could set a TV comedy series. Having myself worked as a jobbing gallery technician for a time, I had also had this idea, and soon realised how unoriginal it was. Another technician, who also had the same idea, suggested it would work better as a radio play, given you wouldn't have to psychically make the artworks and that it is more fun for them to exist in the imaginations of the listener. I concurred.

The comparison regularly made, was that it would be like a contemporary version of *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971)¹¹, the technicians in their small workshop or backroom store, the gallerist in their oversized office, and the bizarre interactions that happen in the gallery space during *install* (the phrase used to refer to the period of hanging, or installing, a new exhibition) or *de-install* (when everything comes down). To massively, though accurately, generalise, there is commonly a clear class differentiation between these two professions, a correlation that gets more extreme as the value of the work increases. As most technicians are almost all also artists—who usually needed the extra income to live off, let alone support their practice—as one of them, you may have likely experienced how differently you are treated when working with a gallery as an artist, as opposed to working with a gallery as a technician. This is not to say there aren't really nice gallerists who treat technicians well (which I realise more and more I got quite lucky with) but it is hard at times not to be made to feel as you are *the help*. Though I should also add, that as a relatively young and inexperienced technician at the time, I was usually drafted in last minute as an extra pair of hands when the stress and anxiety levels were at their highest to somehow get everything finished. This is not necessarily a situation where people are the most considerate, though at its best, it can have a nice way of banding everyone together.

I have many of what I would like to think are amusing anecdotes from my own experience, though a lot more full-time and longer-term technicians have way better and funnier stories, and these stories are commonly shared amongst us – and so too is all the gossip. There is a network of technicians who all see and hear a lot and trading information seems part of the trade itself. If you ever want to see an example of this, go to the back entrance (the exit for visitors) of a major art fair at the end of the last day. Usually all huddled outside (when there is actually plenty of room inside they could be let in to) you will find, like a convergence of migratory birds, a sort of annual conference of technicians. If technicians ever unionised—which wouldn't be a bad idea—this is probably where it would start. The reason why it won't, is that everyone is too busy telling funny stories.

Without focussing too much on the negatives (let's just say it is hard not to become disillusioned with art itself), for an artist, it is an amazing education. You gain access to, and thus learn the ins and outs of the mechanisms of the artworld: who all the key players and collectors are, where most artists' works are fabricated, how they need to be packed and handled; learning inventive and pragmatic ways for installing works, which opens up a whole new set of possibilities of ideas; learning actually how much, or sometimes how little, money is made; and maybe most of all: learning that if the artist treats you nicely, it makes all the difference.

Other than *make sure to thank the technicians* and *buy a laser level*, here are some of the useful tips I picked up from this informal training:

- It is a good idea to measure things before transporting them to the gallery; know how wide the doors are and make sure you actually have space to store the crate whilst the work itself is on show—this is a surprisingly common oversight. One artist who I helped install a show, mentioned they had determined the size of a series of frames based on the exact measurements of the size of their car boot when the seats are folded down. This always struck me as a good idea.
- For some reason in most galleries all the works get hung on screws when, particularly for smaller frames, paintings or light wall mounted works, nails are a far better option. You can get them in on your spirit level marked holes far more accurately, tap / bend the nail to level it out if needs be, and it leaves a far smaller and neater hole in the wall which is much easier to fill and paint over afterwards. I have always wondered if this is due to an anxiety around nails not seeming serious or professional enough.
- A lot of people make pencil markings directly onto the wall and then have the job of painting them over (as rubbing out looks even worse). If you just put a piece of masking tape down first, you solve this problem easily.
- And in all honesty, in the eyes of many curators, gallerists, and even some other artists, when they identify you more as a technician than an artist, unfortunately, they are far less likely to consider you for artistic opportunities. Whether due to a mix of not wanting to allow the crossing of class lines, the suspicion you know a lot more about how things work and what goes on, or not wanting to invert the already established professional hierarchy—I think many young artists, such as with myself, don't realise that becoming assigned as a technician in those peoples' eyes can have a potentially detrimental effect on your professional prospects as an artist. I really hope this is changing but it's just something to be aware of.



Carter's Theory of Criminal Investigation

In 2001, not long before my fourteenth birthday, I had very kindly been brought along on a trip to America by two close family friends who wanted to provide an opportunity not otherwise afforded to me. We were staying one night in the Hollywood Roosevelt hotel on Hollywood Boulevard—the one with the famed David Hockney swimming pool mural I certainly didn't appreciate enough at the time. By sheer coincidence, that same night happened to be the world premiere of *Rush Hour 2* (2001)¹² taking place at the famed Mann's Chinese Theatre across the road. Those familiar with the *Rush Hour* film franchise, starring Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker, would recognise it from the first movie.

From my elevated position in the hotel room window, I eagerly watched the red-carpet arrival of various celebrities—though of course most notably Jackie Chan, whose films, along with Bruce Lee, had hugely impacted my young mind. As the traffic halted and the pavements packed with people, I also finally realised why 'blockbusters' are called 'blockbusters': the *block* gets *busted* (it was quite the revelation to me at the time).

Following our short stay in LA we progressed, after being involved in a small car crash, on to Las Vegas. Driving past all the various casinos seen depicted in films over the years, we then went past the remnants of what, from the indication of the sign outside, was the *Red Dragon* casino—it looked like a literal bombsite. Thinking this seemed quite extreme, and how odd it was there had not been mention of a casino being blown up in the news, it was quite the mystery. That was until I saw *Rush Hour 2*.

Fast-forward twelve years and I find myself recounting this story to a group of collectors just before the opening of a solo show at a good commercial gallery in London. I went on to explain that the artwork at my feet, a small casino chip from the *Red Dragon* casino, is in fact a movie prop from *Rush Hour 2* (coincidentally, bought from the prop store up the road from the gallery). Titled *My Commercial Complex Condensed* I didn't fully allude to the significance of how this object encapsulates my unease and uncertainty around the selling of one's artworks, but I did paraphrase a pivotal scene in *Rush Hour 2* when the two main characters, both police officers, appear to have lost their lead and are not sure where to go next:

LEE
Why LA?

CARTER
Lee, let me introduce you to Carter's theory of Criminal Investigation:
Follow the rich white man.

LEE
Follow the rich white man?

CARTER
Exactly. Now you're learning. Every big crime has a rich white man behind it waiting for his cut. Now in our case we know who the rich white man is.¹³

And thus the story progresses—a brilliant plot device. Arriving in LA, but then being captured and driven to Las Vegas, the detectives' presumption turns out to be correct, the rich white man is opening a casino in order to launder counterfeit money, and the casino, that I happened to witness the real-world aftermath of, gets blown up at the end.

I looked up from my monologue to see a room full of rich white men. None of them bought anything.



Dom Peri

For a few years I was part of something called the Leeds Weirdo Club¹⁴. Founded by myself, David Steans and Matthew Crawley, it was essentially the name we gave to our shared studio. The identity of what it actually *was*, however, seemed to always cause some degree of bewilderment. After putting on several exhibitions of our own work in the studio itself, we began to be invited to participate in other exhibitions, commissions, a residency, and slowly morphed into a sort of artist group. We moved premises, added another member, published annuals and it finally ended as up a shared storage unit that we ran like a museum's off-site store where you could book-in to come and visit the archive. As one of the other members best put it: it was an anomalous art institution.

Of the many exhibitions we hosted, and possibly not even his most ambitious, *First Year* by Matthew Crawley¹⁵ always stands out in my mind. He converted the basement-level studio into a fully functioning bunker in which a person could live unaided for a single year. Provisions of canned and dried food, water tanks, medicine, toiletries, sealed waste barrels; the basics of everything you would need to survive. As with most of our exhibitions, one artist would produce a lead work and the others would contribute additional works around, or in this case, to it. David Steans included a new book work he had recently written – and realising there was a sort of *Desert Island Discs* thing going on I thought I should add a luxury: a bottle of Dom Pérignon.

I knew very little about champagne, maybe other than the line in *Wayne's World* (1992)¹⁶ that explains if it's not from the Champagne region in France, it is just a sparkling white wine (a designation known as *appellation*¹⁷), and I didn't even particularly like / had possibly never actually drunk it. One thing I did know, from years of TV and film watching, is that Dom Pérignon is expensive, and its brand is a cultural signifier of wealth and excess. It wasn't uncommon for myself at the time to spend whatever little money I had on making artworks; it was in fact pretty much all I spent any additional income on after my general living costs. So for the same cost as say, having a couple of things framed, I thought why not buy a bottle of Dom Pérignon instead?

Initially I had actually thought that I could buy the bottle, exhibit it, and then return it to get a refund (a good strategy, also for AV equipment, if your exhibition is shorter than 30 days). The problem I faced was that the very nice box the bottle comes in has a paper seal, that once broken, means you can't return it. Realising that people might think I'm just exhibiting an empty box, I had to open it. The box then serving as a wall mounted shelf on which the bottle stood, installed high up on the wall—out of reach.

This work opened something up in my thinking: what if instead of spending all my money on making these other types of artwork for others to consume, I spent it on bottles of Dom Pérignon for myself to consume? Having been keeping track of my self-employed artist expenses for a couple of years at this point, I was very aware of actually just how much I was spending on my work (and at how much of a loss I was operating). If I spent that on Dom Pérignon instead, what could that mean?

Over the next six months I bought ten more bottles of Dom Pérignon that in slightly different ways were consumed as artworks: three for a group show in Manchester to be each drunk by myself and the two curators at the opening (one of whom it turned out didn't drink), one to myself on my 27th birthday (a performative exhibition / birthday party at my parents' house), and a case of six that were served to any visitor that came in to the Weirdo Club during an open studios event in the city. For one further exhibition at the Weirdo Club, *The Champagne*

Murders by David Steans¹⁸, I littered the studio-turned-gallery space with a further twelve empty bottles of Dom Pérignon (totalling twenty-three) that in a rare case of deception I had purchased from eBay—a curious market in its own right.

No one, I think, ever really got this series of works. In the dawning age of Instagram, too many people believed I must have just become more successful than I really was, and that I was wasting it away on over priced Champagne. That I was—like the exact thing I thought I was critiquing—flippantly displaying an excessive signifier of wealth and success; something, it turns out, is actually quite easy to fabricate.

Misperceptions are rife, and in the case of Dom Pérignon, many believe it is the oldest, original champagne; and in the case of Dom Pérignon himself—a Franciscan monk—many believe he invented Champagne. Neither are true, yet Dom Pérignon (the brand) have over the years subtly encouraged this narrative. The more interesting truth is that Dom Pérignon (the monk), who did help refine the champagne making process slightly, actually introduced the use of corks. Paired with making the glass bottles for champagne slightly thicker, by using cork stoppers instead of the traditional solid wood ones, he solved the problem of champagne bottles frequently exploding¹⁹. This of course making them far more transportable, and far more sellable. "Poppin' bottles" so to speak, we have Dom Pérignon to thank for.

But now let me share a wider sober reflection, and when I say *sober*, I mean five years, two months and three weeks sober: there is a serious alcohol problem in the artworld. Though thankfully less common than it used to be (due to the introduction of better safeguarding policies), when I was an art student it was not just normalised, but actively encouraged, to seek out free alcohol at exhibition openings, continue your conversations in the pub afterwards, and get extremely drunk with your tutors. I very much fell into this, admittedly very much enjoyed it, and even when initially becoming a tutor myself years later, helped to perpetuate it. It wasn't until after waking up on my back choking on my own cold sick alone in a hotel room following the 'artist drinks' night—the evening before the actual opening drinks for a large art festival I was involved with—and the related alcohol poisoning which prohibited me from being able to continue drinking, that I realised maybe there was something a bit off.

The problems are many. Much of the culture around art-making centres around drinking: art openings, socialising in the pub with other artists, meetings in the pub, conceiving collaborative artworks in the pub, arranging exhibitions at afterparties, making sure there is free alcohol at your own exhibition openings, complaining when a certain gallery starts charging for drinks at the opening, not going to openings because there aren't free drinks, arguing that you can hang works a lot straighter when you're hung over, making artworks that involve drinking overpriced alcohol... So many artists, galleries and institutions talk about inclusivity, but try requesting to not have any alcohol at an exhibition opening—I have, and more than any other ridiculous request I've made as an artist, the resistance I've received to that suggestion far exceeds any other.

There are multiple reasons why a—larger than you may think—number of people have to avoid situations where alcohol is being consumed, whether personal or religious, and I do sympathise that it is fun, helps with social anxiety, and makes things generally feel more celebratory, but sometimes you do have to look back and realise—*it's just not a very good idea*.



Critiques

8

Let me tell you about the best artwork I have ever seen...

I first started teaching as a very part time associate lecturer on an Art & Design Foundation course. The primary purpose of these courses is to help students identify their own interests and then support them in applying to the most appropriate art or design degree course. After the initial *diagnostic* stage, from which they are sorted into the different specialist area pathways (sort of like in *Harry Potter*²⁰), it was worked out that I was just doing enough hours to get my own tutor group—a scarier prospect than you may think.

One student in my inaugural tutor group, which, to use the language from the PGCE I had to undertake a couple of years later, we shall refer to as *Student A*, took me immediately by surprise. Soon into our first tutorial they revealed that they had no intention of becoming an artist or designer, they just wanted to explore their artist interests before going on to be—said with a weird and knowing confidence—a spy.

Student A was initially torn over the complex boundary between Fine Art and Illustration, and as is not uncommon, wondered whether they had made the correct choice of specialist area. We discussed it for a while and worked out an interesting solution: what if they transferred into the other pathway, tried it out, and if after a while they wanted to come back to Fine Art, we could say it was a performative act of espionage?

Without any of the staff in that area knowing this agreement, and unsure of whether Student A would return to Fine Art or not, when it came to the mid-way assessment point, I was very happily relieved to receive Student A's request to have their work assessed by the Fine Art staff. It was relatively difficult to pass them by the normal criteria, as they hadn't done any of the Fine Art projects (and in all fairness their illustration work wasn't particularly strong), but as they had framed their stint in the other area as an artwork in its own right, and as their notebooks and reflective journal were also part of the work rather than just supporting materials, that was surely enough to earn them a pass.

For the remainder of the course, colloquially referred to as the *Final Project*, Student A seemingly struggled quite a bit. They had missed out on the actual start of Fine Art, its associated projects, presentations, seminars, and most importantly of all, friendships, that help inform and support students to develop their own work more independently. They weren't caught up in the same process of portfolios and interviews (having already secured a place on some Oxbridge course I didn't even realise was a subject) and was even maybe treated as a sort of Illustration interloper by their Fine Art peers. They didn't really ever seem to be making any work, were rarely in the studio, and for most of the other students, they only encountered Student A during crits.

Crits, an ambiguous shortening of a bygone phrase that had the word "critique" in it, are one of the primary structures through which much teaching happens in art schools. There are many variations of how they are run but as a basic example, and how they were in this scenario: two staff and around six students spend a solid half-day session in which each student takes it in turn to present

some recent or developing work for the group to collectively discuss. There is a degree of critical unpicking, but ultimately the aim is to help generate ideas for each student to move forward, as well as generally building their confidence in talking about artworks.

I wasn't present for Student A's first crit during the Final Project, but from all accounts it didn't go too well. I'm a bit hazy on exactly what they presented, but from their handwritten *Critiques Record* it appears to have been a piece of paper torn in half, possibly with another object, 'plonked on the table'. There seemed to have been some confusion over what this work was, or what Student A's intention was, but given the handful of artist examples given (Giuseppe Penone, Tom Friedman, David Musgrave, Martin Creed, Mona Hatum) ideas around working with simple gestures and simple materials seemed to have dominated the conversation. Noticeably, the last note Student A made reads 'strive to mimic exactly'.

Two weeks later it was Student A's second crit, and this time around I was co-facilitating it. When it was their turn to present, they placed a small dish on the table which had a few small sweets on it. They asked everyone to take one and the conversation continued whilst people sucked on the small hardboiled sweets. Again, this was met with general confusion. Student A did not really attempt to qualify the work or really discuss their intentions, which did not help the situation, but the responses were generally not that enthusiastic.

Three weeks after that at Student A's third and final crit, they presented a few coins out of their pocket placed on the table in front of them. This, equally, did not get the best of receptions.

By the end of year show, the work they chose to exhibit was a piece of A4 paper crumpled up into a ball on a plinth (similar to Martin Creed's *Work No. 88, 1995*²¹) and their Critiques Record mounted on the wall behind it. The paper ball was in fact made by one of the other tutors during the first crit to demonstrate a point they were making (or could have been a replica); but all in all, it seemed to many as if Student A had produced a rather underwhelming artwork. Though, as I'm guessing you may have already surmised, a lot more was revealed when it came to the assessment process...

In a somewhat similar way to the last assessment point, but much more comprehensively, Student A had produced two sets of supporting materials. Generally, this included: a portfolio, documenting all the works produced during the final project; a studio notebook, for general planning and development of works; a critical journal, containing research on relevant artists; a reflective planner, for reflecting and (err...) planning; a final evaluative document, and the critiques record. One set was the rather underwhelming set that other students and staff had seen thus far and made very little sense, yet the other exposed the true nature of the project they had secretly undertaken, which in short, was to only do the things suggested to them by other students and staff—to mimic the ideas fed to them by the course itself. They had chosen to do nothing more than what they had been directly instructed to do, and when finding themselves in a position with no clear instruction (such as what to present in an upcoming crit) they would ask around the other students in the studio for a suggestion. They had become a secret agent within their own course, gathered intel, carried out

Critiques

interrogations, made transcripts, followed the missions unknowingly assigned to them by students and staff, and had not once been suspected – even with the somewhat open knowledge of what they had done with the other specialist area earlier in the course. Hopefully I do not need to overstate the brilliance of this work, the critique it makes of art education, or maybe it is hard to fully convey the complexity of it. I know I had to argue quite heavily for it to receive a high mark as some of the other assessing staff had only noticed at the first set of materials (in their defence, you do have quite limited time per student) and as a work it wasn't a clear fit with the assessment criteria.

Though I was clearly biased—I must admit that as Student A's personal tutor, they had let me in on their plan, I must also admit to being quite surprised during the assessment when I read in their secondary studio notebook that the idea to exhibit the Critiques Record had in fact come from myself—a double cross! And one further admission is that, as Student A disappeared immediately after submitting their work and didn't return to de-install, though there is an official process for returning supporting materials, I felt compelled to save the Critiques Record from being binned by the cleaners (which happened with the ball of paper) and keep it for myself—the only evidence left.

When it came to the final day of the course when students receive their marks followed by a ceremony in which their diplomas are handed out, Student A was nowhere to be seen (and has never been seen since). Following this unusually formal event, the Fine Art tradition of all the staff and students going to the pub afterwards commenced. As the various conversations drew on, and the level of drunkenness lead to the students' collective confidence growing and the Staffs' collective resilience weakening, I found more and more of the students asking me who I felt had made the best work in the show. Trying to not let myself give anything away they started to list off various students one by one. Running out of ways to deflect each suggestion I simply asked "which do you think was the worst work in the show?" They all immediately said—

"Student A."

8

FINE ART
FINAL PROJECT CRITIQUES RECORD

2013

name

List students and staff attending the crit:

Sean Kaye + Jenny West
 Tabby Phil
 Hugo
 Joanne
 Rebecca
 Gina

Review and Comment: Notes taken during the crit in response to the work of other members of the group

Phil: floating a bed down a river.

→ tested waterbed on a canal.

multiple stage journey?

problem: will it deflate over time?

lifejacket?

bedding
 pyjamas etc

Rebecca: Chance procedures
 chemical reactions.

site specific sculpture.

start high.

regaining control.

use of gravity.

tan can cover

quite reluctant
 control as a person.

sounds from
 around the
 world played
 with videos from
 elsewhere.

Gina:

Making cast of section
 of wall + replacing.

Translate marks on walls.

Index.

Hugo:

video = 3
 traffic
 fountain
 skinner

better quality images
 observation etc.

Tabby:

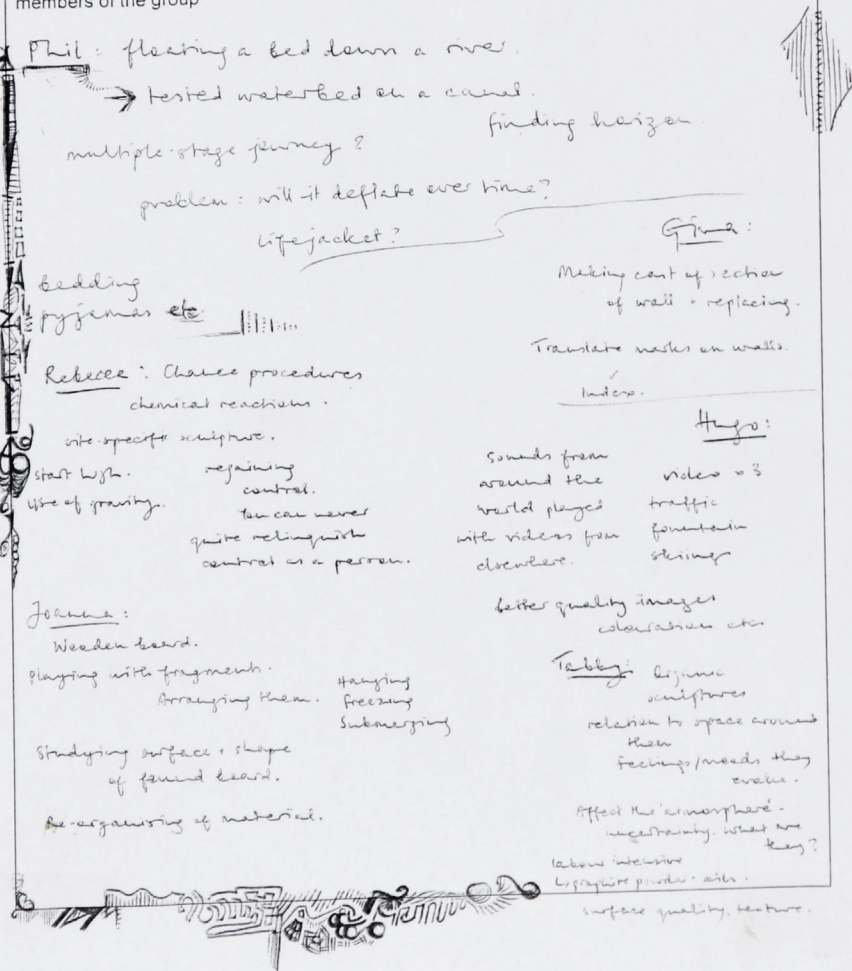
beginning
 sculptures

relation to space around
 them
 feelings/moods they
 evoke.

Affect the atmosphere -
 uncertainty. what are
 they?

labour intensive
 requires precise work.

surface quality, texture.



Response and Feedback to own work

Make notes in relation to the following points:

The successful aspects of the work:

G: simplicity - how it is white.

P: the action - stages 1 to 2

S: piece of paper (use of) - proposes other things. Relationship between paper + beard.

T: bravery of being so slight

T: interaction between 2 objects
 tension.

H: so much to say about it when
 it could be very off.

J: Mystery of it. Don't make it more complex.

R: Simple action - so many developing issues

The unsuccessful aspects of the work:

G: Scale - could be larger

P: Obvious choice of material

S: Preparation of beard → ~~difficult~~ colour prepared,
 sanded,
 painted

T: Careless tear

T: careless - plucked on table. location
 pristine surface
 Look down on it.

H: wants to know what it's about

Readings of the work which may offer alternative directions:

Thousands of similar works
 stored in a cupboard

J: Nothing.
 R: Marks on paper - circles, dots, etc.

Proposes things that are halved. Series remake objects in other version.

Mimic exactly or other things that are halved.

Have diff: colour/size/shape series of 3 stages → 3 = unscrewed

TV + Smashed up TV

Repeat action + video.

Tin foil Tracing paper

Further artist and source material research:

Extract Hefti Draw them

Giuseppe Penone

To be a river
 Carves big rock to be exactly
 a replica of smaller one.

Vic Hefti

Tom Friedman

1000 Hours of Staring

David Musgrave

Markin Creed.

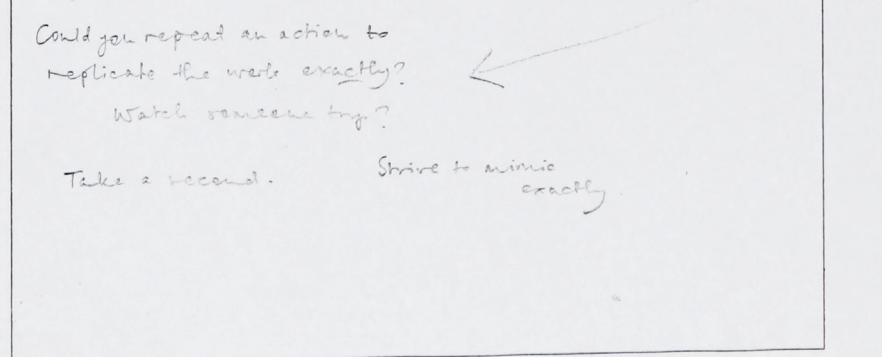
Mona Hatoum - marbles on floor
 (Rome)

Actions to take in relation to - quality and refinement, quantity, planning, time management, experimentation, process:

Could you repeat an action to
 replicate the work exactly?
 Watch someone try?

Take a second.

Strive to mimic
 exactly.



List students and staff attending the crit:

Jenny West & Harry Meadley

Rebecca

Elle

Elaine

Review and Comment: Notes taken during the crit in response to the work of other members of the group

Elaine

Same quantity of paint in both pieces? Just reorganised.

Palette + what looks like a
Dulux colour chart.

↓
important as process. colours from Pepsi can.

Will try to arrange the colours? → visually simplify
it too much?
Needs some structure.

Elle Thread + glue into a graph/chart.

with knife... ideally a syringe.

Rebecca stalagmite/stalacmite forms made from
laundry powder.

powder over weed

powder over suspended rope.

Response and Feedback to own work

Make notes in relation to the following points:

The successful aspects of the work:

E: The interaction Talking & touching.

R: Generated responses.

J: Chance to talk about food. Made us have fun together.

H: It is an artwork. Sweets were tasty.

The unsuccessful aspects of the work:

E: Didn't get enough feedback.

R: Bad presentation, careless & grubby.

J: Empty feeling. Mean. Lazy.

H: Unclear what the work is. 2nd guessing.

Readings of the work which may offer alternative directions:

What did the empty bowl contain?

Everyone wants a sweet? → Are they sweets?

Trick?

Pudding dishes

Replaceable.

ready-made

For elves & pigs?

Easter

Glass half full / half empty

Further artist and source material research:

Alice in Wonderland 'Eat Me' 'Drink Me'

Felix Gonzalez Torres Candy work.

Crème Caramel recipe.

Rickit Tiravanga - sharing kitchen food social space Crème caramel

Actions to take in relation to - quality and refinement, quantity, planning, time management, experimentation, process:

Does it have a title? → Looks like the title is relevant & would be informative.

"Here the artwork" Could have put anything in front of us.

Space around needs to be cleared up.

Waste is about offering something?

Selection rather than craftsmanship

Dishes are cheap. → Glass as choice one.

List students and staff attending the crit:

Jenny Josh
Harry
Kendia
Jess
Naomi
Nicola

Review and Comment: Notes taken during the crit in response to the work of other members of the group

Jess Conversations with objects trance/meditative poetry
Presented as interview
 ↳ explanations as to what happened.
 ↳ leading? Performance?
 ↳ film, match back

Kendia - Persona: feminist artist.
 b. 1942 lesbian
Wrote autobiography. San Fran.
Object / parapsychic. d. 2007 AIDS.
Creating shows of forgotten art.

Naomi Collage on canvas coloration
 ↳ links from newspapers keep them the same size

Nicola Tights pulled down over frames
 Painted onto. Layers. delicate.
 space, interval



Response and Feedback to own work

Make notes in relation to the following points:

The successful aspects of the work:

Material similarity, form etc.
Coins.

The unsuccessful aspects of the work:

Don't get much from it.
Placement is important - problem with watching them being put down.
Maths of it overtakes the work. Carolyn.
 ↳ Flippant work. Obtuse as a gesture.

Readings of the work which may offer alternative directions:

Mathematics. Multiply 2 to get the 3rd?
Value of coins. How the coins relate to each other.
More about the audience.

Further artist and source material research:

Kages Hyems - coins trickle out of machine as ceiling.
 ↳ Well diff currencies
Martin Creed. Cash that go up in scale.

Actions to take in relation to - quality and refinement, quantity, planning, time management, experimentation, process:

Place the coins before entering the crit.
Give it a title.

End Notes

- 1 'Home Rooms' (2006) *The Wire*, season 4, episode 3. Directed by Seith Mann. Written by Richard Price. HBO, 24 September.
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- 9 *The Wire*, 2002. [TV programme] HBO.
- 10 Niwa, M., 1990. *Japanese Traditional Patterns. Volume 1: Plants, Animals, Natural Phenomena*. Tokyo: Gurafikkusha.
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- 12 *Rush Hour 2*. 2001. [film] Directed by B. Ratner. New Line Cinema.
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- 15 Ibid. p.71-95
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- 17 Stevenson, T. and Avellan, E., 2014. *Christie's world encyclopedia of champagne & sparkling wine*. New York: Sterling Epicure.
- 18 Ibid. p.202-219
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