



The seriousness of play

A gallery, two schools and an artist: in search of missing lessons

The project *Hidden Curriculum* investigates forms of learning in school outside the official curriculum, and the informal ways in which secondary school students learn from one another. Together with students we aim to find possibilities to address informal knowledge, unrecognised and undesired learning in the context of institutionalised normalisation processes. These specific interests informed an investigation into the schools and the gallery involved.

Annabel Johnson: a curator's perspective

There is so much for us to question in society, normality being key. It's a word so often used without reference to the fact that everyone's normality is so vastly different. We are confronted by challenging feelings with every step we take often pushing them away because we don't know what to do about them or the dominant system we are part of feels too impenetrable to even try. Annette Krauss addresses these 'routines of the impossible'¹ through her work with young people.

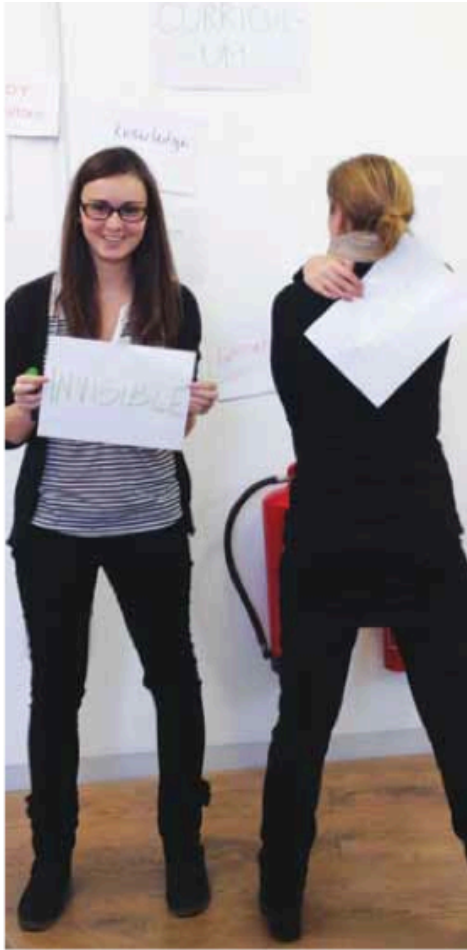
Teaching children to be aware of these feelings and giving them power to feel like they can do something to change them is an essential part of education. It takes courage to allow them to test boundaries, to engage students in experimental projects driven by artists and others outside the school institution.

Whilst visiting Open School East² recently I glanced at a poster casually displayed proclaiming, amongst other things: 'Art is...a way of doing what is to be done...that feeling you get when you see something that challenges you and you don't really know what to do with it.'³

This is what drives artists working within research-based practice – a desire to persevere with questions that need answering. Highlighting this with students shows that art is about complex ideas; that students can add layers of meaning to their work and know what it feels like to struggle through visual language with a troubling idea. If art is to continue to be valued, there has to be a place for students to learn to think like this and begin to question a school system that is subtly sorting them into categories through the historical remnants of systems, postcodes and levels of privilege⁴ – teaching them to fit a skewed set of normalities.

Conceptual practices are sometimes seen as difficult to approach in the classroom. The pressure, in an assessment driven curriculum to work to schemes of work with predetermined outcomes and objectives; difficulties in the assessment of ephemeral, performative and work of a collaborative nature are all obstacles to negotiate when evaluating new projects to work on. Work produced in this way could be seen to take up valuable time needed for work measured against set parameters and 'normalities' prescribed by others.

In both St Paul's Way Trust School, Tower Hamlets and Cumberland School, Newham, the teaching staff and management were brave enough to put their trust in the Whitechapel Gallery and artist Annette Krauss giving us the license to spend a year working with students on Krauss' *Hidden Curriculum* project. They had the foresight to realise that asking students to question rules and structures does not mean transgressing them. Analysing the reasons why we are forced to behave and act in certain ways is an important part of learning, forcing students to take a step further and begin to 'unlearn' deeply rooted practices. Krauss proves we are wrong to ever assume that young minds cannot deal with



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philosophical questions and complex ideas.⁵ Ideas that can be inaccessible to the uninitiated are played out through students' performative actions, theory and practice are brought closer together and you see the significance of what is being said through their games and short films.

Krauss empowers students to think deeply through the situations she puts them in and the questions she asks. She needs only the basics of equipment – video and still cameras, sound recording equipment, paper and pens. Her medium is the students' bodies and eyes, asking them to look closely at how they physically interact with spaces and systems. They are given the freedom to play in spaces, often out of classrooms, to work out their own rules and normalities.

The key to what was achieved here is the slowness of the process – often painfully slow! It takes time to allow children to figure things out for themselves – sadly there is so little time for the slow pace of working that the discipline of art affords.

A parent told me recently that she was discouraging her

daughter from doing art as it is so time consuming, taking time needed for other subjects. This skill should be valued in today's fast paced world.

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Monthly visits from Krauss to schools and repeat visits to the Gallery over the year allowed students to grow in confidence in their ideas, gain ownership of the Gallery space and their activities within it. They created their own normality of how to visit a gallery based on a repeated experience of the space and the freedom to play and observe how people reacted to their ideas.

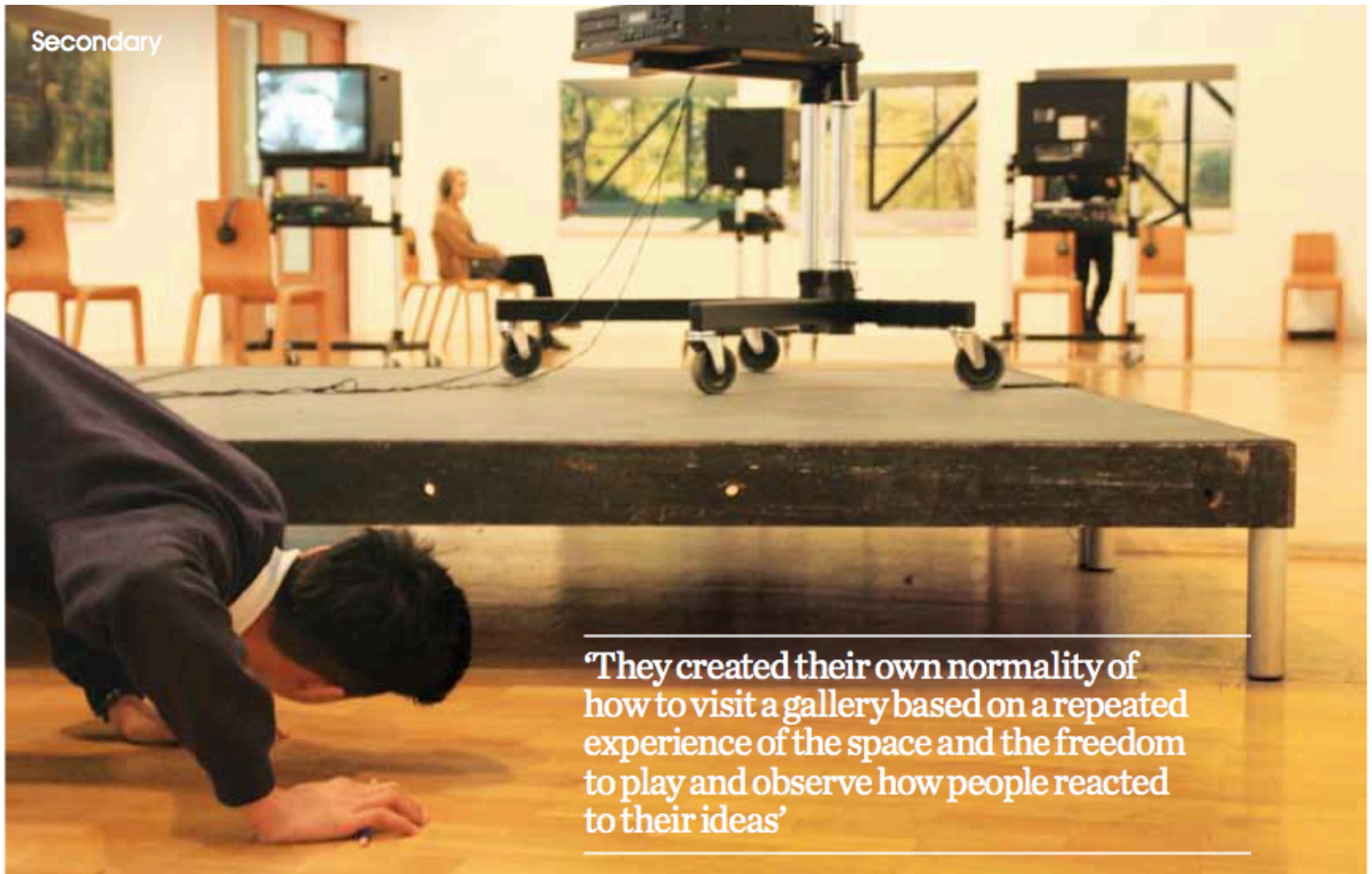
Backwards walking tours, word games and hide-and-seek replaced traditional tours where students are 'trained' in the correct and appropriate way to experience art. In the final months of the project and when their work was installed in Whitechapel's Project Galleries it was inspiring to watch how the strength of their ideas had developed and how powerful they seemed in comparison to earlier visits.

This project should be used to advocate slow processes over prolonged periods with relatively small numbers. The power is now in the project's legacy and its transformative potential for students and those engaging with this work.

Annette Krauss: artist's perspective

I understand a hidden curriculum as something that evolves out of the interaction between the socio-political and economic conditions of schooling and the process of learning of a very specific situation at a certain place and time. I find it important to emphasize that as a consequence it is not necessarily I, as teacher, artist or researcher who would know about this, but the students themselves. They are able and need to find out about it themselves making the whole experiment around hidden curriculum an extremely exciting collaborative investigation. This shouldn't be misread as opposing knowledge to ignorance, but rather understood that every knowledge is also ignorance.

Moreover, the gallery and schools involved need to agree on a process that is quite unforeseeable. It is necessary that the students indicate where the investigations will go – not the artists, the teachers or gallery. This implies necessarily an ongoing negotiation of what risks are taken and not by the different constituencies involved in the organisation and coordination of the project.



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The method used is one that schools, and to a certain extent galleries, normally try to avoid – disruption. It is here where the seriousness of play comes in. We investigate when a disruption is not just a funny joke, but rather the project *Hidden Curriculum* is dedicated to the multilayered and paradoxical potential of disruption. Although a rupture is always part of a system, and certainly has the power to reinforce and sustain systems, a disruption nevertheless makes it possible for us to take distance to our habits and to let go of a routine for a moment. A disruption is the feedback that could make things run differently.

Liz Millward: a teacher perspective

In Cumberland School fifteen students (ages 14-15) began working with Annette in a workshop to deconstruct the words ‘Hidden’ and ‘Curriculum’. They were tasked with finding new words for these. Students investigated the unseen structures that shaped their lives through their performative actions in and out of school. One student commented: “Even a chair had other uses than sitting on it...” Over the year their work changed from naivety to gain wit, character and confidence. Movement along the corridor became synchronized swimming down it. They were observing habits and reflecting on their own behavior structures and how they influence the way they behave in school and outside the institution.

The initial model for the project was to create both work in school and the gallery, have an exhibition and a private view. But as the project gained momentum and confidence grew the project reached new heights. Students were delivering workshops to the gallery staff, they took over a middle leaders meeting at school, presented at the Whitechapel Education

evening and then delivered workshops at their exhibition for the general public. As a teacher I was also taking risks, no sketchbooks, no lesson objectives, giving them expensive equipment to work with, to work in corridors, to have an hour discussion. I was so impressed with how students embraced this, and this gave the students the space to think. The project has certainly made me reassess my own teaching practice and how we as teachers should continue to push boundaries. I couldn’t have done this without the support of the school leadership team who trusted the project, artist, teacher and students and allowed risk taking to take place. ■

Annabel Johnson was curator for schools and teachers at Whitechapel Gallery, curating the artist in residence programme in East London Secondary schools. She is now at Children’s Art School childrensartschool.org

Annette Krauss is an artist based in Utrecht/NL

Liz Millward is teacher in charge of art and design at Cumberland School

References

1. In *ae5 Arts and Education* issue 5 Autumn/Winter 2013. Welling School
2. Open School East is a study programme for 12 associate artists and a communal space housed in the old Rose Lipman Library, East London
3. Andrea Franke: *Art as Muddiness*, poster displayed at Open School East
4. Caroline Benn in *Education Documents in Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery, Editor Felicity Allen, 2011 p78
5. Krauss references theorists Paulo Friere, Jacques Ranciere and August Boal in conversation with Annabel Johnson and Henry Ward, *ae5 Arts and Education* issue 5 Autumn/Winter 2013. Welling School