

**This article written by MA Art and Social Practice programme leader Professor Roxane Permar, was first published on the Art Works Alliance (AWA) website in 2021.**



Photo: Amy Dunnachie (2020) Brush composition

## **Now more than ever**

**AWA member Roxane Permar from the University of the Highlands and Islands explores why we need MA courses for participatory artists now more than ever and proposes an archipelagic perspective for thinking about social art practice and higher education.**

We need MA courses for participatory arts practices now more than ever. Postgraduate study for creative practitioners can strengthen the Feld of participatory arts practice, contributing to nurturing better practitioners, building networks and improving the quality of experience for everyone: participants, creative practitioners and organisations alike.

I base this view on my experience of creating and developing the Art and Social Practice MA programme at the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland, for which I became programme leader and where I am privileged to work with a fantastic team of lecturers and a diverse group of practitioners who join our course at various stages in their careers. The course took its first intake in September 2017 and has grown exponentially each year, demonstrating need and demand. While we designed the course with visual artists, curators, cultural producers and gallery and museum practitioners in mind, we are receiving increasing numbers of applications from creative practitioners in other fields.

In this piece I will consider what postgraduate courses such as ours can offer and how they can work. I'll use examples largely from our programme, but which are also common to other courses, to look at ways this level of study can work and consider factors which might lessen barriers to higher education. In conclusion, I'll propose an archipelagic perspective for thinking about social art practice and higher education. Note that I will

primarily use the terms 'social art practice' and 'socially engaged art' throughout the text, although equally the term 'participatory arts' could be used.

## **Background**

My art practice is embedded in Shetland. I started working in Fine art (sculpture and installation) in the 1980s. I lived and worked in London for over 20 years, first coming to the Shetland Islands in 1985 and relocating here permanently at the end of 2000. Having begun working in collaborative and participatory ways back in the 1980s, I've always also worked part-time in education – community, further and higher sectors. My teaching and art practices are wholly integrated.

Currently, I am based in the Centre for Island Creativity at Shetland College, University of the Highlands and Islands, where I am a Research Fellow. I am acutely aware that I am very fortunate as, after many years working as a freelance artist and part-time educator, I have reached a point in my career where I can do what I love best, teaching and working as an artist researcher, without the constant pressure of seeking, securing and sustaining opportunities for earning my livelihood.

## **Why do creative practitioners need a taught postgraduate course?**

Creative practitioners who have studied on conventional undergraduate arts courses have not usually been formally taught how to work with people as active participants and genuine collaborative partners or to develop and manage participatory projects. While there have been, and continue to be, some opportunities for undergraduate arts students to learn about working with people in social contexts, generally undergraduate training for creative practitioners focuses on artistic output, whether an object or a performance, rather than the process of making or creative engagement with participants. In conventional art schools, for example, students are traditionally taught to practice as a singular author, that is, one who works to their own criteria and does not share creative vision or ownership with others.

Unfortunately, creative practitioners, like me, who want to work with people as creative or collaborative participants have largely needed to learn 'on the job'. The ethos, knowledge and skills offered in most conventional undergraduate arts programmes don't prepare students to work with people in social contexts. While there are exceptions, the conventional curriculum is not relevant to participatory work. It does not include practical skills for working with people, such as collaborative and listening skills. The history of contextual art practice, community arts or participatory practices is usually missing, unless a student is lucky to encounter a lecturer who has experience of this kind of practice. Suitable theoretical tools such as those relating to ideas of place or community are absent, despite the importance of these themes in developing deeper understanding of the contexts in which we practice. There is rarely opportunity in conventional undergraduate programmes to learn about, or engage in, issues and debates relevant to participatory arts, nor to meet professional practitioners.

We need postgraduate programmes for graduates who want to work with people because they need appropriate skills and knowledge to enable them to respond imaginatively, and effectively, to situations and issues facing communities. Postgraduate study can help build confidence while introducing concrete ways forward to help smooth the way to forming positive and fruitful relationships. Established practitioners who are well experienced in working with people can also benefit from the opportunity to improve their ways of working

by giving themselves time to refresh, re-evaluate and recalibrate their practice as they gain deeper understanding of their skills and qualities, achievements and aspirations. During postgraduate study, practitioners engage with, and actively learn from, other professionals in the field; gain in-depth knowledge of the histories and theories of this practice; and, perhaps most importantly, reflect on their position, look at their practices more holistically and consider how best they can move forward with renewed conviction.

Creative practitioners in the participatory arts are also often, especially in my region, working in isolation from other practitioners who share similar approaches to practice, core values and aspirations. Taking part in an MA programme offers a new peer network of diverse practitioners that can open new doors, expand horizons and provide mutual support that is crucial within a new context of learning and discovery. Coming together differently brings fresh perspectives that ultimately benefit the participatory arts sector.

The coronavirus pandemic has affected all of us. It has intensified wider awareness of the social benefits artists can bring to their communities and heightened the need for artists to work in social contexts. Postgraduate study can support a shift in thinking away from conventional ideas about where art practices are located and how we work. In fact, I believe this field is better suited to postgraduate rather than undergraduate study. Working with people isn't easy: it is messy and complicated. Practitioners in participatory arts often face challenging situations. Postgraduate students have more life experience, self awareness and maturity. They bring a range of well-formed skills in their discipline which enables them to work with a level of confidence as they test forms of creative engagement with people. Many already have the added benefit of experience working in the field, or at least know that they really want to work with people, and have discovered they enjoy it, and can do it well. The increased experience, knowledge and maturity of postgraduate students frees them to focus on the issues of social practice, allowing them to dig deeper to find the direction, contexts and ways of working which suit them.

I believe the most successful MA courses in this field mirror best practice in social art practice, which is founded on non-hierarchical, open and inclusive education environments generated through teamwork and student centred learning. In our programme, we use collaborative and relational approaches to teaching that not only facilitate agency, and a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for teaching and learning, but also provide models of practice for working with people. Students learn from each other, sharing and testing practice within a safe and mutually supportive environment. Our programme is assertively student centred and has evolved in response to students' needs in order to create relevant learning experiences, striving for the qualities of responsiveness and reaction that characterise participatory work.

Some students describe our programme as 'life changing' and others call it transformational. Mutual support among students and between current students and alumni not only encourages learning but also contributes to the formation of collaborative partnerships and strong, hopefully lifelong, relationships. We encourage students to experiment and take risks, just as they are accustomed to do in their own practices. We remain flexible so that we can try new approaches, content and structures in order to evolve in response to changes in society, global and local issues, shifts in contemporary art practices and education, and, most recently, the upheavals caused by the Coronavirus pandemic. Our aspiration to create a supportive and vibrant community of practice has the potential to spread, like ripples in water, and contribute to strengthening the wider participatory arts sector.

In addition to the learning and teaching approaches that postgraduate students encounter during their studies, the nature of the curriculum is also crucial to the transformational potential a course can offer. Programme Leaders, including myself, have learnt what social art practitioners need in terms of advanced education and training through a combination of our own trial and error, research findings from research undertaken by the ArtWorks initiative and ArtWorks Scotland, student feedback, peer networks and our own experience of practice and undergraduate teaching.

Postgraduate study for social art practice requires interdisciplinarity, diversity and plurality of practice in curriculum content. Our values in relation to curriculum design and approaches to teaching and learning help make the MA Art and Social Practice successful and distinctive. In our MA programme, for example, we have embedded new subject content into the curriculum that is unusual for conventional arts education, including reflective practice, ethical engagement and decolonisation. Each module of study is positioned to hone different skillsets and bodies of knowledge and understanding. Students gain deeper understanding and skills in relation to the professional context for social art practitioners and the research skills and methods appropriate to our field. We also consider island and rural issues, bringing first hand experience of living and working in small and/or geographically remote communities to a field that has until recently been dominated by urban practice.

MA courses in social art practice draw on different theoretical tools from those found in conventional arts education. Students interrogate their practice and position in relation to the theories, concepts and critical debates that characterise dialogical, social and relational practices. Our programme is distinctive for offering core theoretical studies drawn from social anthropology through a module called Communities of Practice. Students work together to develop a collaborative assignment before looking at their own landscape of practice. This latter study is transformative for many, and ultimately is seminal in gaining new understanding of their practice.

Increasing access through virtual learning a key factor in the MA Art and Social Practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands is the importance of virtual learning for students in our region, and even more widely across the UK and internationally. It provides an important means to facilitate access to higher education, especially for those who would not be able to seek a higher degree otherwise. The university was in fact founded on the premise that new technologies would enable the populations of the sparsely populated and remote areas of the region to pursue higher education never before possible without traveling far from home communities.

Virtual tools have indeed transformed the way we work, creating a diverse community that uses virtuality to advantage, reducing barriers to education and providing opportunities for those who are geographically remote or cannot leave home, for example due to childcare responsibilities, mobility issues or chronic illness. We also recognise prior learning, which means that students who do not have a first degree may be able to join our course based on their previous experience.

As far as I am aware, our MA programme is the first in this subject designed to be delivered remotely in its entirety. Artists develop their projects within their locale and join live seminars, tutorials and virtual student spaces from anywhere in the world. Their learning experience is enriched by working with students who live in different contexts. To date, the majority of the students are based in Scotland, although we have students from North America, Europe and the rest of the UK.

Working virtually has many advantages. Alongside flexibility for students, it facilitates networking among practitioners in the Feld, regionally, nationally and internationally, including bringing them into our educational context. Students meet guest speakers from all over the world, including the Mentors they choose in the final stage of the programme. Our annual Virtual Symposium is international and also provides opportunity to meet with MA students in the Feld from other countries and contexts. All this supports the sharing and development of innovative approaches to education and creative community engagement.

Virtual learning has liberated us from traditional forms of teaching, assessment and exhibition that are practiced in conventional art departments. Without the constraints of a physical building, we don't have a degree show and students have to find alternative ways to go public, which has led to original and innovative outcomes. Students acquire a more advanced level of digital skills as well. They have been well equipped to cope with the mass move to virtual teaching, learning and living during the Covid pandemic.

### **Archipelagic perspective**

When we look at the history of participatory art practices, or socially engaged art, we can see the emergence of practices which are locally grounded and at the same time involved in a matrix of cultural relationships beyond the local. These practices generate networks of social and cultural interchange which contribute to changing social relations not only within their local communities but also in relation to other places.

An archipelagic perspective is where there is no fixed centre, but a multiplicity of place-based cultures, interrelations and overlaps that employ immersion, openness, connection, relational process and 'fluid movement across porous margins.' (Thompson, 2017). I must credit Dr Glenn Loughran from the Technological University Dublin for sparking my interest in the archipelagic as a way of looking at what I do in both my art and educational practices. When I invited him to speak to our MA students about the course he leads in visual arts on Sherkin Island off the West coast of Ireland, he told me he wanted to speak about Glissant's ideas around the archipelagic in relation to what they were doing there. Then he told me that of course we are already doing that and from that moment I have been wondering how we are being archipelagic.

Living and working on an island impacts on the way you live and work but also your attitudes and perceptions of yourself and your work in relation to the rest of the world. Making connections is important and islanders have always used the sea to link with the rest of the world. One of the qualities I like most about social art practice, or participatory practice, is the way it involves connections. Social art practice is relational. It is open and it is place-based.

I see examples of these qualities all the time in our students' work. In fact, I see our whole MA programme as being archipelagic. Our core values encourage openness, sharing and flexibility, which create fluidity across individual and collective practices. Our teaching approach is collaborative and relational, in turn contributing to openness.

Because our programme is virtual, it has no fixed centre. Students can study from anywhere in the world if their time zone permits them to attend live seminars, lectures and tutorials. Students live and work in their communities, giving our programme the character of dispersed locations. And we thus engage with a multiplicity of place-based



cultures, inter-relations and overlaps. Students come together through the programme, and thus move fluidly across their different locations, across margins or boundaries made porous by means of virtual tools.

What we do on our programme is in step with the view that other MA programmes in our field hold. We believe that creative practice should extend beyond the institution and encourage students to build on their own interests, networks and communities. This idea echoes that of the artist Jen Delos Reyas who has proposed a rather convincing series of reasons why we shouldn't attempt to teach socially engaged art in universities (Delos Reyas, 2018). She suggests students should remain in their own locations rather than uprooting to study at the physical site of the art institution. Virtual tools enable us to work with the best of all worlds.

MA courses in social art practice generate networks of social and cultural interchange at many levels, from the local engagement students generate to the national and transnational networks that emerge through the institutional frameworks they encounter in their courses. Local, national and international connections emerge which can only strengthen the participatory arts sector.

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### **Photo**

'Brush Composition', Amy Dunnachie, from the project "An Aye for an Aye" during the MA Art and Social Practice, University of the Highlands and Islands (2020)

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