Shing Tat Chung
'The Superstitious Fund' Project
2012
Installation

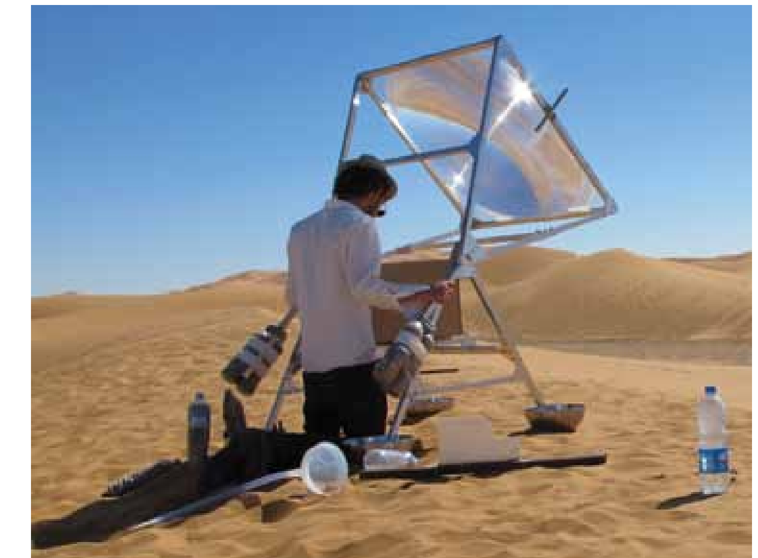
Jasleen Kaur
Lord Robert Napier
2011
Photograph

Previous Page
Top: Markus Kayser
Solar Sinter
2011
Mixed media
Bottom: Tobias Revell
88.7: Stories from the First Transnational Traders
2012
Mixed media

ENOUGH OF THE PAST – WHERE ARE WE GOING?

James Wignall
Fallen Icon
2010
Architectural drawing

Markus Kayser
Solar Sinter
2011
Mixed media



The RCA's 175th anniversary reminds us that 'art schools'– shorthand for the different forms that higher education in art and design has taken over the past two centuries – have been with us for a while. We know from the other essays in this volume – and likely from personal experience – that the form, content and social value ascribed to 'art school' can vary drastically from period to period, and place to place. In its lifespan alone, the RCA has taught everything from textile design to holography, and from illustration to architecture. Once, it asked students to spend their days drawing from plaster models; now, inspiration and idea development may derive from anything and anyone, from global finance and older residents of Kensington and Chelsea to climate science, bioethics and Britain's postcolonial history. Many graduates pursue careers as artists, designers, architects, curators and critics, but others take less conventional routes, advising government, science and NGOs, launching start-ups and achieving pop music stardom. Tutors, too, are expanding definitions of art and design's contribution to the world through critical research practices that change the way we see the world, as well as determining how it looks.

While art schools' questions, methods and orientation in the world may have broadened since 1837, some things are constant. Looking globally, these include continued questions about art schools' ideal relationship to industry and national prosperity, and conflicting concerns – often held at the same time – that art school is either too luxuriously removed from the grind of ordinary life and work, or too orientated towards industry for the creative anarchy necessary for art to flourish. We are still not entirely comfortable with art schools' position in higher education, and we would be much happier if we could establish some kind of incontrovertible and universal way to evaluate art and design 'outputs' in a rubric comparable to those of humanities, social and natural sciences. Are art schools for professional training or for liberal arts-style intellectual development? Should they point students towards engaging with pressing social and economic issues, or provide them with a space away from life's pressures to dream, imagine and explore? Is design education really the same as art education? Should we teach skills or conceptual development? And who should fund higher education, generally? Such questions seem entirely contemporary, but as

the essays in this book demonstrate, often vividly, they have shaped higher education in art and design since its inception. This should not surprise us: it's the rare creation that doesn't bear the stamp of its place and time, be that cultural, social, political or economic – what generations of art school students know as 'context'.

Rather than looking into the past to understand how art schools' context has shaped its development, this essay will peer forwards, in an attempt to see how our context may change, and how art school might adapt to it. Hopefully, little of what follows will surprise; the argument, in fact, is that experience has already allowed us to know what we do and how we do it best, and that much of adapting to the future may rest on recognising these traits and abilities.

Many of the historical changes that will affect art schools in future are clear; what is less obvious is how we will respond to them, or the form they will take. Technological change is a good example. We can predict some of the impact that digitisation will have on art and design education: the shrinking cost of technologies such as additive manufacturing will broaden students' options for how to make things, offering a range of choices including hand tools, traditional workshop machinery and the old–new technology of CNC milling, as well as 3D printers and whatever comes next. (Nanoscale biological fabrication? The cost of gene sequencing and other scientific technologies is coming down, too.) As it becomes easier to make through software, we will need to understand not only how to use the interface but what is happening underneath the hood, before what sociologists call 'the black box effect' takes hold. We might learn something from the digitisation of graphics, printing and cinema in the 1980s and '90s, and we should stress the importance of learning code. Unlike classical engineering education, in which students fabricated their own tools to familiarise themselves with machines, art and design students may not programme their own software, but they should learn how their new tools behave.

But digitisation will also bring effects that we cannot predict in nature or magnitude, as students who are digitally literate in ways we cannot yet know – a generation exposed to iPads, online environments and smartphones from infancy – enrol in art school. Daniel Charny, curator and director of From Now On and former senior tutor in Design Products, argues that their technological familiarity will be unrecognisable to those of us who grew up in a more analogue world, and that we will need to explain to them just how important physical objects were to us.[1] We cannot foresee the nature and extent to which students' relationships with screens, script and things will change, but we can prepare ourselves by engaging with emerging technologies – by getting our hands dirty in a new way. We can recalibrate our media literacy to respond to this increasingly dense field of information by developing critical tools for assessing new technologies and information's validity and applications, and continue to help students become critical but not cynical. We must also recognise the relevance and import of the knowledge we have gained through our own continuing experiences with existing and old–new technologies, and think analogously through it.

The impact of continued globalisation too is inevitable if unpredictable – and already well visible in the final paragraphs of Fiona MacCarthy's essay in this volume. We tend to see globalisation in art and design higher education as driven by a set of contemporary conditions and concerns including art schools' international reputations, foreign corporations' and governments' willingness to fund overseas study for exceptional young talent and the invidious pressure to patch holes in income left by dwindling state support through high foreign student fees. But movement in transnational networks is hardly a novel condition. Artists from the Americas and Asia studied in the painting ateliers of nineteenth-century Paris, and artists, designers and architects from Korea, Taiwan and China travelled to Japan in the early twentieth century to study there. More recently, a generation of creative minds now shaping art and design education in the UK gained experience working in Japan in the late 1980s and early '90s. Art schools can learn from these experiences as we chart our globalisation strategies. Looking ahead, our playing field will change as the new art and design universities springing up in China mature, providing competition as well as opportunities for staff and student exchange – and hopefully, some provocative challenges to our accepted ideas about how and why we teach. We might also expect numbers of African students and collaborative projects with African schools to rise, again cross-fertilising school cultures and enriching student experience. Programmes such as Global Innovation Design, a new collaborative Master's programme in development between the RCA and institutions in London, Tokyo and New York, will enable students to experience the logic of global practice while still in school, and offer a satisfyingly unanswerable challenge: what happens when an art school's 'local community' is literally transnational?[2]

Globalisation also means changing communities within the UK (and many other countries), adding new art and design traditions to the mix as well as other cultural attitudes towards art and design education. As with new technologies, we will be best served by welcoming plurality, but there is a challenge here, too: how might we enable students from under-represented groups in art and design to choose art school as a next step? Inspire, a joint initiative of the RCA with Arts Council England to increase the numbers of black and minority ethnic curators, is one example of how this might be done, but such initiatives require a commitment to long-term and external funding, and raise complex questions about integration versus special-track education. Internal globalisation affects content as well. Without reinventing the 'culture wars' of 1980s to '90s North America, we need a better understanding of 'the ordinary' – and to recognise that 'the ordinary' can take multiple forms at one time and place, without threatening existing traditions. One way in which this happens already, in an almost organic form: RCA tutors often say that our students learn the most in the first term, when they are confronted with the attitudes, values and abilities of peers from six continents at the same time as they are dropped into London's particular culture.

How will the pull of global networks mesh with expectations for art and design schools to participate in their local communities and contribute to local and national economic wellbeing? In Britain, given the still-important role of state funding in supporting art and design education at all levels, this is a crucial question. So is the tension between governments' desire to restrict immigration, concerns about equipping young Britons with skills for meaningful work and the important role played by young, creative and skilled migrants – including many RCA graduates – in generating new industries and arts cultures (as well as revenue) in their adopted home. And how will the pull of the global interact with the decades-old trends in education towards standardisation and compliance culture? National quality assurance guidelines lead, at best, to accountability, high standards and greater opportunity for student satisfaction, at worst to homogenisation, low morale and an inability to take risks. A careful balance is required, so that we do not damage art schools' growth and international reputation by accident, and lose the ability to meet students' expectations for art school as a place of experimentation, particularly in Britain.

For simple reasons of supply, art and design education at all levels – like all areas of creative practice and inquiry, including the sciences – is unlikely to enjoy ample state support again for a while. Here, British art schools can look to other nations where semi-privatisation occurred one or two decades earlier to see what we might do, and what may happen to us. If we are creative and fortunate, we cultivate partnerships with other levels of government or new funding streams such as corporate patronage and alumni support, as do many American universities. A less sanguine scenario might see us competing for limited and dwindling state funding – a scenario in which it's all too easy to imagine either a mass sink towards mediocrity or a 'survival of the fittest' pruning of institutions, in which provincial art schools and programmes that serve first-time university-goers may suffer most – and talented students will be discouraged from pursuing a postgraduate arts education due to the phenomenal cost. Here, the importance of maintaining British art schools' strong reputations becomes even more clear: we cannot see how we will be funded, but we must continue to stress quality as well as value for money.[3] We need to continue publicising what we do and to continually experiment with the best language for doing so, both to attract new students and to remind government and society why our continued existence – and support for art and design generally – is important. To some extent, this may even be welcome: it's helpful to be asked why we do what we do for our own sakes, as well as important for accountability. But we also need to tell our interlocutors when the questions they're asking aren't the right ones, or are limited, rather than acquiescing to a system that our experience tells us is inaccurate or flawed. As Helen Kearney, 2012 RCA research student, points out:

> *The current argument that 'design is equivalent to a STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] subject' as a way of validating its continued funding and public support is dangerous. There's a danger in campaigning too much. We have rigour and standards but we're creative. That's what makes us interesting. We're at the edges. Taking the concept and pushing it further and further, in all sorts of directions, is what art can do.*[4]

Questions around sustainability will not disappear, either. Art schools' campaigns to focus students' attention on the environmental, social and economic sustainability of projects combined with students' own awareness – now fostered since primary school, in many cases – are already effecting behavioural change, to the extent that some students argue sustainability should no longer be an assessment criteria: they'll consider it regardless, as a matter of course. Currently, students' enthusiasm for sustainable practice cannot always be mirrored in industry, where concrete considerations like existing production lines, unverifiable supply chains and low margins, as well as old attitudes, continue to impede sustainable business practices. The latter will be less of an issue in 20 years, when today's students are decision-makers. But social and economic concerns will not disappear, and environmental pressures only increase as oil reserves are exhausted, global warming intensifies and the toll of decades of enthusiastic industrial production on people, cities and countryside in industrialising nations becomes apparent. Art schools need to continue emphasising sustainability now, both as a form of competitive research into good practice and so that we are able to best meet these challenges in future.

This is particularly true in fine art disciplines, where relative distance from industry – manufacturing as well as advertising – has allowed sustainability to take a back seat to other considerations, most obviously the art market's ravenous appetite. There is a wicked illogic here, however, as the impact of market demand on students' approaches to their practice raises concerns about the sustainability of the system itself. Ute Meta Bauer, dean of Fine Art, has commented: 'Before the incursion of the market, art schools could still more easily be testing grounds for experimentation and innovation, including failure. But are they still places where you can discuss the meaning of artistic production within the larger field of culture, or, perhaps more precisely, debate what *is* culture today in such a globally expanded field of experience and how art schools have adapted to this fact?'[5] Today, design students too find their work commodified as 'the latest thing' hours after first presentation, thanks to design blogs and Twitter feeds. While useful in raising public awareness of strong work and the potential public contributions of critical design (also in attracting support for its young practitioners, one hopes), the immediate mediatisation of graduates' work evokes somewhat unnerving parallels with past bubble economies in tulips and flats. Art schools need to continue to assert the importance of rigorous, sustained peer and tutor critique within the institution for students' self-awareness of the work, and to strengthen support structures for 'life after art school' such as FuelRCA.

It is safe to say that these trends – digitisation, globalisation, standardisation, pressure to contribute to the national economy, declining state support, environmental and professional sustainability issues – will continue for the foreseeable future. As outlined above, some of our responses are clear, but the future itself – how people will react to these trends more broadly, and what other contingencies may arise – isn't actually that foreseeable. What art schools can do, though, is to remind ourselves of our best qualities, strengths and character – not what we are, necessarily, but what we can be – so that we might put these elements of 'best practice' towards future challenges as they arise. The rest of this essay, then, outlines a set of characteristics that art schools can have.

At its best, art school is an assemblage of laboratories, experimental spaces in which tutors and technicians model professional practice and students gain skills, self-awareness and confidence *as everyone does their work*. Labs are where artists and designers (and scientists) propose, hypothesise, create, test, examine, interrogate, reformulate, fail and succeed, in a never-ending process that's often as frustrating as it is joyous, yet compels beyond reason. Participants at all levels are expected to identify techniques appropriate to their projects, to engage in the conversation and critique and to challenge and develop their practice through it. Professor Anthony Dunne of Design Interactions argues, 'In an ideal world, at MA level there shouldn't really be disciplines but studios with different agendas and ideologies exploring different roles and possibilities for art and design in society. Each should be a sort of atelier where students and staff work together – experimenting, reflecting, learning, disseminating.'[6] Ideally, we talk across disciplines: challenging each others' assumptions and ways of working, so that we emerge with a stronger sense of why we work as we do, while also drawing new ideas and methods from the photographers, fashion designers or historians down the hall. This may happen *within* programmes – Innovation Design Engineering at the RCA and the MA in Transdisciplinary Design at Parsons the New School for Design are two examples of programmes where designers, artists, engineers and the odd economist work collaboratively on briefs that intentionally need multiple skills and perspectives. But it blossoms most compellingly, perhaps, when encouraged but also left up to chance, for example by providing communal (and therefore irrational and inefficient, but that's partly the point) spaces for improvisation and unexpected encounters. Professor Jo Stockham of Printmaking sketches an intoxicating image of what this might be:

> *Here's to sociability and play as work, craft and meaning bought into relationship… My art school ideal would have a garden at its centre (or on its roof!) and a shared canteen where people are learning to cook. Cloisters with seating alcoves where people could walk and talk even in the rain, at least one large simple empty space with clear walls which opened on to the garden where people could stage events, have parties, invite in dancers, show films, host workshops and encourage improvisation.*[7]

While easier to implement at postgraduate level than at undergraduate, the laboratory system requires a certain autonomy granted to its researchers, and autonomy requires trust, confidence and self-criticality. Such a culture understands that failure is important, and granting some autonomy to students is partly about allowing them to fail.[8] It runs on the assumption of good faith: that in an art school, tutors and students alike are there because they can't bear to be anywhere else, and consequently bring their best to endeavours. Here we might look back to former RCA rector Robin Darwin, who said:

Jane Bowler
Blue Raincoat
2010
Recycled plastic

Screenshot of *Unmaking Things: A Design History Studio* Website

> *We are fortunate here as compared with universities to which some students may go for expedient reasons; for the awards that is to say which are offered, rather than for interest in the subjects studied. Students come to us because they are truly besotted in their work and for the most part ask only for the freedom and protection necessary to its pursuit. They are, I believe, essentially concerned with ideals beyond themselves and thus, without knowing it, serve the traditions of Learning that have been hallowed for all time. It strikes me sometimes as faintly comical, though I am intensely proud of the fact, that in these material days, we here should be privileged to help in keeping this ancient fire aflame.*[9]

Darwin’s characterisation of art school students as both besotted and oddly selfless, concerned with things beyond and outside themselves, is almost maddeningly accurate; indeed, his only slip was in not including tutors, too, in his formulation. Noam Toran, senior tutor in Design Interactions, describes the best project briefs as those that challenge the tutor as well as the students, for which there’s no obvious answer, and the question and challenges are open-ended and likely unsolvable.[10] The questions can be self-reflexive: how might we improve our practice? What else is out there – in other disciplines, as well as our own – that we might use to do so? How can we set the bar higher for our discipline, too? Asking such questions individually in the communal setting allows tutors to learn from students, too. Reflecting on their experience running a student-led space, Department 21, in the RCA’s 2009/10 academic year, Brave New Alps (RCA graduates Fabio Franz and Bianca Elzenbaumer) commented, ‘We had the feeling that those tutors who came along had a sense of being peers of the students, simply trying to walk a line of creative practice that also students were exploring. It felt like walking a piece of the way together, having interesting discussions and learning from each other.’[11]

Art schools can be connected, even embedded in their communities and in industry, allowing tutors and students to ask ‘real-life’ questions, experience ‘real-life’ work and potentially realise the solutions. (Some questioning is provoked rather than requested: we might look back to Womanhouse, the house-sized installation created by the Feminist Art Program begun at California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles in the early 1970s to tackle gender issues in the art and local community, as a powerful example here.) Students also gain professional networks, technical, critical thinking, communication and planning skills and the confidence to engage industry and peers. They are places where emerging practitioners can fit themselves into genealogies of practice, write themselves into the larger narrative of their profession. But the relationship can be more complex. Rector Paul Thompson argues, ‘Is our role to produce students who are industry-ready, or to produce thinkers and game changers? The latter… Our role is to be imaginative, to ask ‘what if?’ – to be provocateurs, and give inspiration.’[12] Sam Livingstone, senior tutor in Vehicle Design, feels similarly:

> *We’re not in the business of training students for industry, but in preparing them to create the future. The question for us is ‘how to make sure that the future isn’t the past in exaggerated form’, i.e. we don’t just want to transmit how we’ve done things to the next generation, and to have them plug into the existing mould. We want to enable them to make their own structures and practices. We’re not a finishing school for car designers. We want to support people who might lead and go beyond where we are now. We’re not trying to usurp the mould, the existing idiom, [rather] we’re simply not considering it. Art school can encourage students to go further, so that when they leave, they’re not slotting into what exists already, but actively shaping its next steps.*[13]

Providing students with skills for research and critical analysis and a strong sense of intellectual rigour is part of this, as is enabling speculation. The art school’s role as an experimental space outside of industry can allow for following an idea to its conclusions, no matter how extreme, impractical or defiant of natural law, social convention or accepted knowledge they may be. As 2012 History of Design graduate Marilyn Zapf suggests, ‘Projects may not be ethical, but perhaps that’s not a problem. Following ideas to completion, then addressing the problem is a way that art schools can work.’[14] Vehicle designers, for example, can pursue the idea of designing mobility rather than designing cars, and graphic designers the possibilities of designing democratic practice.

Installation View of *Impact!* Exhibition with Zoe Papadopoulou’s *Nuclear Dialogues* in the Foreground

Here, art schools share their critical power with the humanities and their rigour with both arts and sciences, but adding a visual, tactile and aural language that communicates differently, sometimes more immediately.[15]

According to Gareth Williams, senior tutor in Design Products, it is the combination of freedom and constraint that gives art schools their power.

> *There is always a tension between colleges being places for entirely free and autonomous exploration and expression of creative ideas, and places where students can interact with the 'real world'… from which they can learn. This interaction can sometimes seem intrusive but needs to be present to best prepare students for the future. Art and design universities should be places which celebrate and cherish individualism and autonomy, where people can ask the 'what if?' questions and be taken seriously, but where they can meet contrary and sometimes contradictory points of view and evidence too.*[16]

One possible – and again useful – constraint is the gamut of expectations for what art school students will contribute to society: from individualistic self-expression that provokes reflection in others to projects that directly aim to benefit others. For students, this means the expectation that they will, as Williams phrases it, 'employ their skills as transformative agents in social contexts. We… want to make designers who can think imaginatively and coherently about a range of social, economic and technological challenges.'[17] Tutors and students both can channel art schools' particular combination of creativity, criticality and embrace of the unexpected towards public issues at local and national levels. Art school as experimental lab space fulfils a second social role, too, generating potentially useful ideas for society at large but also functioning as a kind of beacon of uncontrollable creativity, blinking out into the world to unsettle, comfort and excite. This is as true for often unsung local art schools as it is for massively mediatised metropolitan schools like the RCA, Central Saint Martins and Goldsmiths and the *zeitgeist*- and imagination-capturing schools of past eras; we might include 'support local art schools' in the 'to-do' list above, too.[18]

These are only some of the things that art schools can do; the list continues far longer than these pages allow, as do examples of good practice. But volume and familiarity are the point: art schools possess many of these attributes as a matter of course. At its best, the RCA certainly does. It is exhilarating, exhausting in the intensity of its stimulus, heady, nourishing, challenging, confounding, confidence-inspiring, joyous and energising. It makes us want to contribute – to the school, to our colleagues and students, to our communities – because we receive so much from our time and effort in it. The 'art school of the future' isn't just about defining what we should be and do, but also about recognising and acknowledging what we already are and do, and finding strategies for ensuring that these qualities persist and deepen, in the near and further future. We don't speak much of 'besottedness' these days, but perhaps we should.

'Exploring the Gap between Promise and Performance in Technical Drawings' Workshop
Department 21's Outdoor Platform during *Show RCA 2011*

[1] Charny, D. (2012) comments made as part of 'Design and… Education', Victoria and Albert Museum, 17 July

[2] On the transnational state of design education, see Traganou, J. (2011) 'From Nation-bound Histories to Global Narratives of Architecture', in: Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley (eds) *Global Design History*, London: Routledge, 166–73; and Jilly Traganou and Miodrag Mitrasinovic (eds) (2009) *Travel Space Architecture*, London: Ashgate

[3] The concept of 'quality for money' in higher education is inspired by Michael Wood (2011) 'Must we pay for Sanskrit?', *The London Review of Books*, 15 December, 10

[4] Interview with Helen Kearney, 28 June 2012

[5] Bauer, Ute Meta (2009) 'Under Pressure', in: Steven Henry Madoff (ed.) *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, Cambridge MA/London: MIT Press, 219–30

[6] Anthony Dunne, email correspondence received 17 July 2012

[7] Jo Stockham, email correspondence received 23 July 2012

[8] The RCA's Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2011–15, states: 'We expect [students] to take risks. The freedom to make mistakes is an important part of the learning process.'

[9] Darwin, R. (1968) Royal College of Art Inaugural Meeting of the Court, 7 February

[10] Interview with Noam Toran, 16 July 2012

[11] Brave New Alps (Fabio Franz and Bianca Elzenbaumer), email correspondence received 18 July 2012. See also the Robbins Report (1963): 'It is the essence of higher education that it introduces students to a world of intellectual responsibility and intellectual discovery in which they are to play their part… The element of partnership between teacher and taught in a common pursuit of knowledge and understanding, present to some extent in all education, should become the dominant element as the pupil matures and as the intellectual level of work done rises… (*The Robbins Report: Higher Education*, report of the Committee appointed by the prime minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins Cmnd. 2154, London: HMSO, 181)

[12] Interview with Paul Thompson, 14 June 2012

[13] Interview with Sam Livingstone, 6 July 2012

[14] Interview with Marilyn Zapf, 28 June 2012

[15] For one argument in support for the arts and humanities more generally as vehicles for open-ended thought, and for the social import of such research, see Thomas, K. (2011) 'Universities under attack', *The London Review of Books*, 15 December, 9–10. See also Terry Eagleton (2010) 'The death of universities', *The Guardian*, 17 December

[16] Gareth Williams, email correspondence received 19 July 2012. See also Ken Lum's comment, 'Students need to challenge dominant ideologies by coming into dialogue with them. This is one of art school's primary roles. But such a role can be achieved only if the instructor's knowledge about the art world is convincing to students. This is one of the reasons that I think it's important to teach, even if I continue to have doubts about the art world at large. What students need to be taught is that art is about making everything in the world relevant.' (Ken Lum, 'Dear Steven', in: S. H. Madoff (ed.) op. cit., 329–39)

[17] Gareth Williams, ibid.

[18] For more on this argument, see J. Beck and M. Cornford (2012) 'The Art School in Ruins', *Journal of Visual Culture* 11:1, 58–83