Image 1: *Our Day Will Come* (2011) Paul O'Neill. Participants at the free school
Image: Supercritical http://supercritical.com.au/2011/09/20/our-day-will-come/

Collaborative Practice and the Academy

Working collaboratively was identified as a learning outcome for visual and performing arts graduates in the *Creative and Performing Arts Academic Standards Statement* published in 2010 (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, p.12). Earlier, in 2002, James, McInnis and Devlin remarked on a growing trend for incorporating generic skills alongside subject-specific knowledge in the expected learning outcomes in higher education generally, and within the set of skills they identified they included *group work*. Increasingly, they argued, team-based, multidisciplinary models of practice are becoming the standard in the creative workplace, however tertiary students are often ill prepared for working within these modalities (p.47). More recently, Fleischmann and Hutchison observed that 'the traditional university-based creative arts curriculum often has not sufficiently responded to, nor reflected, contemporary workplace realities' (2012, p.23).

Moreover, in the contemporary art field, socially engaged art has been a prominent feature of the contemporary art scene since the 1990s, if not before, with its roots in early tendencies of twentieth century avant-gardes. With its emphasis on process,

collaboration and very often political and social dissent, socially engaged art is, by now, the subject of a number of studies including the landmark survey exhibition, with an edited collection of critical essays published this year under the same title, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991—2011*, edited by Nato Thompson. In other words, socially engaged art is now the subject — albeit possibly an awkward one — of art history. These reference points indicate that socially engaged art and collaborative practice deserve places in the academy.

Nonetheless, teaching collaborative practice is still only at the germinal stages in most Australian university art schools' curricula. Certainly our own institution, the Tasmanian School of Art at Hobart (TSA) has, to date, yet to broadly incorporate collaborative practice into our teaching and learning as an 'Intentional Learning Outcome'. This sort of lag effect is likely to have multiple causes — apart from the obvious charge of cocooned academics being out of touch with current practice! We are inclined to suggest that the bureaucratising tendencies of mass higher education, and concomitant tendency for students to approach their education as consumers rather than participatory scholars, present obstacles for the practical application of collaborative art production methods in undergraduate teaching. This paper describes and reflects upon the authors' novitiate attempt to incorporate assessable collaborative elements within an experimental 'one-off' unit, with some success, but it also points to foreseeable problems for 'naturalising' (i.e. incorporating) the means and methods we used within standard repeatable units offered to large cohorts.

We devised and taught our 'Complementary Studies' unit (FSA 200/300) as a summer school in late 2011. It was entitled *Our Day Will Come – Discursive Art Practice and the Artist-Curator*.[1] On several earlier occasions the TSA has utilised 'Comp Studies' to enable the creation of quick-response units. The Complementary Studies option enables individual undergraduate students to develop specifically tailored projects—usually to complement their major, and it enables staff to mount units based on particular exhibitions, one-off events, including off-campus and interstate-based content, e.g. the Asia Pacific Triennial, and training for new front-of-house staff prior to the opening of Tasmania's private Museum of New and Old Art (MONA).

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[1] Complementary Study: *Our Day Will Come – Discursive Art Practice and the Artist–Curator* (FSA 200/300). University of Tasmania, School of Art, Summer School, November 2011.

The focus of our own 'Complementary Studies' unit was an art work created in September 2011 as a component of an ambitious program, *Iteration: Again* (*I:A*) auspiced by Contemporary Art Services Tasmania (CAST).[2] The particular work was a month-long dialogical art project, called *Our Day Will Come* (*ODWC*) conceived and developed by the UK-based artist-curator Paul O'Neill and curated by Fiona Lee.[3] It was presented at the TSA in the form of an 'alternative' art school or 'free school', which incorporated works of ten invited international practitioners—curators, artists and writers from across the world, alongside a core group of local practitioners some of whom were School of Art students or staff. The project aimed to drive community discourse, to engage ongoing debate and to encourage discovery, but not to teach—at least, not in a standard sense.[4]

ODWC operated out of a small Hobart City Council caravan, normally used as a workman's tearoom, which was set in the forecourt of the TSA. The caravan was painted the colour of a European passport—a shade of magenta identified as Pantone 222, and embellished with a wooden veranda and a canvas awning supported by two robust 'Hill's Hoist' poles.

Within the broader curatorial framework of *Iteration: Again*, O'Neill's strategy for the 'school within a school' was to stage a multi-faceted schedule of events that would 'iterate' over the four-week *I:A* public art program. Nine invited international artists worked alongside local participants to present works as part of the curriculum, and these included lectures, workshops, performances, dinners and publications. The curriculum was based around the asking of four key questions: 'What is a School?', 'What is Remoteness?', 'What is Autonomy?' and 'What is Usefulness?'

The visiting artists were Mick Wilson (IRE), Rhona Byrne (IRE), Annie Fletcher (IRE) and Jem Noble (UK) who came to Hobart to present their work. Other overseas-based artists, Sarah Pierce (IRE), Garrett Phelan (IRE), Gareth Long (USA), Liam

Gillick (UK) and David Blamey (UK) either gave workshops and instructions via Skype, or sent email directives for performances, material for the publications or designs for artwork construction. The artworks included a table designed by Gareth Long for one-on-one conversations; a series of four potluck *School Dinners* hosted by Mick Wilson; a workshop and lecture by curator Annie Fletcher; Sarah Pierce conducted performance workshops with some of the participants via Skype; Rhona Byrne worked with the Hobart Laughter Club in a series of workshops and activities; Jem Noble conducted a workshop and gave a performance based on material collected from outdated self-improvement video and audio cassettes; seven hour-long live radio broadcasts were performed by the participants on instruction from Garrett Phelan, via Skype from Dublin. At the end of each week a 'zine' or small magazine was launched—the content of which reflected the dialogical material generated during the numerous events. On the last night of the term Paul O'Neill, with Jem Noble, presented Death of A Discourse Dancer at a local nightclub—which included a program of art lectures that mingled with DJ-ing and dancing.

ODWC generated and funnelled the energies of people outside their normal institutional roles, though they were only metres away from their institutional workplace. Its un-formulaic, non-procedural attributes presented some challenges for the local art fraternity, within and outside academia. Nonetheless, it precipitated vigorous collective engagement and within some of the loose talk and levity there were nuggets of rigorous discussion. The project presented novel opportunities for debating thorny ideas and raising difficult questions that, within a standard classroom situation, might be considered by many students to be unpalatable or outside their immediate concerns. The material presented during the project addressed recent and perennial issues: audience participation, collaborative and dialogical practice, the relatively new role of the curatorial artist, questions of artistic autonomy and the social role of dialogue.

In its month-long incarnation, *ODWC* generated and harnessed a frenetic level of energy that could only be maintained temporarily but, as an adjunct or sequel, the authors sought to create an opportunity for students from the TSA to build and reflect upon the density and richness of *ODWC*, to formulate some lessons from its methodologies, and to apply them within an actual educational setting.

The summer school unit aimed to historically contextualize and examine the new and expanding form of discursive art practice and to describe and analyse the emergent role of the 'artist-curator'. Students undertaking it were required to attend the one-day Symposium held as the finale of *Iteration: Again*. Practitioners involved in each component of *Iteration: Again* spoke about the intentions behind their works, described their processes, and reflected on the outcomes. In addition to the national and international visitors implicated in the program, a number of invited academics and cultural specialists were invited from around the country and from New Zealand to convene sessions and participate in critical discussion. Paul O'Neill delivered a keynote lecture and Mick Wilson gave a concluding address.

For the summer school students the *I:A* Symposium formulated key questions and introduced critical debates associated with public art, discursive, relational, collaborative and participatory art practices. Subsequently, we built on these topics in our lectures and workshops, with special emphasis on the question *What is a Public?* the titular question for the 'zine' the students produced. Our unit aimed to familiarize students with methods of practice through reading and discussing signal published essays about key projects, and to engage them in devising some collaborative works of their own. They were asked to write a review of an aspect of the *ODWC* project; to produce a group 'zine' together; to engage in a documented group project and, finally, develop and write about a hypothetical (future-oriented) project of their own devising, in the form of a project proposal and covering letter.

We did not anticipate that our unit would have broad appeal, in part because students were required to have participated in the month-long activities of *ODWC* and the timing was unfortunate, as the project coincided with the end of teaching and assessment period for undergraduates. The unfamiliar terrain and open ended-ness of the unit description too, we surmise, may have limited its appeal. While historian and theorist Boris Groys is of the opinion that art school students court unfamiliarity and hanker for newness, his characterisation of art school students does not square with our own experience of teaching in a regional Australian art school over the past decade! He writes,

> [S]ome, if not all, of the things taught in any art school will immediately and automatically be perceived by students as obsolete, outmoded, uncool and

irrelevant—a remnant of the dead past. Students immediately begin to look for something alternative, something necessarily outside the school, something that still remains out of reach for the existing art system because it operates on a frequency still unheard, still forming, emanating from the perceptions and instincts of another generation. (2009, p.27)

If these observations held true at the TSA, we might have expected more interest in our unit, however by and large the undergraduate students we deal with seem to expect and prefer fixed elements, predictability and tightly delineated outcomes in their curricular studies. Rather than being open to novelty, experiment or speculative thinking, they need energetic encouragement in that direction. By marked contrast to the norm, the people attracted to our summer school unit fitted Groys's description. They were highly motivated, high-calibre students, and had participated actively in the *ODWC* events, a condition of entry. Most of them had previous experience in reflecting upon self-directed projects. Some were undergraduates who undertook the unit as part of their degree; others were currently enrolled in postgraduate course work; some were recent honours graduates no longer enrolled in a course, but active local practitioners. It was clear that most were enrolled in the unit primarily to focus on the content and experiential learning process, rather than to clock up marks.

A key aspect of our unit was that we counselled intending students on the germinal nature of our undertaking. We took care to frankly describe our relatively low level of experience with the terrain and made no claims to expertise. We signalled that there was a provisional and improvisational aspect to the learning and assessment tasks. We also pointed to the limits of current pedagogical practice. The students who opted to undertake the unit were primed by their prior involvement in *ODWC*, and personally briefed on what to expect as a learning experience.

Within the scholarly literature on teaching and codes of practice in higher education, there is a small body of commentary about teaching of group work and collaboration, but so far little descriptive treatment or concrete practical advice on how to effectively teach collaborative practice, so it is not possible to take a textbook approach to teaching. A pivotal new text on the subject is Pablo Helguera's seminal book published last year, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques*

Handbook (2011). At the time of offering our unit, we had not yet read this important book, but it provides prompts for reflecting on our teaching experience of last year.

Because our unit was driven by responsiveness and opportunism and was a one-off, we had more latitude in its devising. Moreover, we had an atypical cohort of students keen and able to contribute to designing aspects of the unit for themselves, who had some idea of the level of ambiguity they would need to entertain. The tone of their class interactions was playful but earnest. One student in particular was forthcoming about her mixed feelings of antipathy and intrigue towards conceptual and discursive art and what she perceived to be its elitist and closed aspects. On more than one occasion the misgivings she voiced instigated well-formulated debates in the class, and her reservations were taken up seriously and with good spirit.

The students devised their collaborative project as a series of film screenings and discussions, with food held on Sunday evenings, to which they each invited a guest. Democracy, learning and social conviviality in society were the themes of the films they selected: Artur Żmijewski's *Repetitions ('75')* (2005) and Anton Vidokle's *New York Conversations* (2010). The students contributed to devising the assessment rubric for their project, formulating criteria to evaluate their collective output. They documented their group processes as video and audio recordings, and edited the footage to show as a group presentation of their project, submitted for assessment. Their illustrative report outlined to their teachers what had worked, what didn't work, and the discoveries they had made in the process. They also took part in peer evaluation, which formed a component in arriving at their grade; as teaching staff, we provided a component of their final project marks.

In preparing the film screening events and the 'zine', the students defined their own roles. Conventional wisdom on group work in university is that competencies should be transferred between students, in other words the skilled should teach the unskilled. Biggs and Tang recommend that students should assume roles for which they are unskilled in order to build new skills, arguing that skilled students benefit from teaching others by reinforcing their own skills when imparting them (2007, p.220). With hindsight, we might have counselled our students to take on roles for which they needed to acquire skills, but they used their own discretion and opted to play to their strengths and directly apply their skills and talents. This was pragmatic,

given the short form of the summer school format, as the acquisition of specialist skills—for example the use of InDesign to format the 'zine', or the use of photography and video for documentation—would not have been practicable; in any case, the development of particular studio-based skills were not intended outcomes of our unit.

It has been documented that teaching units that are reflective and responsive to student feedback are more likely to be successful in delivering quality teaching and learning. (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p.41). A unit developed for repetition and refinement over time has the benefit of post hoc analysis feeding into subsequent teaching cycles. By contrast, a one-off unit that aims to address an emergent sphere of creative practice needs to be taught in an especially agile, reflexive fashion. We engaged with frank discussions about the unfolding proceedings with students, and sought their feedback along the way. We were impressed by the fact that they learnt from their failures as well as their successes, and were candid and critical in their self-appraisal. For example, they identified an unsuccessful aspect of their series of screenings and film discussions: only a small proportion of their invited guests showed up, pointing to problems with their modes of communication and promotion as well as the timing of the events. In the spirit of much socially engaged art practice, the unit was dutifully and multiply documented (with much employment of iPhones and file sharing through Dropbox), which meant it was more, rather than less, evidentially accountable than a standard unit.

In terms of outcomes, the most striking aspect of our summer school unit was the fact that a tight community of practice arose very quickly from a group of students who, at first blush, seemed to have few common interests, skills, or even values. Moreover, their camaraderie had no homogenising effect over the development of their final assignments: written individually, these were lively, novel and diverse in concept and expression. The students entered and left the unit with different skill sets, ideas and orientations in studio-based and dialogical art making, but operated as a highly productive working group. Importantly too, they achieved different personal goals through their participation in the group process. For the students engaged in the graduate course work program, the unit served to update their familiarity with art theory, enlarging their conception of contemporary visual practice and improving their writing skills. For others, who were not participating in the unit as part of a course, it fed directly into their professional practice: for three participants in

particular, it was highly influential in informing their participation in a local artist-run space.[5]

To genuinely fulfil the stated standard graduate outcome of *working collaboratively* in the creative and performing arts, university art schools will need to incorporate artworld practices that have been in use for well over a decade, which are yet to be adequately theorised, and which call for new modes of evaluation and critique. These practices demand responsibility, responsiveness, openness as well as accountability and expertise on the part of participants, and run against the grain of a pervasive passive client-consumer attitude on the part of students, or a bureaucratised service-delivery model of teaching.
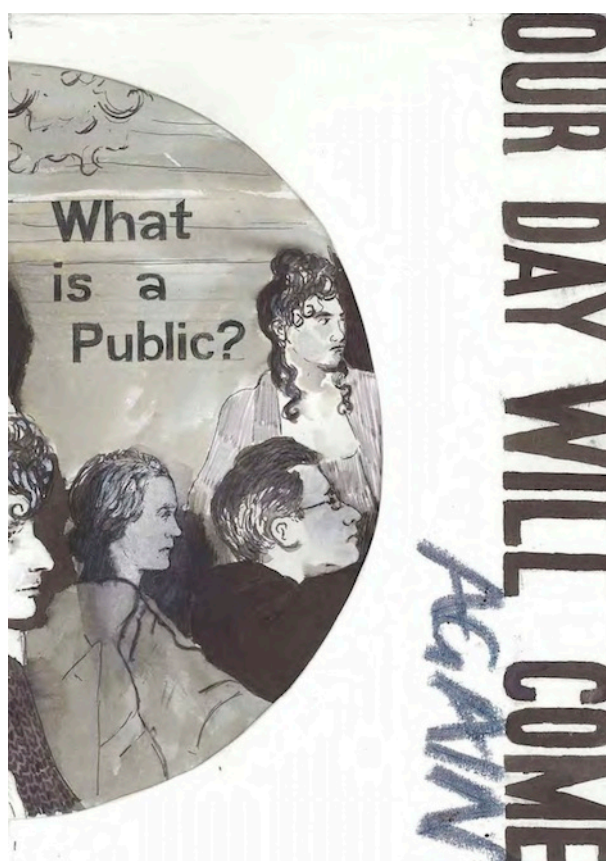

Image 2: *What is a Public?* Zine produced by participants of the unit 'Our Day Will Come – Discursive Art Practice and the Artist-Curator, Tasmanian School of Art (2011), 88 pages

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[5] Conversations with Laura Hindmarsh and Ben Ryan, Director of INFLIGHT Art. The artist-run organisation had all but disappeared earlier this year, apparently closing its doors in June, only to reopen as a changed space, we understand, with a focus on exploration and dialogue, collaboration and collective energy. The *Taxonomy* project and *Economy* are two others that have set out to engage group dynamics in a more searching way than the regular artist-run initiatives.

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