



OTAGO
POLYTECHNIC
Te Kura Matatini ki Otago

Update.

New Applied Research.

Issue 3: October 2009.

Special Issue:

Teaching and Learning in Art and Design.

Introduction.

Leoni Schmidt

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Welcome to Issue 3 of 'Update: New Applied Research.' In this special issue we are showcasing research in art and design education.

“By showcasing innovative cross-disciplinary and collaborative practice and situating art and design education in broader socio-political contexts this research seeks to inspire and inform the work of educators.”

We highlight six presentations and one exhibition presented by Otago Polytechnic staff at *art works – mahi toi*, the 2009 biennial conference of the ANZAAE (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Art Educators). This conference was held in April at Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin in order to support and enhance teaching and learning for art and design educators throughout the country, the Pacific Rim region, and further afield.

These research projects reflect the conference's purpose to focus on issues and critical questions relevant to art and design education in the contemporary arena. By showcasing innovative cross-disciplinary and collaborative practice and situating art and design education in broader socio-political contexts this research seeks to inspire and inform the work of educators.

For more information on the conference and links to research undertaken across all sectors please see <http://www.anzaae2009.org.nz/>



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Research Update is published by the Otago Polytechnic Research Office, October 2009.

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Additional Photographs:

Brian Treanor (pages 3 and 10), Qassim Saad (cover image and page 4), Margo Barton and Mike Wilson (page 4), MacBookPro photobooth 72dpi (page 5), Caro McCaw (page 9) and Max Otletti (page 8 and 11).

Writing:

Nic Ink Ltd

Design:

Otago Polytechnic – Marketing, Communications and Customer Relations.

Stock:

Printed on Novatech Silk Max Paper made from FSC certified mixed source pulp.

Objects of desire.

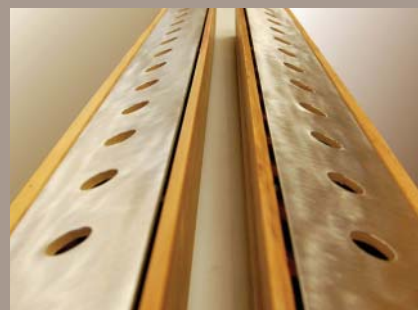
Otago Polytechnic Design Staff

‘Desire / n’, the Otago Polytechnic Design Staff Exhibition, spanned the gamut from sustainable furniture to floral menswear, from evocative photography to absurdist urban transportation.

The exhibition, launched to coincide with the April ANZAAE conference, offered viewers a glimpse into the cutting edge of New Zealand design.

It was the first time a group show of such a scope had occurred at Otago Polytechnic, with work on display from Fashion, Interior, Communication and Product Design staff. The exhibition represented some of the fruits of the Polytechnic’s research programme as well as the individually supported research of Design staff members.

In keeping with the spirit of the age, sustainable design practice was a key feature of several of the works. Product Design Lecturers Mike Wilson and Tim Armstrong created their Battlestar, a minimalist aluminium coffee table, according to a rigorous list of environmentally friendly provisos, and Product Design Senior Lecturer Qassim Saad built his elegant lighting unit Enarah from fully recycled materials, right down to the electric fitting.



Enarah – Qassim Saad

Saad nods to nature when describing his aesthetic influences as well as his methods. “Part of the inspiration for this work is drawn from my own visual memories of childhood and adolescence,” he explains. “I still enjoy remembering the image of sunlight falling on the courtyard of our family home and how this defined the visual environment in which we lived, worked and played.”

Equally stylish, but considerably less functional, is Creative Studies Academic Leader Jane Venis’s Blasterboard, a surreal vehicle-cum-musical instrument “designed for the niche market of skating brass instrument players”.

Venis cites Dr Seuss as an influence, but this design in particular is informed by the Japanese art of Chindogu. “Chindogu are objects that are entirely impractical but could be seen as useful (almost)”, says Venis. “They appear to be solutions to problems - problems that aren’t terribly pressing to begin with.”



Hatch – Margo Barton

Fashion Lecturer, Margo Barton’s three piece collection *hatch, match and dispatch* works on several levels – as a reformatted baby bonnet into a fashion object, as echoes of the past, as an illusion or allusion to the future millinery and millinery wearer – part human, part object.

Other exhibitors addressed issues as diverse as gender stereotypes in Simon Swale’s *The Man in the Floral Suit*; the social impact of hair styles represented in Cyndy McKenzie’s *Hair Piece*; a reflection on social networking in Rachel Gillies’ *I check my e-mails every day* and Tania Allan Ross’ personal journey told in textiles, *Hiding and Burnout 1 & 2*.

Head of Design Alistair Regan says that the quality and diversity of the work on display at the Design Staff Exhibition was partly a testament to the department’s commitment to research. “It is important to the school and its stakeholders to ensure that our lecturers remain amongst those at the leading edge of design research in this country.”

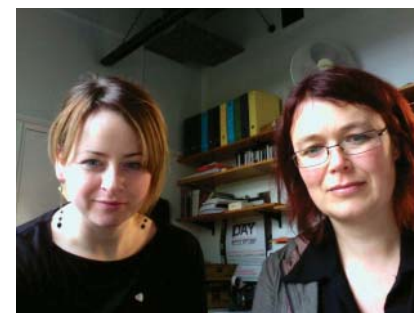


Blasterboard – Jane Venis

Art in a digital world.

Su Ballard and Rachel Gillies

Whether you are painting landscapes, sculpting stone with a hammer and chisel or cutting and pasting digital video, using the internet has become an unavoidable part of being a contemporary artist.



Rachel Gillies and Su Ballard

“Every art student now has to engage in some way with digital media,” says Dr Su Ballard, Principal Lecturer in Electronic Arts at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art. “Maybe they are a painter and want to find resources about an overseas artist. Maybe they want to put their own work on the internet so other people can see it.”

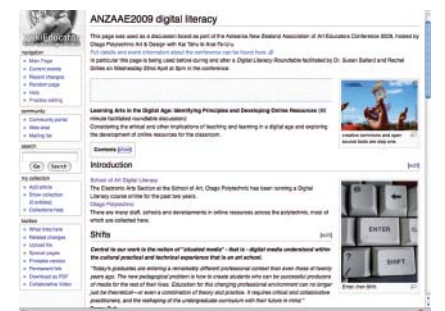
This reality of artistic life provided the stimulus for Ballard and Senior Art and Design Lecturer Rachel Gillies to develop a paper that teaches digital literacy for art students. In turn, their experiences developing the course, and Gillies’ experience teaching it, prompted the roundtable discussion they facilitated at the ANZAAE conference in April, considering the implications of teaching and learning in a digital age.

“It has become something of a cliché to say that the pace of technology threatens to leave people in the dust, but it is a real issue for educators”, says Gillies. She insists that it is not an insoluble problem, however. “If we focus on teaching software, it may be obsolete by the time students leave, so it’s important to teach broad skills that they can then apply to different situations. It’s largely about the wider context of art-making in a digital world.”

“That context is always changing,” Ballard continues. “They need to critically engage with it. If you download that song onto your ipod, can you put it in your video, and then can you show that video in a public space? If you put your photographs on Flickr, how are you going to feel if someone else uses them without your permission? Maybe you should read the terms and conditions before you upload them.”

The roundtable discussion was partly an opportunity for Ballard and Gillies to share some of the insights they have gained from three years of teaching the digital literacy paper. They are pleased with the outcomes of the paper so far. “Students have taken on the skills and developed them and made them their own”, says Gillies. “They are the users and creators of the media we introduced them to.”

“It has become something of a cliché to say that the pace of technology threatens to leave people in the dust, but it is a real issue for educators.”



http://wikieducator.org/ANZAAE2009_digital_literacy

Shooting spree.

Margo Barton and Max Oettli

It was the first time Otago Polytechnic's Fashion Design and Photography departments had officially joined forces for a major project, and they pulled it off with style.

There were six collaborative teams of photography and fashion students, models, six locations ranging from Moana Pool to Taiaroa Head, one internationally-renowned fashion photographer and only one intense day of shooting.

The project took place in April 2008, and the catalyst was a visit by German photography professor Ute Mahler, whose fashion photography was on display at the 'Zeitgeist Becomes Form' exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Mahler accepted an invitation to play a major role, assisting teams of students with the preparation and execution of their shoots and critiquing their final works.

"The opportunity was too good to miss," says Fashion Design Academic Leader Margo Barton, who organised the undertaking with Photography Academic Leader Max Oettli. Students agreed with her sentiment, with more than half giving up their Easter holiday breaks to be involved.

"I think being freer meant they could really experiment with things and take greater risks."

Students weren't the only participants to learn a great deal from the opportunity, however. Barton and Oettli presented a paper at the ANZAAE conference in April discussing their experiences of cross-disciplinary collaboration and considering what insights might be brought to bear on future projects.

One of the issues discussed in the paper is the philosophy of Problem Based Learning groups, which informed their approach to the original project. "The idea is basically that you give the group a problem and the group

attacks it," Oettli says. "They had to come up with the results in a fairly short period of time, which is something I've noticed the students love doing."

Barton agrees: "I think being freer meant they could really experiment with things and take greater risks," she says. "An interesting question I'd like to look at in the future is whether they enjoyed it more because they weren't being formally assessed."

Barton and Oettli's paper discusses a number of subjects, from the importance of clear communication to questions surrounding authorship in a collaborative process. But the pair insists that the reflective process is an ongoing one – and one that will influence their next collaboration, which they are currently discussing. "There is no final chapter to this story," says Oettli.



Photographer: Tara Douglas
Designer: Cheska Pasco
Model: Pagan @ AliMcD Agency



Photographer: Werner Mahler
Designer: Meg Gallagher
Models: Ali Van Ammers and Frances Gordon



Photographer: Werner Mahler
Designer: Hollie Perniskie
Model: Victoria @ AliMcD Agency



Photography: Emily Hlavac-Green and Julia Johnstone; Designer: Jenna Dudley; Model: Ella Buchanan @ AliMcD Agency

Blurring the boundaries.

Sudhir Duppati

Art has always had promiscuous tendencies, according to Otago Polytechnic School of Art Lecturer Sudhir Duppati.



“The cultural roots of Eritrea aligned well with this kind of performance, so it was easy for them to adapt to the strategy.”

“I think this could definitely enrich the culture,” Duppati says. “There is the potential there to create a real cross-cultural situation, and broaden students’ horizons.”

For Duppati, this is not merely an experimental notion. Before immigrating to New Zealand, he worked on the redevelopment of the national primary school arts curriculum in Eritrea, successfully introducing aspects of integrated arts education. In the Eritrean model, a range of creative disciplines is taught separately throughout the first part of the year, before being integrated into a single multi-media performance.

“In this final performance there is space and time incorporated with music, dance and drama, there is three-dimensionality in the crafting of various objects and there are costumes, make-up and face paint,” Duppati says. “The cultural roots of Eritrea aligned well with this kind of performance, so it was easy for them to adapt to the strategy.”

Currently, he is looking at the New Zealand curriculum to envision ways in which the approach could be adapted in a distinctly Kiwi way. He is heartened by a recent experiment carried out by a team of University of Waikato researchers, which demonstrated its feasibility at a local school.

He is looking forward to seeing more research of this kind, and will continue to contribute to the discussion. “I’d like to see the colleges of education take up the initiative, at least on a trial basis – to establish a model school and see whether this is viable,” he says. “That would be a great start.”

“There is the potential there to create a real cross-cultural situation, and broaden students’ horizons.”

From ‘ngoma’ in East Africa, which incorporates story, song, dance, costume and mask, to contemporary multi-media art and the remix culture of hip hop, artists are constantly finding new ways to mix, match and integrate different art forms and disciplines.

In the Western world, however, arts education has tended to focus on specific, distinct disciplines, from the primary level onwards. Duppati presented a paper at the April ANZAAE conference that asked whether there is a way to bring these disparate threads together into a single project or performance in a primary or secondary school setting, and what creative possibilities this might open up.

Media watch.

Caro McCaw

“You don’t want to separate theory and practice anywhere, not in educational institutions and not in the world.”



This is the philosophy of Caro McCaw, the Academic Leader of Communication Design at Otago Polytechnic and ardent enthusiast of new media theory. She is constantly looking for innovative ways to encourage students to share this passion – acknowledging that many students are more interested in practising design than they are in learning theory.

The Media Ecologies paper she presented at the ANZAAE conference in April explored a variety of ways to turn a theory of digital media into “part of the toolbox that students use for making things.”

“If you teach theory and practice in embedded ways, practice becomes more intelligent and theory becomes richer. The paper I wrote was an attempt to develop an argument for why that was so important, based on my experiences.”

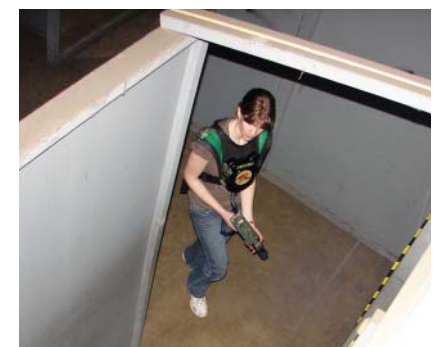
Part of the experience McCaw drew on in her paper was that of designing and delivering the curriculum for the Interaction Design paper. Originally developed in collaboration with Su Ballard from the School of Art, McCaw now teaches this at second year level.

In one of the exercises given in this course, students played America’s Army, an online first-person shooter game, which also serves as a recruitment tool for the US army. They also played Laser Force, an interactive, real world game of a similar kind, and finally, they discussed media representations of the Iraq invasion, and how these experiences interrelated.

“I have to say, it’s a winner of a class!” McCaw says. “Students love it. But also, the kinds of conversations you can have are much more embodied and social and real. Theory becomes really engaging when you start to practice it in this way.”

“If you teach theory and practice in embedded ways, practice becomes more intelligent and theory becomes richer.”

One of the conclusions McCaw reaches in her paper is that because of the way new media pervades students lives, they already have many of the tools necessary to deconstruct and re-contextualise those media forms. “Students’ knowledge and experiences from outside the classroom equal those experiences they have in the classroom,” she says, “so you’re actively drawing on their experience in order to enrich their learning.”



The discipline debate.

Bridie Lonie and Stella Lange

Damien Hirst became the wealthiest artist in the world last year when he sold an entire collection in a single stroke for over \$300 million. And he did it without painting a single painting or sculpting a single sculpture.



Stella Lange, Bridie Lonie and Raewyn Atkinson

Instead, Hirst employs a large team of technicians who transform his ideas into material artworks. His approach is not unique. In fact, many visual arts institutions around the world have adopted this conceptual model to such a degree that they no longer teach technical skills at all.

Not everyone believes that this model represents the future of arts education, however. Bridie Lonie, then Head of the

Otago Polytechnic School of Art and Senior Fashion Lecturer Dr Stella Lange introduced and facilitated a roundtable discussion on this topic at the ANZAAE conference in April, beginning with a passionate defence of the importance of discipline-based learning.

Lonie argues that "Discipline-based teaching in a tertiary institution enables research through material processes. Artists and designers change the ways we view the world by asking us to engage with what some theorists have called 'mere real things'. However, those 'mere real things' force us to engage with issues and their implications in real time and space. For transformation and creativity to occur within the material worlds the obduracy of that world has to be a factor, and this is what an education dealing only with the conceptual does not offer."

"One difference between experts and novices is that experts understand materials and they can make decisions about them without even having to touch them," Lange says. "They can mix the right colour, they can cut the right shape – they can pinch off the right amount of clay. There's no way you can reach that expert level without introducing play with materials into the process."

They both believe that the primary driver behind attempts to integrate the different disciplines and abandon skill-based teaching is an economic one. This was a view shared by many art educators who attended the discussion, Lonie says. "There were various

people who were seeing their departments closing down – in response to demands for less one-on-one contact and more online work."

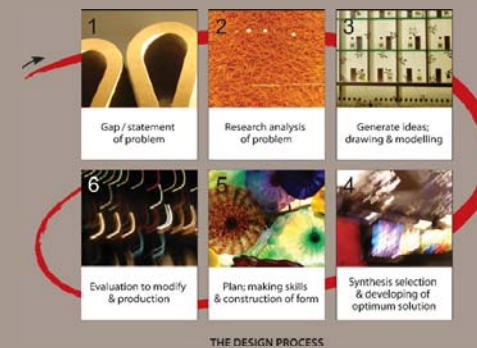
Lonie and Lange have always insisted on resisting this tide, they say, in spite of the funding pressures that are all too common in the education sector. "Research in the arts involves being able to both understand skills and break boundaries. We believe that an active engagement between expert and learner creates a forum in which research occurs organically. Only through experimentation and play with material processes can their possibilities be discovered."

"One difference between experts and novices is that experts understand materials and they can make decisions about them without even having to touch them."

Designing a better world.

Qassim Saad

Qassim Saad knows that one size does not fit all when it comes to product design – he has worked in Iraq, Jordan, New Zealand and South Africa and he says that his job description is constantly changing along with his environment.



Saad is a Senior Product Design Lecturer at Otago Polytechnic, and is also completing a PhD in Design Studies, aimed at locating design practice within specific cultural contexts and looking in particular at how to address the needs of developing countries.

He presented a paper based on his doctoral research at the April ANZAAE conference, exploring ways in which design educators can enhance their students' awareness of the socio-cultural contexts in which they work.

"The key point I am trying to express is that design and technology should be focused on human needs," Saad says. "There is a real movement within design that is trying to look not only at the aesthetic and functional aspects of a product, but also where it fits into the culture."

"There is a real movement within design that is trying to look not only at the aesthetic and functional aspects of a product, but also where it fits into the culture."



Saad recently finished work on an international project that put this theory into action, designing sustainable means of transport for rural South Africans living in isolated villages. He says that the solutions they came up with, such as bicycles capable of carrying water, babies and groceries, are an example of the difference design can make when it is properly targeted. "Once again, it is about utilising design strategy to improve people's quality of life."

Saad's students have been getting in on the action too, attacking tasks such as designing water purification systems based on solar-powered energy in the paper he teaches on the social applications of product design.

Much of Saad's current research is based on looking for creative solutions to problems in a country with more than its fair share of them – Iraq. Iraq is his home country, and he is passionate about the role that could be played by design in its reconstruction. He quotes H.A. Simon's definition of design's raison d'être: "changing existing situations into preferred ones".



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