

Mildly Radical

Dense Cluster was a hubbub of independent activity and knowledge sharing that took place in Bristol on the 4 December 2010, organised by two professional development agencies based in Wales and the South West, Alias and g39/WARP in association with Cerbyd, Supersaurus and Surface Arts. Hosted by [Bristol Diving School](#) the event saw artists and artist's groups including [Hand in Glove](#), [Lombard Method](#), Redwire, [An Endless Supply](#), [Folded Glued and Printed](#), [Project Space 11](#), [Surface Arts](#), [Supersaurus](#) and [Cerbyd](#) come together to set out their stalls, talk, make a publication, listen, eat and debate.

I started to imagine how the ethos and possibilities presented at Dense Cluster might be lived out and further propelled by other models and discussions. This has resulted in a tongue-in-cheek timeline tracing the potential routes of an artist's work and career that speculates on how over a lifetime, you might traverse and modify the art ecosystem.¹ The writing is supported by extensive footnotes for more in depth analysis of the issues raised. In keeping with the spirit of generosity generated at Dense Cluster many of the links are to open source sites.

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- **Twenties: Low on contacts and experience you use your ingenuity to buy time and space for your practice. Many fall by the wayside unable to cope with the combination of rejection and poverty. Others develop resilience built on a diet of cheap noodles and freezing working conditions to become hardened in their determination to succeed.² Alternatively you might have been born independently wealthy and serve your family's own label of champagne at all of your openings. Or perhaps you have completed a top notch MA and been picked up by a commercial gallery at your final show.³ Whatever your starting point you need to find supporters to get ahead and generate income from art related sources. Unfortunately you are probably going to have to work**

¹ There is a useful diagram on page six of a report made by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre for Arts Council in 2006 called *Tastebuds- how to cultivate the art market* that outlines a potential art ecosystem model:

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/taste-buds-how-to-cultivate-the-art-market/

² For more detailed examples of UK artist's DIY approach please see David Burrows interviewing Matt Hale of City Racing, David Crawford of Beaconsfield and John Russell of Bank for Issue 5 of Variant Magazine in an article called *Career Opportunities, The Ones That Never Knock*:

http://www.variant.org.uk/5texts/David_Burrows.html

³ For an interesting discussion on the markets interaction with education see the conversation between Simon Starling and Willem de Rooij in an article called, *Freespace or Marketplace* published in Issue No4 of Metropolis M, August/September 2006.

<http://www.metropolism.com/magazine/2006-no4/vrijplaats-of-marktplaats/english>

for free to gain the experience and opportunities you need,⁴ so work on projects you believe in and spend time making your own scene.⁵

- **Thirties: You write, take part in residencies,⁶ curate, teach, go to the studio, show work, initiate conversations, manage projects,⁷ give talks, perform at events, make applications, read, critique, lead workshops, administrate, document work and grow a thicker skin (among other things). You think of yourself as a professional⁸ even though there are no guidelines as to what that might actually mean for artists.⁹ But what if the opportunities aren't flooding in at all? Just keep going.¹⁰**
- **Forties: How much more precarious living can you cope with before you give up¹¹ or come up with a better solution?¹² You make a sign saying, 'I**

⁴ And break the cycle by paying volunteers for their time whenever you can in the future.

⁵ For an engaging reflection on who your audience are and how they give your work value see: *Romancing the Looky Loos* by Dave Hickey in *Air Guitar – Essays on Art and Democracy* published by Art Issues Press, 1997.

⁶ If you are looking for residencies, this is a great site.
<http://www.transartists.nl/>

⁷ For an example of a successful community media space in Sheffield called Access Space see, *Open Access All Areas; an Interview with James Wallbank* by Charlotte Forest, Mute, 2006.
<http://www.metamute.org/en/Open-Access-All-Areas>

⁸ For an interesting discussion on the nature of professionalism in the arts see this online-only survey, where *frieze* asked 16 curators, writers and artists how they thought the languages, codes, education and business methods resulting from this process are affecting creative freedom.
<http://www.frieze.com/comment/article/professionalization/>

⁹ Pascal Gielen & Camiel van Winkel make a case for how society might learn from artist's critically reflexive approach to their work in this article for the No 5 issue of *Metropolism* M, October/November, 2010, *The Contemporary Artist as Role Model in a Crisis of Competence*:
<http://www.metropolism.com/magazine/2010-no5/the-contemporary-artist-as-role/english>

¹⁰ In *Don't Trust anyone over Thirty*, Maxine Kopsa discusses the benefits of giving your work some time and space to grow:
<http://www.metropolism.com/magazine/2007-no5/vertrouw-niemand-boven-de-dertig/english>

¹¹ For more on the current social trend for short term, flexible contracts with reduced benefits for employees Anthony Iles reviews Republicart's issue on precarious labour
<http://www.metamute.org/en/The-Insecurity-Lasts-a-Long-Time>

¹² I found Will Bradley's fictional account of the decisions made by an artist's group a temptingly plausible and wryly amusing alternative:
Will Bradley. 'Fables of Deconstruction', in *stopstop*, no1 (Glasgow, 1997); retitled as 'The Village', in Ryan Gander: *Intellectual Colours* (Paris: Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art/Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2006) 5-11; and as 'The Village' in 'Failure: Documents of Contemporary Art' Ed, Lisa Le Feuvre. (Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2010) 190-192.

live a life of luxury' though you still have little chance of earning enough money to buy a house. Or you take on the black hole of a teaching job leaving you with a deficit of time to make work if a (moderately) secure financial future.¹³ Is it all worth it? You bet it is. You lobby local government to allow you to rent a vacant property¹⁴ and develop innovative live/work spaces in your city.¹⁵ You are sustained by the relationships and conversations that guide your practice.¹⁶ You have the confidence to critique institutions designed to support the arts.¹⁷

- **Fifties: You work with different agencies to make art an important and valued aspect of society changing the prevalent attitude towards artists in the UK.¹⁸ You remember the inspiration and assistance given to you as a younger artist and make sure you give some back.¹⁹ You still dream**

¹³ For more on the realities of teaching in FE/HE and the impact on practice please see *Something For Nothing?* Brigid Lowe:

<http://www.variant.org.uk/9texts/BrigidLowe.html>

¹⁴ Bonnie Sherk is the founding Director/President of Crossroads Community (*The Farm*) in San Francisco, 1974-1980. The Farm, located beneath a freeway interchange in the heart of the city, served as a series of community gathering spaces: a farmhouse with earthy, funky and elegant environments; a theater and rehearsal space for different art forms; a school without walls; a library; a darkroom; a pre-school; unusual gardens—all providing an indoor/outdoor environment "for humans and other animals."

http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/09/between_the_dia.php

¹⁵ Danish art collective N55 rethink the office as a place for social co-operation and imagine new sites for creative production:

<http://www.metamute.org/en/Office-Politics>

¹⁶ One such conversation between the musician Brian Eno and painter Peter Schmidt resulted in a fascinating set of provisos called the Oblique Strategies. Brian Eno discusses the Oblique Strategies in an interview with Charles Amirkhanian, conducted at KPFA in Berkeley in early 1980:

<http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/OSintro.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oblique_Strategies

¹⁷ Continuing the discussion on the precarious nature of art workers employment this article by Anthony Davies for Mute in April 2007 called, *Take me I'm Yours: Neoliberalising the Cultural Institution* looks at a protest by activist group ctrl+i against working practices at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona

<http://www.metamute.org/en/Take-Me-Im-Yours>

¹⁸ For an introduction to the seminal work of Artist's Placement Group who put artist's in industrial settings during the mid sixties see *Manpower: The Legacy of the Artist's Placement Group* by Lily van Ginneken in Issue 3 of Mute, June/July 2010.

<http://www.metropolism.com/magazine/2010-no3/de-erfenis-van-de-artist-placeme/english>

¹⁹ Please see the interview with David Reinfurt, part of design group Dexter Sinister on the benefits of generosity in Issue Magazine:

<http://www.issue-magazine.net/>

of an art world where market forces aren't the predominant means of citing value²⁰ and you thrive on having the time to consider your own practice.²¹

- **Sixties:** You are working as hard as you did in your thirties with no end in sight. You live in rented accommodation after losing your teaching job following a nervous breakdown in response to an overdose of student body casting.²² Occasionally an artist-led space gets in touch and asks you to come and speak about your long and illustrious art career. You open an independent art school.²³
- **Seventies:** You are back in fashion and your work is selling like hot cakes. You buy a big property somewhere hot and invite all of your friends to come and hang out making art with you. You throw away your CV²⁴.
- **Eighties:** You fall out of fashion and live in a series of increasingly decrepit, ramshackle houses in order to store your enormous collection of art and related paraphernalia. You have to keep moving as the gentrification sets in and rents rise.²⁵ Something's got to change.

²⁰ Anna Tilroe's letter to Metropolis M, 2010 No2 April/May *Who is Ringing the Alarm?* Is an insightful analysis of certain market dominated trends in the art world.

<http://www.metropolism.com/magazine/2010-no2/who-is-ringing-the-alarm/english>

²¹ Neil Chapman's essay *Counter-Arguments* found here at Use This Kind of Sky is a reflexive excursion into an art practice.

<http://www.usethekindofsky.com/>

²² The Second World Congress of Free Artists organised by the Camel Collective last year looked at transcending the traditional pedagogic modes of receiver and sender with playful and performative modes of knowledge production.

<http://congress.camelcollective.org/>

²³ Set up by The Mountain School of Arts, *teachablefile*, is an online reference of articles, lecture notes and lots more.

<http://teachablefile.org/>

²⁴ There is an interesting note in the text *Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research* by Simon Sheikh where he points out that an artist's progress can only be evaluated by means such as a CV. The problem when we are discussing an alternative to the mainstream, is that exhibitions, events or actions outside of the recognised platforms, galleries or funding bodies aren't read as significant.

<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/sheikh.html>

²⁵ For a critical deconstruction of gentrification by cultural led regeneration in Manhattan, see Gregory Sholette's article, *Mysteries of the Creative Class, or, I have Seen the Enemy and They Is Us Mute*, February 2005

<http://www.metamute.org/en/Mysteries-of-the-Creative-Class-or-I-Have-Seen-The-Enemy-and-They-Is-Us>

- **Nineties: You develop a project that allows you to live in the future; it is never finished.**²⁶
 - **Cryogenic Future Self: The on-going realisation of your project is a specially developed unit designed to support your frozen remains. It is funded by the astronomical prices your work commands since your official death.**²⁷
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Researching this piece of writing has reinvigorated my sense of what is possible - but possibilities can only emerge if we persist in being proactive. Make your own luck. Go and see the exhibition, read the book, make the phone call, write the email. Don't be afraid to talk to people - find group solutions to common problems. That said, in these times of increasing cuts in public spending on the arts, opportunities and funding are in short supply. Times are tough; money is tight. Living isn't cheap. But your £3.40 pint of beer can still be half full, not half empty

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²⁶ Boris Groys opens up a fascinating discussion on the nature of the art project and it's relationship to authorship, the future and sanctioned isolation in *The Loneliness of the Project* in Issue 1 of New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory:
<http://www.ny-magazine.org/issues.html>

²⁷ Not cryogenic but certainly alluding to futuristic imaginings of art practice, Makrolab in Yugoslavia asks questions about new artist's subjectivities and picks up on many of the debates from the previous Boris Groys article.
http://www.metamute.org/en/coded_utopia