

## Art Education in the Age of Metrics

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A critical exhibition about how we teach and learn art under neoliberal conditions

## La Educación Artística en la Edad de la Métrica

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Una exposición crítica sobre como aprendemos y enseñamos arte bajo el neoliberalismo

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### Abstract

The higher education sector in the United Kingdom finds itself immersed in a data culture that evaluates every aspect of the university life according to a metrical paradigm. Art education, an area with its own teaching and learning characteristics, is particularly incompatible with a model that favours efficiency, productivity and success over all other aspects. In this essay I describe an exhibition, *Art Education in the Age of Metrics*, which took place in 2017 at the campus gallery of a specialist university located in the town of Canterbury. This was a curatorial project that tried not only to represent the difficulties of art education in the current climate, but that by engaging the university community—particularly students—in the process of organizing the exhibition, tried to actively intervene in the debates on the impact of this neoliberal model in how we teach and learn art today.

**Keywords:** art education, universities, metrics, curatorial, exhibition, neoliberal

### Resumen

El sector de la educación universitaria en el Reino Unido se encuentra inmerso en una cultura del dato que evalúa todos los aspectos de la vida universitaria en relación a un paradigma métrico. La educación artística, un área con sus propias características de enseñanza y aprendizaje, está especialmente en contradicción con un modelo que favorece la eficacia, la productividad y el éxito por encima de cualquier otro aspecto. En este artículo describo una exposición, *La Educación Artística en la Edad de la Métrica*, que tuvo lugar en 2017 en la sala de exposiciones de una universidad especializada localizada en la ciudad de Canterbury. Se trató de un proyecto curatorial que en vez de simplemente representar las dificultades de la enseñanza artística en el momento actual, a través de la participación de la comunidad universitaria—especialmente de los estudiantes—en el proceso de la organización de la exposición, intentó intervenir activamente en los debates acerca del impacto de este modelo neoliberal en cómo enseñamos y aprendemos arte hoy.

**Palabras clave:** educación artística, universidades, métrica, curatorial, exposición, neoliberal

## 1. METRICS

Grades, student-teacher ratios, employability rates, league tables, student satisfaction surveys, retention capacities, research outputs, fees and debt. We are all aware that a “data culture” dominates formal education, and that numbers define our relation to teaching institutions. Although this is a reality that permeates the entire educational system, nowhere can the tensions provoked by this model be more clearly felt than in art education. In the book *Teaching Art in the Neoliberal Realm* (2012, p.5), Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne argue that neoliberalism practices a “fundamentalism of measurability,” and that, as a result, what “cannot be measured will be more difficult to legitimize or honour.” Art education—which values uncertainty more than certainty, failure as well as success, unproductivity rather than simply efficiency—is, therefore, finding itself under scrutiny.

Despite this problematic situation, it is also possible to consider how the age of metrics can contribute to art education. According to a well-established narrative around the “art school,” these greatly-missed environments were ideal spaces for learning and making art: students were left alone to do (or not do) “their thing”; conversation, disagreement, and even confrontation were encouraged; and the relation with teachers was not mediated by a service economy. From a different perspective, however, these relatively “macho” institutions were, to a great extent, unaware, unable, or unwilling to respond to the difficulties that many of their community members experienced. The age of metrics is, despite its numerous evils, also the time of student-centred learning (including its egalitarian agenda), of the student support services (raising awareness about learning difficulties like dyslexia), and of accountability. Or is it?

Against this background, the exhibition *Art Education in the Age of Metrics* (Fig.1) was an initiative that explored how we teach and learn about art in the present day through the proposals of a series of agents with multiple identities: artists, researchers, peer-groups, students, and teachers. It was presented at the Herbert Read Gallery, the exhibition space of the University for the Creative Arts campus in Canterbury (UK) in 2017. As such, it was not an exhibition about “alternative” educational models or a project that tried to substitute current infrastructures with new ones, but an invitation to consider the pros and cons of the current paradigm of art education from within an institution devoted to that exact subject. *Art Education in the Age of Metrics* was also the third episode on a series dedicated to investigate current aesthetic, social, and economic forms of organization under neoliberalism. Yet while the previous two chapters had been devoted to external issues like labour and the relation between agency and intention, this third exhibition was looking at how neoliberal values (including measurability and efficiency) were impacting the university itself.

As we are all well aware, since the 1990s the realm of culture is no longer conceived separately from other areas of the productive economy, but rather as a fundamental part of it. If

it was previously still possible to think about artists as operating outside the parameters of industrial work, with the expansion of neoliberalism, not only did culture become organised according to a quantifiable logic, but many of the until then considered “anti-systemic” qualities of art were taken as models for new forms of profitable (and exploitative) labour (see Sholette, 2011; Gielen and De Bruyne, 2012). This ongoing process, exemplified in terms like “creative economy” or “cultural industry,” is the inevitable ideological context in which students, staff and managers at art universities must operate.



Fig.1. Exhibition at the Herbert Read Gallery, UCA Canterbury. Photo: Katie Jolin.

## 2. UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

It is probably worth briefly recounting the history of the institution hosting the show in order to understand how this specialized university with campuses across two different regions is dealing with the challenges affecting higher education in the United Kingdom. The academic year 2017/2018 was actually chosen by the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) to celebrate its 150 anniversary. However, the institution now known under this name started in the mid-XIX century as a series of Government-funded, small art schools in the South-eastern towns of Canterbury, Epsom, Guilford, Farnham, Maidstone and Rochester. For different economic and strategic reasons (mostly, cuts in public funding), these independent providers of part and full time education for the local community gradually merged during the second-half of the XX century into the Surrey Institute of Arts & Design and the Kent Institute of Art & Design (Haste, 2013). After

several other name and structural mutations, the University for the Creative Arts came into existence in the first decade of the 2000s. Today, therefore, UCA has a fully-recognized university status, and competes with other higher education institutions across the country for inter/national students and money, as well as for a place in the all-important university rankings and league tables. However, its physical dispersion, its particular past, and the legacy of each different art school in present-day campus life make it a specific place with its own idiosyncrasy; a reality not always acknowledged at a central institutional level.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the page dedicated to UCA's history on its official web page describes this trajectory as one going “from our beginnings in the Victorian era as a collection of public art and design colleges . . . to being named in the top 25 of all UK universities this year (2017).”



Fig. 2. View of the UCA campus in Rochester.

I worked at UCA as its Cultural Programme Curator running the Herbert Read Gallery in Canterbury from late 2012 to mid-2018. Coming from Spain, where my pre-crisis BA in Art History at a public university had been relatively cheap and self-directed (I didn't have any welcome event nor a graduating ceremony), and then arriving in the UK after the controversial increase in 2010 of tuition fees up to £9000 per year (which in effect meant that the funding of universities became almost entirely dependent on paying students), I was struck by how “recruitment” and “the enhancement of student experience” were the main focuses of UCA's strategic plan. The need to attract and retain student/clients motivates every decision made by the institution: from the arithmetic efforts to appear at higher positions in rankings such as The Times “Good University Guide” to

<sup>1</sup> UCA's circumstances (including its physical dispersion) make it harder to compete for students with other specialized or better-known institutions like University of the Arts London. As a result, league table have acquired a particular importance at UCA over the last six or seven years as a way to publicize its achievements and reach a broader pool of prospective students.

the constant monitoring of students' progression through grades, satisfaction surveys, and the review of alumni employment destinations. Any marketing strategy as well as every human resource decision (including the ever-increasing demands made of staff to be not only educators but also administrators/emotional supporters/career advisers/disability experts) is now dependent on a productive model that tries to make the university an ever more attractive place while the effective resources available continue to decrease.

While this economic model aligns this art's university with any other private business, a crucial difference is that as an institution devoted to knowledge and reflection, it is still possible to produce criticism from within it. In that sense, the Cultural Programme at UCA and the exhibitions organized at the campus galleries were, on the one hand, a way for the institution to support its staff and students, and on the other, spaces for critical institutional reflection. Following from that, it is fair to say that *Art Education in the Age of Metrics*—an exhibition that tried to think curatorially about a difficult reality—was welcomed and encouraged by the organization's managers.<sup>2</sup> The show was an exercise in institutional critique as well as an attempt at a post-representational way of curating; that is, a transformation of the gallery into a place “where things are ‘taking place’ rather than ‘being shown’” (Sternfeld and Ziaja, 2012, p.22). If UCA as an organization with a well-established trajectory of teaching and learning about creativity in art and design had to complete the ongoing transformation into an efficient and productive business due to the pressures of the neoliberal system, how was this affecting everyday life at its campuses?<sup>3</sup> And how, as a parallel consideration, could the space of the curatorial help to “find ways of conceptually entering contemporary urgencies rather than commenting upon them, taking them as ‘subject matter’” (Rogoff, 2013, p.46)? Could there be, in effect, a reflective relation between what the exhibition was discussing and how the curatorial process itself was organized?

### 3. CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

One of the immediate answers to these questions was to actively involve UCA students in the curatorial process of the exhibition. We had previously experimented with such approach in the show *Despite Efficiency: Labour* (Herbert Read Gallery, 2015), by inviting BA Interior Design students to imagine and construct the exhibition display and turning their participation into a reflection about the efficient and inefficient aspects of their collaboration with the gallery. In the case of *Art Education in the Age of Metrics*, the ambition was to make a group of MFA (Master in Fine Arts) students consider their own role in the university's metrical performance.<sup>4</sup> This group of volunteer students

<sup>2</sup> I would like to particularly thank Mark Little, Former Exec Dean Fashion, Architecture & Design at UCA and my line manager, for his complicity with this project.

<sup>3</sup> *Day After Debt: A Call For Student Loan Relief* (Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, 2015) is another recent example of an exhibition about the problems of art students hosted by a university itself (Sheena, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The National Student Survey boycott organized by the UK National Student Union in 2017 was a recent instance that revealed the complex metrical role that students play today. By not completing the survey—whose results influence the position of universities in league tables as



worked alongside Spanish artist Miren Doiz to design and build sculptural installations in the gallery (Fig.3). These site-specific constructions were made from objects and materials recovered from different campus locations to which we then pasted the names of different fine art education institutions alongside their results in the corresponding subject area ranking published by The Guardian newspaper for 2017.



Fig. 3. Artist Miren Doiz and MA student Anna Lopatina. Photo: Ana Daganzo.

During the design and installation phases, conversations sparked amongst participants on the problematic logic underpinning league tables, on UCA's position in the ranking (24), and on whether this reflected or not their own experience at the university. We also needed to negotiate how all these institutions and scores would feature in the work, and the inevitable "favour" we might be doing our competitors by "publicizing" their higher results. In the final display, however, shapes, colours, words and numbers intersected each other, creating a relative unintelligible mix that could be interpreted not so much as a coherent set of results, but as the result of a shipwreck; that of the arts university collapsing under the unquantifiable pressure of metrics.

Another way in which the "student body" was involved in the show was by inviting a former graduate back to campus. Simon Merrifield had studied both his BA and MFA at UCA and had specialized in performance. As part of *Art Education in the Age of Met-*

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well as other Governmental statistics—students were trying to protest against a further increase in tuition fees. At UCA, however, the Student Union decided not to follow the boycott as they considered that by damaging the university's reputation, they would be harming their own career prospectives.

rics he was commissioned a new work concerning employment after graduation. For *Out of the Bubble* Merrifield produced Instagram updates that gradually covered one of the gallery walls and a live performance for the opening based on his current position as sales assistant, website editor and social media manager at a fancy dress and party shop (Fig.4). According to the US-based platform BFAMFAPHD, in 2014 only 10% of all art graduates in the country were working artists. Despite the unquestionable and global difficulty of working in the sector for which you have studied, one of the main values in all higher education statistics in the UK concerns whether graduates are in relevant employment or further study 6-months after completing their degrees. By asking Merrifield back, we wanted to embrace rather than ignore the dilemma of teaching students about a field in which they would probably end up not working.

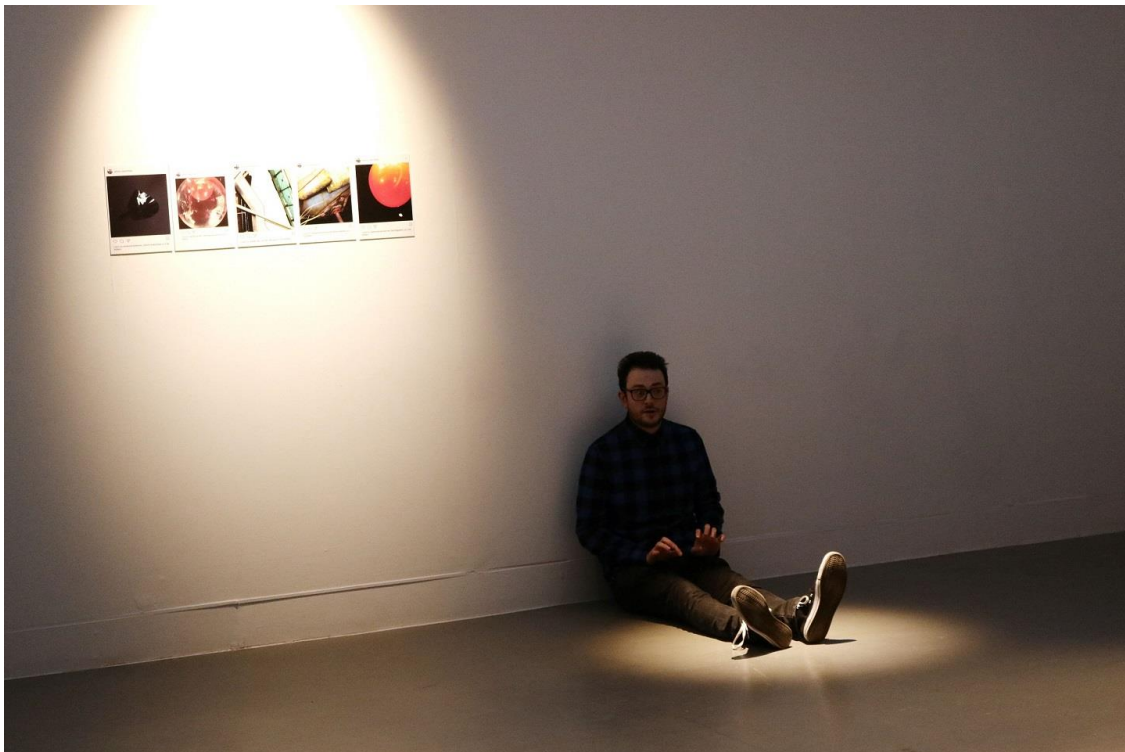


Fig.4. *Out of the Bubble*, performance by Simon Merrifield. Photo: Katie Jolin.

#### 4. LEARNING MODELS AND SUPPORT SERVICES

The other two projects on display at the gallery were film-based and presented apparently differing models for how to, in fact, carry out that teaching. The first, Redmond Entwistle's *Walk-Through* (2012), looked at the past, specifically at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and the post-studio classes conducted by the artist Michael Asher at the Los Angeles-based institution (Fig.5). Rather than the teaching of manual skills, the main pedagogical tool in CalArts was an updated version of the critical conversation amongst students and teachers: "In the expanded crit, how to be an artist had

to be learned through being able to hold your own in the face of intense and lengthy interrogation” (Houghton, n.d.). The film by Entwistle included scripted reflections from former students on this relative inefficient model of teaching (long, not necessarily focused dialogues) along with archival, marketing-style material about the figures and facts surrounding the founding of this very successful organization. Yet the two narratives (one more personal, the other one more institutional) ended up collapsing into a critical portrait of art teaching and learning as the capacity to add value; a core and applauded skill of the worker in the neoliberal economy.

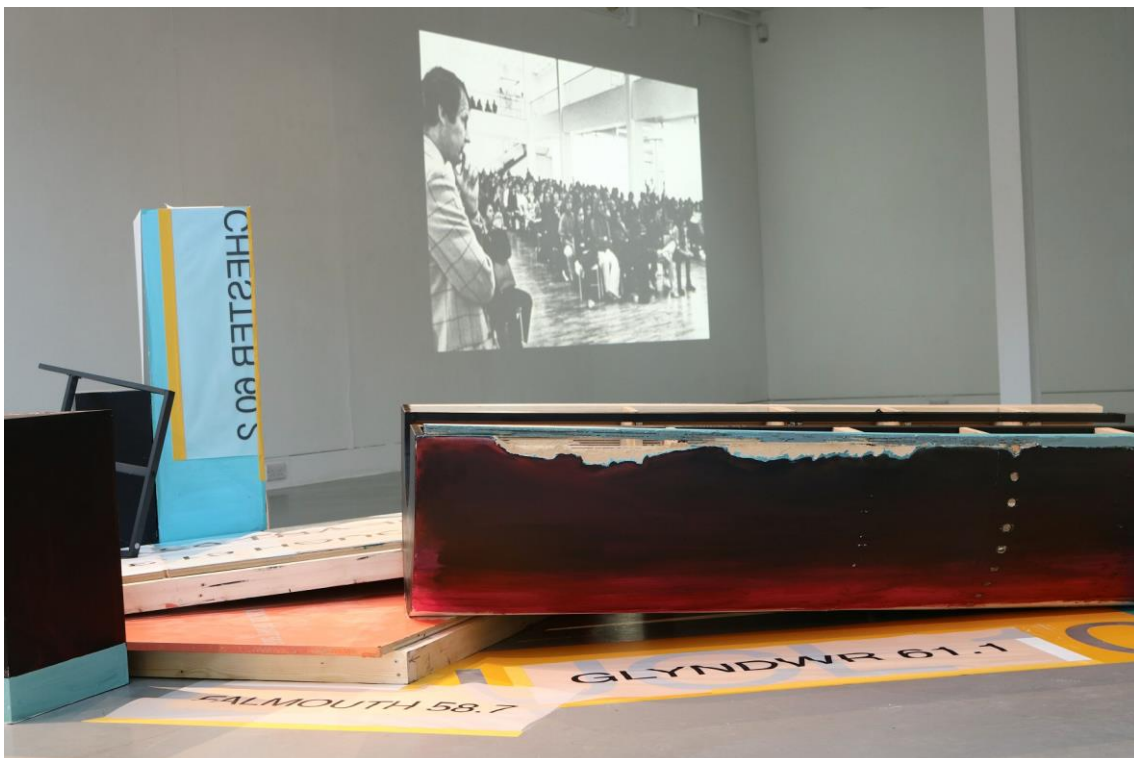


Fig. 5. Works by Miren Doiz (front) and Redmond Entwistle (back). Photo: Katie Jolin.

The second of the two films, Steven Cottingham’s *Conversations with Eliza* (2011), presented a model for what art education could become in the future. In the video, whose only images are textual reproductions of what is being spoken, we can hear (and read) the artist talking to a computer-generated voice (Eliza) that emulates a Rogerian psychotherapist. This type of therapy is a person-centered one that argues for the capacity of the patients to help themselves, rather than needing expert advice. What in principle aligns with progressive agendas around the rupture of the unidirectional model of learning (from authoritative teacher down to passive student), is ironically adapted by Cottingham into an absurd dialogue with Eliza. In this conversation on the artist’s fears about the quality of his own works, his thoughts are just presented back to him as questions by the computer programme. In the context of the exhibition, Eliza represents a threatening prospect for art education: a computer able to take on the role of the art



teacher. For if we believe that students already hold the answers to their own questions, wouldn't it be much more efficient to substitute human beings for software?

As with the other shows in this series of exhibitions, we decided to produce not a catalogue but a publication that captured and expanded what was happening in the gallery. The resulting booklet included along with recombined images and texts from the different art works, a dialogue between the member of Fresh New Anxieties, a peer-group focusing on collective and critical methodologies of self-care in the context of higher education (Fig.6). Composed by students and staff from Goldsmiths University, FNA appeared as a reaction to cuts to disability and mental health support at the institution. The text they contributed does not identify speakers but runs as a series of comments on audit culture in academia, student services, institutional complicity and the (im)possibility of escape (Fresh New Anxieties, 2017). Particularly critical with the ways the university gathers student data (for instance, by asking for individual and anonymous feedback rather than listening to groups' complaints), FNA highlights how student-generated metrics are both a way to "improve a service" and a threat to the well-being of the students themselves (with bad satisfaction scores affecting the institution's funding, for example).



Fig. 6. Publication

## 5. ENDING THOUGHTS

*Art Education in the Age of Metrics* was a project that tried to consider the problems of art education under neoliberalism through the exhibition format. It was, in fact, on display at a university itself and pursued the active engagement of the university community, especially of those agents most affected by the contradictions of learning art in the

age of metrics: art students. Who or what is an “artist” is never a self-evident fact, but the result of changing views, circumstances, and values. How art is taught, and what skills are transmitted through the higher education system will directly or indirectly determine who becomes an artist and what are the standards under which such category exists. Art and creative subjects are under specific scrutiny today by a system that favours measurable results, quantifiable outcomes and productivity. Under a neoliberal, semi-privatized model, educational organizations providing courses in those creative areas are also obliged to perform under metrical terms if they want to recruit enough students. Nevertheless, the “skill set” that is today the centre of art education—from self-motivation and flexibility to resilience and self-assurance—is also expected of all workers in the current precarious, entrepreneurial economic model. In that sense, and while art education itself is confronting a contradiction (how do you measure—beyond the art market—the success of an unquantifiable practice like art?) some of the capacities developed through an art education are suitable and even encouraged by the neoliberal job market.

Finally, it is worth again emphasizing that the data culture within higher education affects every aspect of campus life: from the curricula to the support services, from relations between students and staff to institutional strategic decisions. With this in mind, the exhibition that we organized at the University for the Creative Arts was not intended to solve the all-encompassing problem of art education within a metrical system of evaluation. Yet, in the context of our relatively small historic campus, our curatorial endeavour tried to open up necessary conversations, raise awareness, and provide a space in which the worries that we share became tangible.



Fig. 7. Miren Doiz's installation (detail).

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## 7. BIO

**Emma Brasó** is an art historian and curator. While in charge of the cultural programme at UCA, she has collaborated with artists like Gustav Metzger, Andrew Köttling, Bernardí Roig, Rosana Antolí, Greta Alfaro or Fermín Jiménez Landa. Her projects have also been showcased at institutions like Centre for Contemporary Arts (Glasgow), la Sala de Arte Joven (Madrid), La Casa Encendida (Madrid), Las Atarazanas (Valencia), Hamni Gallery (London) and ISE Foundation (New York), amongst others. In 2018, Emma directed a course on curating contemporary art at Tabacalera (Madrid), and finalised her PhD at Royal College of Arts (London) entitled *Parafictional Artists: From the Critique of Authorship to the Curatorial Turn*.

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