

Education is about Enabling

Interview with Gill Addison, Stage 3 Coordinator for BA Fine Art at Chelsea

Joe Easeman: How important are online identities to the Fine Art industry, both for students and for professionals?

Gill Addison: What appears to be now is that most artists have a website, whether it be through their gallery website, if they have a gallery, or if they don't have a gallery through their own independent website. The site acts as is both a flagship for their current work but also a depository for archived and earlier work that they might want to expose to the world if they have had a longer career, or if they are a new and emerging artist, current work and where their ideas are stemming from. So web presence in terms of individual websites or via their gallery is really important in students promoting their practice. It's like a cheaper version of an artist monograph (a book of their portfolio). I think more and more the web industry is supporting artist portfolios with the type of website, the ease of the website, to ensure that the aesthetic of the work and the aesthetic of the website can reflect maybe the aesthetic of their practice. In terms of the course we don't ask students to develop a website, but what we do anticipate and expect for some of the units that students will have a blog presence and the blog, in a way, acts as an axis that is somewhere between a public accessible file/ document/ book/ sketchbook and the sketchbook. So it kind of acts as some sort of balance in between both of these elements within the course. Often, certainly with the first years, we do often ask them to make a blog so they are used to talking about their work and reflecting on their process, selecting images that go public. They are all very much aware that if it goes on the web it's on the web for everyone, and that's a really important thing to get your head round - that, a sketchbooks private, a blog is not, so being aware of what you post is crucial. But I think the current generation are very much aware of their media presence, they are so media and web savvy. They are at so at ease with social media, they use it socially so the translation to use of your work is an easy one.

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You said on the blogs they are quite aware of selecting work and where it goes, is there a knowledge about that selection and then that in relation to things like Facebook and their social presence?

I don't know, I mean, I don't have a Facebook account, so I don't know what goes on in that world and on a lot of the students pages, I know some members of the team do. However [what] I advise students is that their notebooks or their sketchbooks, if they keep them, are where they can work things out, and their blogs are where they put their workings out. So there is a level of selection and there's a level of editing, but maybe not as say an editorial as a website. If you think of it in three stages; sketchbook - total honesty, blog - honesty, but somewhat edited, website - totally censored as it's very public. I think it's helpful that you can make a blog private and that's what students, who are feeling sensitive around particular content within their work or sensitive around the work as a

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whole, will often supply a password to a member of staff. So that's a really helpful tool to feel that it's not so pressurized and not so much in the public view.

And in relation to that do they use any of the UAL tool ever, things like workflow or my blogs?

Not at the moment, not on fine art, I mean. I'm aware of these kind of packages are available, but most of the student will work on blog sites, WordPress, Tumblr, BlogSpot for example, but what I find is more and more Svbtltle surfaces as the preferred provider It feels more like a magazine, it's less complicated than say WordPress. It appears to be very accessible, easy to set up and not too difficult to use and update.

I don't know about workflow from UAL, because we don't use it on the course, but it is something that we could look at doing. We had a bit of a realization that about two years ago, students could only use their UAL web accounts/email accounts to contact us, yet we will still get emails from hotmail.com. Hence asking a student 'I'm going to look at your blog, but it has to be on this format' might not always work, whereas I think it could work if there is a choice and if it is easy setup and a bit...people like seduction and sexiness, Svbtltle is really sexy, it's in at the moment, media flow and svbtltle, cargo collective, all of these thing, you know. I know cargo collective for last year third years, all of them wanted a cargo collective account, really difficult to use, but they all wanted it. [so it's that sort of aesthetics that they are after] yeah, it's a bit like trainers, you either have to have the latest or you go for the classic vintage, which today is two years ago!

Do you think there is a need to disconnect between the university and your identity as an artist with students and graduates?

I don't know really. I'm not sure about that, in my experience with students, once they are in the third year, some want to use that connection a lot more. They might not in the first and second year. But when they come to the third year, certainly when they are coming up to the degree show and after they have left if there could be something that's offered to ensure that connection, then that's when it might be used. I know that students from the royal college who graduated and they are part of the RCA network and they still have royal college of art web addresses. That sort of sets them out as that clandestine royal college fraternity; they'll have their website hosted by the royal college, because it gives an instant community.

Is that connection something that people within the industry are looking for?

You know, I think that it has more to do with the content to be honest, especially in the practice. However that may not be the case in design courses the connection with UAL, with Chelsea, Camberwell, or Wimbledon, or CSM, might be of a benefit. As external employers or people who might commissions, will want to know that you have come from a very good college and UAL is that. It has a brand and why not use that. I don't think that the students at undergraduate level realize the branding that UAL has in the real world, but I think they begin to realise in their third year, and especially when they are coming to the end. And more so in the period now, when they have just left. They are starting a fresh and they realize that can use that UAL graduate connection, and use it to their advantage. [so it's something that sort of comes back in later in the course] yeah, it's a bit like being a teenager again, it's like you love your parents, but you also hate them and want to leave, but once you have left and set up your own home, it's quite nice to go back to Sunday lunch and you realize how good they were. I think if you look at education at undergraduate level, it has a little bit of that tension and that traction and that's a really interesting space to sort of realize that there is scope to for student to want to come back to the brand. Is it a brand, is that the right word?

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I think it is, I mean, I know people who will look through CV for commission based worked or such like, and take out any that aren't UAL, Goldsmiths, Slade etc., any small college, and it's because they just have so many CV with very similar attributes that they have to narrow them down somehow, and these colleges are known to produce very good graduates. So I suppose from what you were just saying an online version of that where you have a connection to the 'brand' would be really useful.

We were just talking about the cargo collective and the fact that a lot of people from the graphic design industry will go and look at graphic design websites their as they are supposedly really exciting designers. If you are looking to commission someone to do some work for you and you know about UAL and you know that they have really solid courses and student come out with an air of professionalism and are really good at what they do then you are going to go to search out UAL students. So I think there is a scope for a wider web presence [some sort of talent pool, do you mean?] yeah possibly, or just something like UAL could hosts websites, but they could only be for ex-students. I don't know if that would be possible, but it would be quite an interesting idea. if you were a recent graduate and you wanted to set up a website and you could have a UAL website, and it had some sort of UAL branding on it that attached itself to the fact that you were an graduate from university of the arts, its doing good for both, isn't it? You know it good for the student, but it's also good for the University of the Arts to keep their alumni in contact. I think that would be an interesting thing to look at. I guess that would be an interesting thing to look at on the curricular, on the educational side. I won't ask a student to set up a website, because I know that they are expensive, I mean good ones, you can get free one, but maybe if there was some kind of facility where students could instantly use something that has been set up whilst they are a student at the university of the arts, then there becomes a potential to tie that into some sort of workshop or, not necessarily an assessed element, but a work project/ workshop to help students do that. Especially when you get into the third year, the students need to be given skills, experience and knowledge of promoting their work. I won't do that at the moment, because it's all very well me saying, go out and get yourself a really good website, when people are paying x amount of money to just be and make work, and that's another £30 a year that they haven't got.

We talked a lot in our last project about the tools that students feel they need to get a better understand of the online environment, information about things like coding and open source and thing like that and whether some sort of web portal outside of the course would be useful that both staff, students and graduates could go to. What are your opinions on this?

I think that would be really helpful. Because it is a bit of a minefield out there. I mean one of my projects this summer is to build a website, and it's a nightmare. Apart from the psychological trauma of trailing through 85,000 years' worth of work, it's the fact that what seems to be simple isn't. And [there are questions such as] what's the difference between web hosts? and, this web host will give you a domain, but it won't give you an email, so you need a google app. and you're like 'what does that mean' and that's going to change, that's going to constantly change. So there need to be something that if there is that information out there that it needs to be generated or fixed for a period and then re-examined. And you think that's something staff would also use? I think so, yeah. I know I have gone on a couple of staff development course when WordPress first came out, and

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upload and video, to understand compression to upload videos to Vimeo, and they're all really great. When you go on them, you have to sign up to something that is quite external. like for example I went on something about compression for video and it was to work

on a Vimeo account, and you should have a Vimeo, and I'm not saying the college should have some sort of Vimeo account, but if you take that as something like setting up a website, if whilst you are training you are also setting up your own website, brilliant, then I think more staff would do it. I mean when you look at how many staff from fine art have a website its very few, some are linked to their galleries, simple, very easy, some of them have very easy websites, some are very complicated. Students often say to me why don't you have a website, and I'm like, because I'm scared. It take ages to get one sorted out and actually it a bit unfair really, because unless they've seen some of the work, or I've shown them it they won't necessary know it exists. working in film it's difficult for me because I won't put my work fully on the internet, it's not meant to be seen on a small screen, so I have to get my head round what I'm prepared to do on that [the internet] so at the moment I'm just using stills to promote film.

I suppose there are a lot of copyright issues?

A lot of copyright issues. A friend of mine who unfortunately passed away had work on a video account. She passed away and the next moment her work is put onto a pop video. I think being an independent film maker or image maker in that way, because you don't have a production company behind you of any capital weight, it can be a bit of a nightmare. Although having said that if your work is on the web and it is copyrighted and it has your name on it it's become more problematic for people to take your work. I find students are also more and more aware of what can and cannot be used. But still I am not too sure about copyright – it's still so grey, and a dodgy grey at that

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There was a lot of talk about how the students don't always feel that they can come to the staff to talk about these issues, because there is not the confidence in staff knowledge relating to online presence and identity.

I agree. You know even as far as, 'I having problems with my Moodle account' I glaze over. Because in many ways the staff are just one step ahead of the students in this. But the staff I work with are very much up for training. Moodle has had a rough year this year, in terms of it being set up for the students and working. I think our course, BA fine art, we didn't think we realize the capability of what Moodle could do could offer, but we are realizing now it can be used more. So I think staff are definitely up for the training, but I don't think at the moment any of us are confident engaging with a kind of technical aspect of it. And that is a problem the college needs to address, technical support is all done via the phone. I think there needs to be an actual person housed somewhere on site to direct students and staff to if there is a problem. [That's an issue that came up with the students as well, that they just don't know where to go. so it is also felt amongst the staff?] Yes absolutely, because when we have an issue technically with IT it's a phone call, and they are really helpful and they're really great, but sometimes you just need to sit down with someone. And we have got IT, but they are more to do with intranet, or networking systems, or problems like your computers not turning on, but questions around web presence and setting things up would be really good. I think there are a lot of online tutorials, like Lydia, which is really good...but when you are stressed out with the technology, the last things you want is for someone to tell you to go and watch an online tutorial, because you just need a person. So while Lydia is brilliant when you have time and you're not stressed, when it's troublesome sometimes you need a real person.

Education is all about enabling not putting hurdles, so if it's a hurdle, some people are going to jump and make it and get over it, but not everyone will, and therefore you have disenabled that person.

So if it's there and you advise them to use it then great, but you know, you can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink, and I think that is the fundamental rule in education, you know, it has to be in place, be available, but you can't make someone do it. and if you get 80% of the people doing it, that's brilliant, and you know, for that other 20%, if they don't do it, but you can direct it to them at some point they might feel the need to do it. And that goes for staff as well