

The Escalator Effect

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Introduction

Last year I was asked to curate a small exhibition of work by alumni of previous New Arts West Midlands exhibitions, as a means to check back in with selected artists and show what happened next. The broad aim of the exhibition was to prompt discussions about how, or if, the exhibitions have functioned to support recent art graduates. Choosing one artist from each of the six contributing art schools, I have assembled a varied show. The hope is to open a conversation about not just about the work on display, but also about the different ways artists practically continue their art practice after graduating.

I am not offering advice to artists on how to ‘succeed’. The aim is to reflect on the arts ecology in the West Midlands, and speculate on how greater numbers of young artists could be persuaded to stay and thrive in the region.

Having grown up in the market town of Shifnal in Shropshire, I have a personal history and continued interest in the region. However, as I don’t live in the Midlands currently, I am perhaps not the best person to delineate the specific arts ecology. Instead, I thought I would take a sideways view, reminding us of the larger societal, political and economic pressures which bear down on artists, shaping their opportunities and experiences.

Many years ago I heard an interview with a Managing Director talking about how they coped with getting hundreds of applications for every job vacancy. He said: “I take the pile of application forms and throw 50% of them in the bin, unread. You have to be lucky to succeed in this business”. You need good fortune to succeed in the art world too. But apart from luck, what are some of the other forces that, like gravity, work from afar invisibly but inexorably on any artist?

A decade ago I moderated a panel discussion in Bristol at which a panel member stated that any artist who didn’t move to London wasn’t serious about their career. You can imagine how this went down with the artists in the audience; but the panellist was stating his honest opinion, drawn from his professional experiences. Is this statement true today? Do ambitious artists need to leave the West Midlands to develop their career?

Looking after children, aging parents, and earning a living are pressures that impact on where graduates live and work, arguably more so than their own drive, talent and ambition. A fifth of 25–29 year olds now live with their parents¹. This growing circumstance is bound to bind more artists locally.

¹ Office for National Statistics 2015

But does it matter now where an artist lives and works? I am often in contact with artists or curators electronically without knowing where on the planet they stand. Skype can largely take the place of face-to-face meetings. Some artists build a career and sales without a physical place to display work (traditionally provided by a gallery or agent), utilising Instagram (D*Face), Facebook (Jean Smith) or their websites (Tom Kemp). Perhaps the modern equivalent of an artists' colony, providing support and mental stimulation, is a Facebook group such as the Political Artists Group or the Glitch Artists Collective.

In the past, artists sometimes came together and formed so-called artists' colonies, often in rural situations such as Shoreham in the 1820s, Ditchling, or St Ives. There doesn't seem to be a contemporary equivalent of this model, by which I mean a place for artists to work physically close to each other, meeting and supporting each other based on a pre-existing group dynamic and over-arching philosophy. Today the usual group-studio set-up consists of disparate artists who coagulate in order to leverage their financial clout with landlords, and to cross-promote around studio open days.

In the 1980s and 90s, artists all over the country grouped together to squat unused buildings for living and working. If these were council-owned properties, a blind eye was often turned, as artists helped keep the buildings in some sort of repair and protected them from scavengers. Artists such as Yinka Shonibare and Jeremy Deller got their start in artists' squats, but recent changes in the law has suppressed much squatting².

Unprofitable and unimproved industrial buildings were happily rented cheaply to studio organisations. Organisations such as the Association of Artists and Designers in Wales grew to several hundred members with eleven studio branches around the whole of Wales. Artists fresh from college, or who had never been to college, worked alongside established artists such as Harry Holland and Terry Setch.

These types of incubators have disappeared as the booming property market, fuelled by overseas investment from Russia or the Far East, has turned moribund buildings into development opportunities. At the same time local councils struggling with Austerity, originating in the US global banking recession, divest and sell as much of their property they can.

With Brexit, it will not be so easy for impecunious artists to decamp to cities with cheaper accommodation such as Berlin or Lisbon – in fact some artists already there may be looking to return to the UK. It is hard to see how this number of free and cheap studios can ever be replaced, even if organisations such as Coventry Art Space, Airspace in Stoke and Grand Union in Birmingham were to develop to the size of charitable studio organisations such as ACME or East Street Arts. This lack of space has had a direct effect on the actual type of work that artists are producing. Technical advances in computing allow certain types of work to be made on a laptop, and performative or collaborative works can also be organised with no need for a studio.

² Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act, 2012

There are solid figures we can look at, to help inform our discussion.

The think tank Centre for Cities reported on the movements of 2014 graduates in all subjects in the 6 months after they left college³

- 76% of students who came from elsewhere to Birmingham to study had left after 6 months. This is not bad - as a university city, Birmingham is one of the places most able to hang onto its graduates.
- Nationally, 46% of employed graduates are home grown. That is, they grew up, studied and worked in one region.
- 53% of students who left Birmingham to study, returned there to work.

The West Midlands region as a whole is one of the most successful in attracting its' home-grown students back. But the authors highlight the importance of career progression opportunities – the 'escalator' effect – on keeping or attracting graduates.

A different recent report surveyed the activities of Fine Art graduates specifically⁴. Career entry into the creative industries is not clearly structured, and many Fine Art graduates take time to establish themselves, with only about a sixth describing their job as artist after 6 months.

With artists there is a high prevalence of portfolio careers. In another survey of recent Fine Art graduates⁵

- 30% were working part time
- Teaching, art therapy and working in community arts offered other career paths. Of those that went on to further study, 21% studied for qualifications in education
- 37% were working full time
- 25% worked in the arts or media
- 28% worked in retail and hospitality

The escalator for artists is most apparent in London, but not because it is the capital of our nation. More because it is a truly global centre of finance (with a broad collecting base), a world capital of the art-trade, and a past capital of Empire containing World Museums and galleries.

How have other towns improved their ability to keep or even attract new artists?

Folkestone Triennial was set up by local millionaire Roger De Haan in 2008 with the specific aim of using contemporary art to revitalise the economy of his ailing home town for every resident. Local artists have benefitted from opportunities for exposure, and cheap commercial rent in premises he has developed. Artists, writers

³ The Great British Brain Drain", Paul Swinney and Maire Williams, 21st November 2016

⁴ What do Graduates Do?", produced by Prospects and AGCAS Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services on behalf of HESCU Higher Education Careers Services Unit

⁵ ArtWorks Evaluation Survey of Artists", Paul Hamlyn Foundation, June 2014

and curators from the rest of the UK and abroad have been attracted to live there by the affordable housing and studio space, improving the year-round economy. Margate seems also set to attract further support from influential individuals and developers with similar personal ties to the town. The idea of the Turner Contemporary gallery (the largest exhibition space in the South East outside London) originated with the Chairman of the Margate Civic Society and was funded significantly by Kent County Council and the South East England Development Agency. Artist Tracey Emin, Carl Freedman Gallery, Counter Editions and probably Jonathan Viner Galleries are moving into a single development there⁶. Are there similar seers, developers or philanthropists in the West Midlands?

By contrast Glasgow built its own sustained art-world caché, kick started by its being the European City of Culture in 1990. Curator Sarah McCrory cites attractions such as available studio space, affordability, and a pace of life that allows “more time to develop ideas”, as well as the fact that there is “still a culture of government funding.”⁷ Others point to how the visual artists cross-pollinate with other practitioners, such as via the Counterflows experimental music festival or the indie-band scene. And that commercial galleries can base themselves there despite the fact there is no collector base as such. Galleries are near the artists, and can inject money into the arts community by, for example, employing artists in different roles. Taking part in art fairs is a way they connect with collectors further afield.

Hettie Judah points to the vital importance of Glasgow’s educational establishment. “By and large, the city’s gallerists and organisers are GSA (Glasgow School of Art) graduates; the first artists they show and represent are their peers, and the subsequent renovators of their spaces and designers of their exhibition posters are contemporaries drawn from sibling departments. The GSA has produced a prodigious number of Turner prize nominees – 30 per cent this past decade have come from the school.” This leads to a tight, possibly incestuous scene. More importantly is the way Glaswegians have themselves given birth to “the sheer lustiness of the city’s art scene, its self-sufficiency and its inventive, ongoing territorialisation of derelict post-industrial spaces”.

In the 1960’s the average life span in the UK was the early seventies. Now it is the early eighties. Recently some older artists previously overlooked have become celebrated, Phyllida Barlow, Carolee Schneemann or Frank Bowling are three examples. Although I wouldn’t wish long obscurity on any artist, this does demonstrate that artists may pass through many roles and phases in their lives, including periods where they are not making any art at all. This does not preclude a return to creation later, perhaps when finances or family situations finally allow.

On the one hand a longer-lived population means a longer window of opportunity for longer-lived artists to work and attract success; on the other hand it creates an obstacle to making art. Already, 0.7 million older people with disabilities living at

⁶ ‘Tracey Emin, Carl Freedman and Jonathan Viner establish Margate ‘arts district’, Anny Shaw, 13th October 2017, www.theartsnewspaper.com

⁷ ‘How Glasgow became an art capital’, Hettie Judah, 20th March 2016. The Independent

home are cared for by an adult child⁸. Carers UK report that in 2017 one in five people aged 50 or over care for an older family member. Two thirds of these carers are female, adding to the gender discrimination in child rearing and domestic labour.

Coupled with our longer lives is the growing tendency of people after the age of 50 leaving the big smoke, often returning to the neighbourhoods of their birth. A report by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs found that in 2012, there was a net migration of 40,000 people from urban to rural areas in England.

All these demographic changes seem set to increase the number of artists in the West Midlands in coming years. To capitalise on this could benefit many other citizens as, for example, the hospitality sector in towns like Kassel has from the five-yearly exhibition documenta. That would require local and metropolitan councils to take an imaginative leap and, truthfully, a serious application of money.

Multi-occupancy, permanent, warm, secure, affordable studios are available in larger numbers in other big cities. Can the charitable organisations that run and build those be encouraged to expand into this region, or mentor and partner home grown artists' organisations? It's a case of 'build it, and they will come'.

Encouraging links between older and younger artists can promote the growth and survival of all. Creative ways of bringing artists of all ages together encourages practical support, cross-disciplinary friendships, mentoring relationships and an exchange of skills. More established artists serve as an example of how a practice can be sustained, and could impact on the retention and development of recent graduates.

Decisions that arts organisations and individual artists make, or their ability to progress, are substantially shaped by an environment outside their influence. I hope it's been useful to lay out a few elements of this environment. We don't always acknowledge this when we are disappointed by arts organisations, arts professionals, or we turn harsh criticism inwards. We should perhaps to be kinder to ourselves.

⁸ Centre for Policy on Aging Review, May 2014, Commission by Age UK