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**Finnish Academy of Fine Arts
Opening of the 160th academic year
23 September 2008**

ECU

Embracing, challenging and understanding new imperatives in Fine Art education: a perspective on the developing role of graduate studies in Fine Art and its influence and relevance to contemporary art in an increasingly global market.

It is somewhat ironic that during a week that has seen major international financial institutions declare themselves insolvent and endless news reports of a rapidly developing global financial crisis that the international art market is still flourishing and breaking record prices. Damien Hurst's auction of his latest body of work at Sotheby's in London generates sales of £110 million and newspaper articles describe art as a more prudent investment than property or stocks and shares in a time of uncertainty.

Development in the established and emerging art markets across the world is having a profound impact on art education. On one hand this is a positive development at a time when students are increasingly called upon to invest heavily in their future through the cost of their education and the desire to see some opportunity to recoup some of this cost through potential sales of work. However the down side is that the speed of accelerating prices is an alarming mirror of the overheated property market. It has been said that the art market crashes approximately 2 years after a general economic crisis occurs. The market for younger less protected artists work will probably be affected earlier as money becomes tighter and economies falter.

Many of the most successful artists in Britain today who have and are benefiting from the recent boom period for commercial and institutional sales completed their studies at undergraduate rather than graduate level. For example Damien Hurst and other 'Young

British Artists' who emerged from the undergraduate course at Goldsmith's College in the 1980's including one of our recently appointed staff Simon Patterson never went on to post graduate study. Equally Slade undergraduates who completed their studies in the early 1990's such as Martin Creed currently exhibiting at Tate Britain in London and Cecily Brown showing at Gasogian in New York, did not feel that a post graduate education was required in order to progress their career opportunities.

Fortunately from the perspective of this talk there are many impressive career achievements from students who have completed graduate studies. However, while graduate study is increasingly a prerequisite for being qualified to teach in an art school it is demonstrably not a prerequisite for success critically or in the in the art market.

The Slade like the Art Academy in Helsinki is a founder member of EARN the European Art Research Network set up to explore how artistic research at a high level can be integrated into existing and new academic structures. Through this small organisation of diverse partners a number of important conferences have been discussing new realities in graduate and doctoral research in fine art. The conference "A certain MA-ness" held in Amsterdam earlier this year and organised by the Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design and St Lucas Academy in Brussels proposed a number of questions and offered descriptions of some of the issues concerning graduate programmes.

Perhaps Mick Wilson, Dean of Gradcam in Dublin summed up the difficulties of overviews in this area by the title of his paper 'Uncertain MA-ness'. What is increasingly obvious is that a huge diversity of approaches, of programmes of study and of outcomes exists in the field of graduate study in fine art.

The traditional view providing a training in the technical processes and proficiencies necessary to become a professional artist exists at one end of the spectrum while at the other end teaching is concerned with how to locate oneself in the international art market, each of these extremes utilizing different theoretical positions to support specific interpretations of the art system and locate their programmes of study within academic and cultural contexts.

At the same conference Uta Meta Bauer introduces her paper titled 'Under Pressure' by saying that the art system, especially the art market today has become an integral part of the educational system.

In many ways this is exactly the outcome achieved (whether fully intended or not) of the new art schools being established in Britain in the 1960's. A largely successful, if subsequently under resourced, attempt to make art school education more connected to the mainstream art system as well as the requirements of higher education qualifications. One of the main difference between that time and now is the extent that the art market influenced decisions or ambitions. Last week I met a Art Collector from Belgium who remarked how surprised relatively successful emerging British Artists in the 1960's had been when he wanted to buy their work and how ill prepared they were in respect of pricing etc. The art school was seen as an economic generator as well as an intellectual forum; the expectations of deriving income from the art market were very limited.

London was by no means the centre of an international market for contemporary art at that time, but art of international importance was being produced and important artists were involved in art school teaching.

Graduate education in Fine Art has now been established in Britain since the 1960s. At that time the development of contemporary art practice was closely related to the academic status of the 'new' art schools which deliberately sought to employ as their teaching staff the most active and influential artists of the time. This interaction created new opportunities to develop a wide breadth of social, economic and cultural diversity amongst the student body, enabled the development of new curricula and produced some of the most innovative and talented artists of the late 20th century. Within the past two decades globalisation and a persistent desire from the cultural industries and the commercial art market for new developments has drawn the art schools and universities into a complex and difficult series of challenges, in terms of defining their status, and the impact they need to exert in a global economy.

The Slade was established in 1871. Its founder, the collector Felix Slade, envisaged an art school where Fine Art would be studied within a liberal arts university. University College London (UCL)

was created in 1837 it had no religious affiliations and opened its doors to anyone suitably qualified, regardless of colour, creed, nationality or gender. It is within a context of embracing new ideas, new technologies and multi-disciplinary research, that the Slade was established free from the constraints of the conventional European Art Academy, and free from providing a service to support Britain's industrial expansion. The resulting synergies produced many of the most influential artists in Britain at that time and since. Ironically given that the Slade only provided for the study of Fine Art, mainly painting and drawing, it also produced people like the furniture designer Eileen Gray; Countess Markievicz – the Irish Revolutionary leader and first woman to be elected as a member of the British Parliament; G.K. Chesterton the writer; and Henry Tonks, the celebrated surgeon and distinguished painter who was Slade Professor in the 1920s, amongst many others.

It is well recognised that the revolution in British art schools instigated by one of my predecessors Sir William Coldstream in the 1960s, created a new set of imperatives and challenges to the established pattern of art education in Britain. Previous focus on vocational training and further education shifted to parity with higher education, leading to degree status rather than diploma or certificate. The most influential and active artists in the area of contemporary art were invited to teach in the art schools. New use of materials and processes, new ideas in respect of contextual studies, cultural theory and a developing notion of conceptualisation, produced an exceptional opportunity for contemporary art to develop and thrive. The study and practice of art had shifted from being training based to an activity with academic credibility, enquiring, investigative, experimental and research-minded.

So what is the position now? Forty years after the modernisation of British art schools in the 1960s, the market for contemporary art has grown enormously and is now economically very strong. Generally, this is something to be celebrated, but it has created some problems for the art schools. Many of the most successful and influential artists have withdrawn from teaching in art schools in Britain, particularly in the provincial art schools. This has had a detrimental effect. Students are much more conscious of the commercial market and its voracious appetite for new young artists, and in many cases they have already begun to establish

commercial careers while still at art school. This can cause problems but has also initiated student-led projects and initiatives, particularly in the area of independent exhibitions, and it has generated a greater awareness of marketing and the need to be pro-active in this respect.

Students now pay fees, in some cases very high fees, unlike my own generation when all education was free and students benefited from generous maintenance grants. This has created new tensions and a greater imperative to be successful commercially. British art schools today are much more international – the Slade, at graduate level has approximately 40% of students from the UK, 30% of students from the EU and 30% of students from overseas. This has worked very effectively to provide a dialogue across nationalities and experience, generating a major opportunity for students to build an international network of contacts that can sustain them in their professional careers. Over the past 20 years, a growing number of our strongest students at graduate level have come from overseas. They arrive equipped with a good knowledge of traditional skills and the ability to apply these to contemporary theory. British students have high aspirations and intellectual ability, but these are often not commensurate with their level of technical skills.

In parallel with the pressures generated by the bigger picture of a sophisticated art system or engine with an emphasis on things happening outside of the capacity of an art school to deliver we are now in a period of increasing academisation of our subject within art schools. This includes inflation in qualifications, with masters and research degrees increasingly becoming a prerequisite for attaining a teaching position. This is mitigating against major artists wishing to be involved in teaching. There has been a very large increase in administration and bureaucracy in respect of quality control, health and safety, and general accountability. While necessary, this has had a demoralising effect on staff and can be a source of friction with students. If art education becomes procedure-led rather than directed by creative content and energy, problems will develop. A positive feature, not yet fully understood, is increasing interest in and involvement with cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary projects. Art and Science, Art and Architecture, Art and the Environment, Art and Industry, Art and Business, Art and Health, Art and Technology; these relationships have often been artificially led by funding but can produce exciting

projects. The rapid rise in the development and use of electronic media and information technology has had a profound effect in increasing opportunity to engage with diverse markets and cross disciplinary projects.

Has Fine Art as a subject become just another aspect of the creative industries or is it still in a position to challenge preconceptions and conventions and retain a strong identity and voice? In this sense, the Slade is a traditional art school. I use the word traditional in terms of developing from a well established and enquiring base rather than the widely held view that tradition means convention. The tradition of contemporary art is one of innovation, transition and development – convention, on the other hand, is none of these things. The art market however, despite the nature and diversity of work offered for sale is still perceived as being rather conventional in how it operates.

The educational process should be about education in its broadest sense not merely measuring success through certification. The emphasis at the Slade is on the development of the individual artist within a supportive critical context that enables graduating students to locate themselves in an increasingly complex and demanding post-art school world. Access to information and globalisation now make it impossible for artists to set themselves outside a critical context. Success requires a sophisticated, knowledgeable awareness of how one's own work fits into a complex and uncompromising global picture. The benefit for all of us is that the engine that drives creative output in our field is still capable of producing work of exceptional inventiveness and originality. Fine Art as a subject in art academies and universities is a restless and wayward spirit locating itself within a wide range of levels of sophistication, simultaneously oscillating between being irritating and being rewarding.

The things that we value need to be maintained and developed and the growth of the subject sustained by practitioners and experts. The field of study should not be defined by short-term expediency, lack of focus and imperatives imposed from those unfamiliar or unsympathetic to our core values. Embracing, challenging and understanding new imperatives in Fine Art education is an on going and necessary part of how the artist can maintain their individual approach to practise and engage in debate and discourse with emerging generations of young artists.