



Art · Design · Media  
Subject Centre

# Networks

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**Education for Sustainability**  
Arran Stibbe explores a role  
for the Arts

**Looking into Outreach**  
Olivia Sagan investigates  
community partnerships

# Contents

## ADM-HEA News

Art Design Media Teaching Fellows 2010-11 **2**

Call for contributions **7**

Learning to live sustainably **8**

Changing times **11**

Call for projects **11**

## Sector News

National Teaching Fellowship success in ADM subjects **12**

Virtual Training Suite **15**

Creative Honours and Capstone project **16**

Collected learning **16**

## Events

Create Sustain Ability **17**

Forthcoming Creativity and Work conference **24**

Talking Shop NAHEMI conference 2010 **25**

Postgraduate networking 2010 **26**

## Features

Education for Sustainability and beyond: contemplating collapse **28**

Looking into outreach **33**

Embedding sustainability concerns in the BA (Hons) Textiles curriculum **36**

Department 21: a student-led experiment in interdisciplinary learning **37**

Working at the edges **42**

'A-Z of sustainable materials': using a hands-on workshop to engage students **46**

## Projects

Open Educational Practices: a cultural changes in art, design and media pedagogies **51**

Looking Out: effective engagements with creative and cultural industries **56**

A Sustainable Marriage at Sheffield Hallam **58**

Higher Education Academy ESD Project update **59**

Putting Education into Open Education **60**

## Reviews

Environment, Media and Communication **61**

# Department 21:

## A student-led experiment in interdisciplinary learning

**Authors:** Department 21: Callum Cooper, Bianca Elzenbaumer, Fabio Franz, Polly Hunter, Stephen Knott, Fay Nicolson, Anaïs Tondeur, Anna Sikorska, Oliver Smith and Bethany Wells.

**Institution:** Royal College of Art

**Keywords:** Interdisciplinarity, learning Space, autonomy, student engagement.

### Abstract

This article concerns the evolution of a student-led interdisciplinary experiment, 'Department 21', at the Royal College of Art. It came about from a desire to create space between conventional disciplinary departments in the institution. A studio floor was freed up which *Department 21* saw as the opportunity to activate their intentions. In effect, it meant that we had at our disposal for a period of six weeks, a large space in which we had carte blanche to organise our own art and design school.

The main body of this article is made up of extracts by a variety of authors who participated in Department 21 in 2010. The authors reflect on both the personal and institutional impacts of this radical educational model. How did the formation of a community that did not presuppose established categories of disciplinary identity sustain an inclusive and productive educational environment? This article highlights critical issues concerning both the role of interdisciplinarity and student autonomy in current art and design pedagogy.

### Introduction

Department 21 was an experimental interdisciplinary workspace established and run by students at the Royal College of Art between January and February 2010. In the temporary space made available between the relocation of one department and the arrival of another, Department 21 appropriated institutional territory to explore alternative models of education and to create a new kind of conceptual and social space.

We wanted to create a challenging, inclusive, radical and productive environment which might steer the Royal College of Art towards new models of education. By challenging traditional departmental inhibitions, the aim of Department 21 was to sustain a community that did not presuppose established categories of identity. The conviviality that was cultivated in this cross-disciplinary environment created the context for hybrid identities to develop, rooted in mutual support. Educational content evolved out of the interests of the participants, allowing us to reflect on, develop and challenge actual social, and ultimately professional, relations.

Department 21 adopted a radical strategy towards a broader definition of education, of practice, and of disciplinarity. As an autonomous space, it encouraged a greater critical awareness of the students' role within the institution. It was not intended as an exercise in deconstruction, but instead, one of transformation. Department 21 empowered students to initiate and sustain a dialogue with the College regarding traditions of pedagogy perpetuated through existing departmental structures. »

Whilst continuing to develop independent projects, students in Department 21 were able to share thoughts in cross-disciplinary crits, bring in tutors for open tutorials, participate in workshops, invite outside lecturers, join informal events and explore how their practice might evolve in an open and discursive environment. Driven by ideals, the productivity inherent to Department 21 was grounded in the concrete processes of peer-learning, generated through both structured content and serendipity.

The following reflections consider both the personal and institutional impacts of this radical educational model. Driven by concepts central to the processes explored through Department 21, the various authors contemplate how the formation of a community that did not presuppose established categories of disciplinary identity sustained an inclusive and productive educational environment.

**AMATEURISM** by Stephen Knott, PhD student, History of Design / Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork and Jewellery

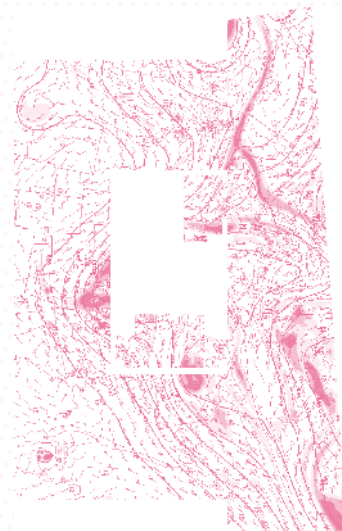
‘Department 21 is definitely amateur... but it is getting more professional... [Amateurism is] definitely [about] going into the unknown.’

Was Department 21 an experiment in amateurism – a subject at the heart of my research – and what was meant when, in week three of the project, it was suggested that Department 21 ‘is getting more professional?’

Clearly Department 21 was not populated by untrained, unskilled individuals, or those in their first stage of learning. The RCA only admits individuals with BAs, students that can be groomed to be *Masters* of Art.

Rather, amateurism in the instance of Department 21 meant being freed from conventional expectations and disciplinary functionality. Being allowed almost a disregard for one’s own corpus of work and background. And this isn’t simple. The use of the word ‘unknown’ suggests that you have to get away from anything that you know – your research, your skill, your tools, your strategies.

Perhaps this unknown-ness, this wildness or freedom was gradually being overlaid by professional requirements – maintenance of the website, negotiations with the College, supervisors and peers –



‘Incidentalities’ by Fabio Franz, MA graduate, Communication Art and Design.

demanding that Department 21 produce something or claim some kind of territory.

The course requirements of each College department and each individual’s response to these meant that despite there being space to play in Department 21, there was not the time.

Thus, the amateurism on display in Department 21 was of a different strand. It was that supplemental activity, a space to get away and reflect on the main vocation, like dipping into a well-heated swimming pool and doing a few lengths, only to towel off and continue with one’s labours afterwards.

**EDUCATION** by Fay Nicolson, MA student, Printmaking

Obedience is achieved through a mechanistic pedagogy in which learning and assessment are based on repetition, and replication. (Skinner, 1953)

The examination is the means for regulating that process. In many ways it is a process that mirrors the factory production-line and the etiquette of bureaucratic control.’ (Addison and Burgess, 2005)

Compulsory, state school education: most of us have been through it, and if not subjected to a state education then at least a course of study concluding with the undertaking of tests within a nationally respected framework of examination and assessment. Amongst educationalists there has been criticism of this result-driven, outcome-led process for a long time. Within school (the area that Addison and Burgess train people to enter as art(ist) teachers) there are obvious conflicts, fallacies and omissions in the space between the system of education and the field of art. Their job is to make us aware of both the doxa and the paradox within this terrain, and perhaps we (artists, students, teachers) can develop strategies to negotiate it; reflectively, creatively, positively.

As professional artists, designers, curators and researchers, we are also aware of an irreconcilable nexus between compulsory education and higher education, with the post-18 Art Foundation course being seen as ‘the domain in which legitimate cultural production commences’ (Robbins, 2003).





Royal College of Art

Deskilling



Images: Callum Cooper, MA Animation

In this case, an MA at the Royal College of Art must be as far away from a GCSE in Art and Design as we could imagine. Or is it? The gap between compulsory and further study seems to be closing.

As a participant in Department 21, as an artist, a student and an educator, I seem to be embroiled in education when this concept itself is going through a crisis; a period of self reflection, re-evaluation, of slippage, metamorphosis, instrumentalization, a shift on both micro and macro scales. Free schools, artist-run projects and alternative models spring up in gallery spaces, whilst research programmes, exhibitions, symposiums and conferences debate this 'educational turn' and ruminate on the future of both art and education. All this takes place within wider contexts; the economic recession and cuts in public spending place further pressure on institutions whilst the Bologna Process is a call towards the homogenization and modulation of study at international level to create a European Higher Education Area.

Standardisation. Homogenisation. Accountability. Economy. We are back at Skinner's 1953 observations on an education based on repetition. Back on the production line.

**IN-BETWEEN** by Anaïs Tondeur, MA graduate, Mixed Media Textiles

The notion of the in-between can refer to a position of discomfort. The in-between relates to an intermediary position, a space between things, between times, between places. The object or the person stands in the centre but also in the middle of two entities. Practices at the boundaries of different disciplines imply the experience of this median territory and its sense of discomfort.

One of the driving forces behind Department 21 was a sense of this tension of not totally belonging to a discipline, of facing the difficulty of defining our exact position.

We recognised a need to create an environment in which our interdisciplinary approach could find its own contexts and spaces and trace the missing parameters of our practice. We had to:

lodge ourselves on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantage point on it, find potential movements and possible lines of flight. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988)

An interstice was found in the concentrated space of the Royal College of Art, where we were to 'plier la ligne' (bend the line). This French expression defines the artistic gesture as one which invents a place. Department 21 provided us with a place in which to locate ourselves. It became a fold; a torsion which allowed its existence but also made it capable of facing the outside, witnessing its confrontation.

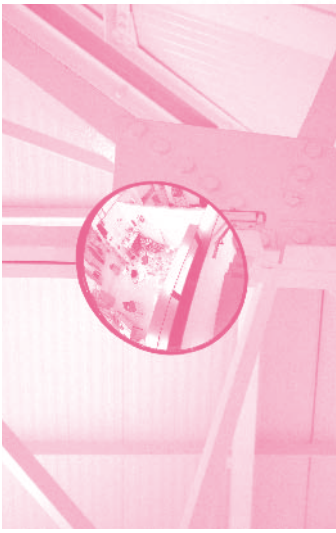
It became a ground for our practices to return to their initial root from which to produce a point to move out from and against. But before being an inter-disciplinary platform, Department 21 was an inter-human communication space. It was an 'arena of exchange'. We evolved alongside and with one another, as well as through the prism of our differences. We broadened our understanding of each other's approaches; we confronted and bridged the parameters of our practices. If Department 21 originated from a sense of in-between, it became a point of interaction between us and a connection between our practices. In other words, Department 21 became an interface.

**INTERDISCIPLINARITY** by Bianca Elzenbaumer, MA graduate, Communication Art and Design / Polly Hunter, MA graduate, History of Design

How to be *inter-disciplinary*? How to *inter-cept*; to find space in amongst; to make space in between? To bring together; to create an *inter-rest*? In practice, this definition does not seem to describe the breadth of activity and depth of community that became Department 21. It has been suggested that this instead might have been *multidisciplinary*: a common space within which many disciplines were working side-by-side. But this neglects the interactions, the constant communication, the animation of our shared space.

So, perhaps *cross-disciplinary*? To extend and move between; to meet and pass; to intersect. But this implies that the disciplinary boundaries were, and remained, understood; fixed despite transgressions. *Trans-disciplinary*? To go completely beyond one discipline into the realms of another? *Outer-disciplinary*? To be situated outside a discipline? These terms are reactionary; they rely on a constant tension with a previous structure. Department 21, whilst critical, demanded to be defined in more independent emancipated terms.

Perhaps designer Roberto Feo's definition of *post-disciplinary* practice, which refuses to be categorised by the academy or by the market, is »



'Other' by Anna Sikorska, MA Student, Sculpture.

most appropriate? Or perhaps Department 21 necessarily operated *between* definitions, benefiting from the values of multiple meanings and manoeuvring between definitions to make space for new understandings and new practice.

#### **LETTING GO** by Bethany Wells, MA student, Architecture

I'm really really interested in the concept (because it is a concept) of limitlessness  
of being able to claim a freedom to be whatever you wish to be, or ever feel you are.  
I just like opening the windows.  
(Tilda Swinton)

We let go  
Picked up a freedom,  
At liberty  
To come and go  
alone, as one, together, in pairs, separate, in groups, dispersed, all-together, altogether as we needed to be.  
Distilling  
Dissolving  
Re-forming  
Trust the process  
Trust the intelligence of the space  
I felt  
I left  
We left it open

#### **TEMPORARY** by Polly Hunter, MA graduate, History of Design

[...] caught in a fragment of time cut off from both the past and the future; he is wrenched from the continuity of time; he is outside time; in other words, he is in a state of ecstasy; in that state he is unaware of his age, his wife, his children, his worries, and so he has no fear, because the source of his fear is in the future, and a person freed of the future has nothing to fear.  
(Kundera, 1997)

Department 21 arose from an unexpected opportunity to respond to immediate social concerns. The space freed by the departure of one department and the anticipation of another was adopted by

students as a temporary enclave within the institution. A camp for the departmentally displaced, the marginal. The speed of its construction meant that, temporarily, Department 21 acted as the gauge of a particular institutional situation.

The paradox of Department 21 was that it existed between the temporary and the permanent. As an experiment of indeterminate duration, it was in the unique position to interrogate the permanence of its institutional surroundings. Simultaneously, it was absolutely dependent on the principle that students required more than a temporary, isolated event by which to establish and benefit from multi-disciplinary practice. Whilst it only temporarily provided a physical space for explorations beyond the limits of the formalised permanence of existing departments, it set in motion a longer-lasting process of collectivity, student-driven education and inter-departmental practice.

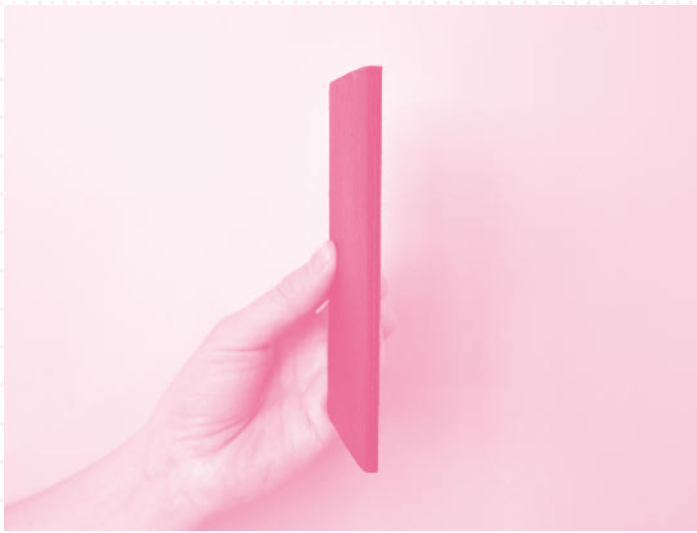
Imagine for a moment that the two vehicles about to pass each other here and now were sped up considerably; the encounter, the exchange of greetings, would simply not take place unless there was sufficient time for perception, the relative invisibility of the two motorists present having nothing to do with some ghostly absence of their bodies, but solely with the lack of duration required for their mutual apprehension. (Virilio, 2001)

#### **UTOPIA** by Bianca Elzenbaumer, MA graduate, Communication Art and Design

All utopias are depressing because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for the 'miscellaneous'. Everything has to be set in order and order reigns. Behind every utopia there is always some great taxonomic design: a place for each thing and each thing in its place. (Perec, 1997)

When setting out to plan Department 21, we only had a fairly vague idea of how it might be structured. We were happy with this approximation – we felt that the project would find its shape as the experiment evolved.

However, to get the project moving through the institutional mill, there was a pressure to plan in detail – to predict the possible outcomes of the experiment. So we set up a series of parameters, whilst leaving gaps to be filled by chance. »



Walls



Images: Fabio Franz, MA graduate, Communication and Art and Design

It was in this loose structure that the role of incidentality was played out in the project. In hindsight, some of the plans we had made proved unworkable, and it was exactly the unplanned, the incidental, which gave the project its real shape.

**WALLS** by Oliver Smith, MA student, Printmaking

‘What was the most important thing that you learned at art school?’

‘How to build a wall.’

A silly question. A silly answer. Yet not an uncommon conversation following my Fine Art degree. And there was sincerity to my answer too. For aside from the intangibles, which I would withhold from the casual inquirer, here was a concrete skill which I had learnt from three years of exhibition making.

But as time passed I realised that, in fact, the inverse was true – it was the taking down of walls and the conversations that this presented which had been the most valuable moments of my art school education. In a changing school where students were invited to play a major part in its progression, these were the moments of empowerment and enablement.

This was a lesson hardwired into Department 21 and by the time I arrived – sometime after its genesis – the warren-like separations of the previous studios had been torn down. The studio walls now lay horizontal; wide, open-plan and, dotted around the space, hot-and-cold-desks and a miscellany of seats which had been constructed from the other remains. Like so many stories about walls, these gestures were more than symbolic. Resourcefulness and horizontal thinking remained key components of Department 21.

#### Contact Info:

E: department21@gmail.com

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Art Design Media Subject Centre  
The Higher Education Academy

University of Brighton  
68 Grand Parade  
Brighton BN2 9JY  
Telephone +44 (0)1273 643119  
Fax +44 (0)1273 643429  
adm@heacademy.ac.uk  
www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk

