

Workshop: making beyond the post-medium condition

Article

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Christine Ellison 



WORKSHOP

Making Beyond the Post-Medium Condition

art school workshops/
fine arts v applied arts/
discipline and DIY/craft/skills/
ubiquity of digital tools



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Visual Culture in Britain, 2017

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2017.1353438>

2 WORKSHOP



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References, film material and further images from this project can be accessed online where indicated.

PROLOGUE

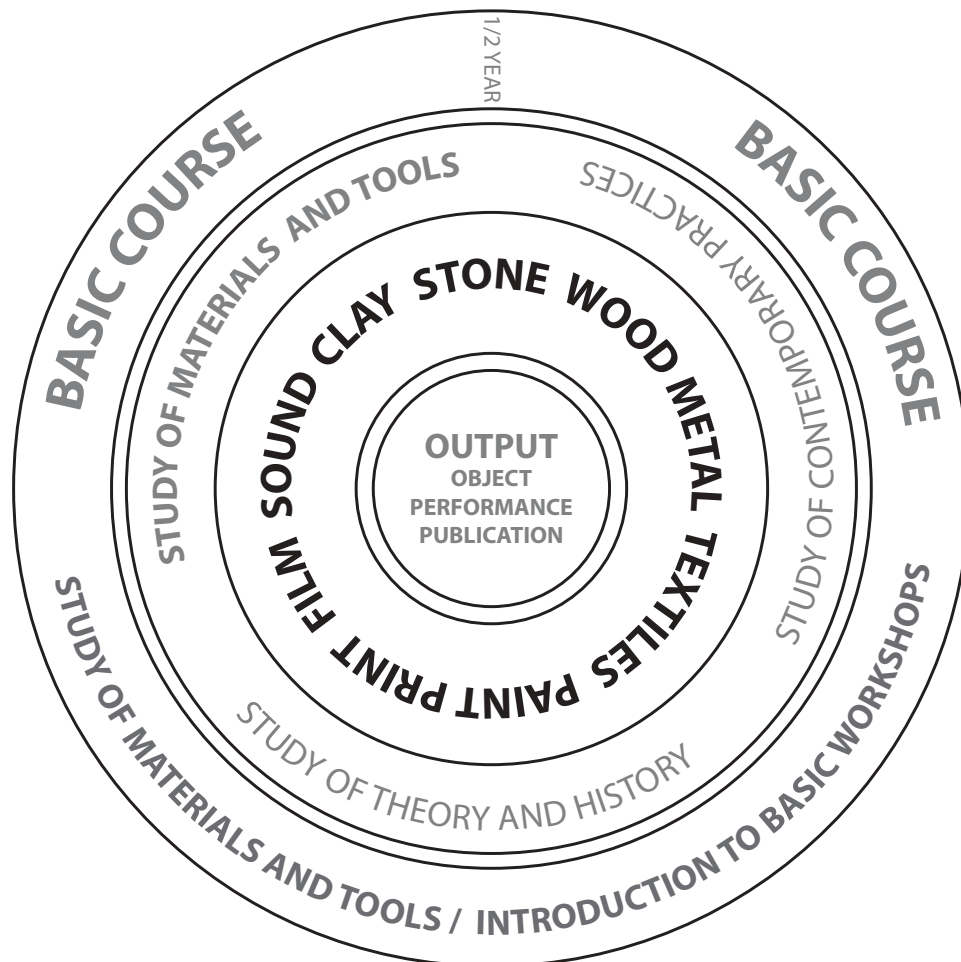
Current trends within Art create tensions in educational institutions between historical forces, logistical challenges, traditional codes of practice, budgetary limitations and inherited objects. The following performative study examines the artists' relationship to medium within this complicated environment. The material emerges from workshops carried out with students in art school spaces across Britain; conceptual workshops that consider the current status of technical workshops in this awkward territory where industrial, craft and avant-garde modes of making overlap. Through engagement with tools found within Art institutions – some abandoned, some unfamiliar, some ubiquitous – it attempts to visualize aspects of the myriad perceptions that the current student/future artist has of the notion of medium. Referring to the condition described by Rosalind Krauss that emerged from the cross-pollination of medium-specific disciplines in Art and its education in the late 20th century, a 'post-medium' approach is adopted to discover the new potential of tools. While acknowledging the dominant legacy of the Bauhaus, there is a questioning here of how we consider material practice, and its mastery, after conceptualism, after institutional critique, and after the tech revolution that has divorced many modes of making from material engagement.

The study's own methodology is itself under analysis; an improvised mode of making that draws on theory, performance, conversation, image and sound manipulation, appropriation, collage and documentary. It is part of a body of work that attempts to confront the future of supporting material practice in Art School beyond the Post-Medium Condition.

AFTER BEYER, BREUER, SCHLEMMER 🔍



AFTER GROPIUS - ART SCHOOL STRUCTURE 🔍



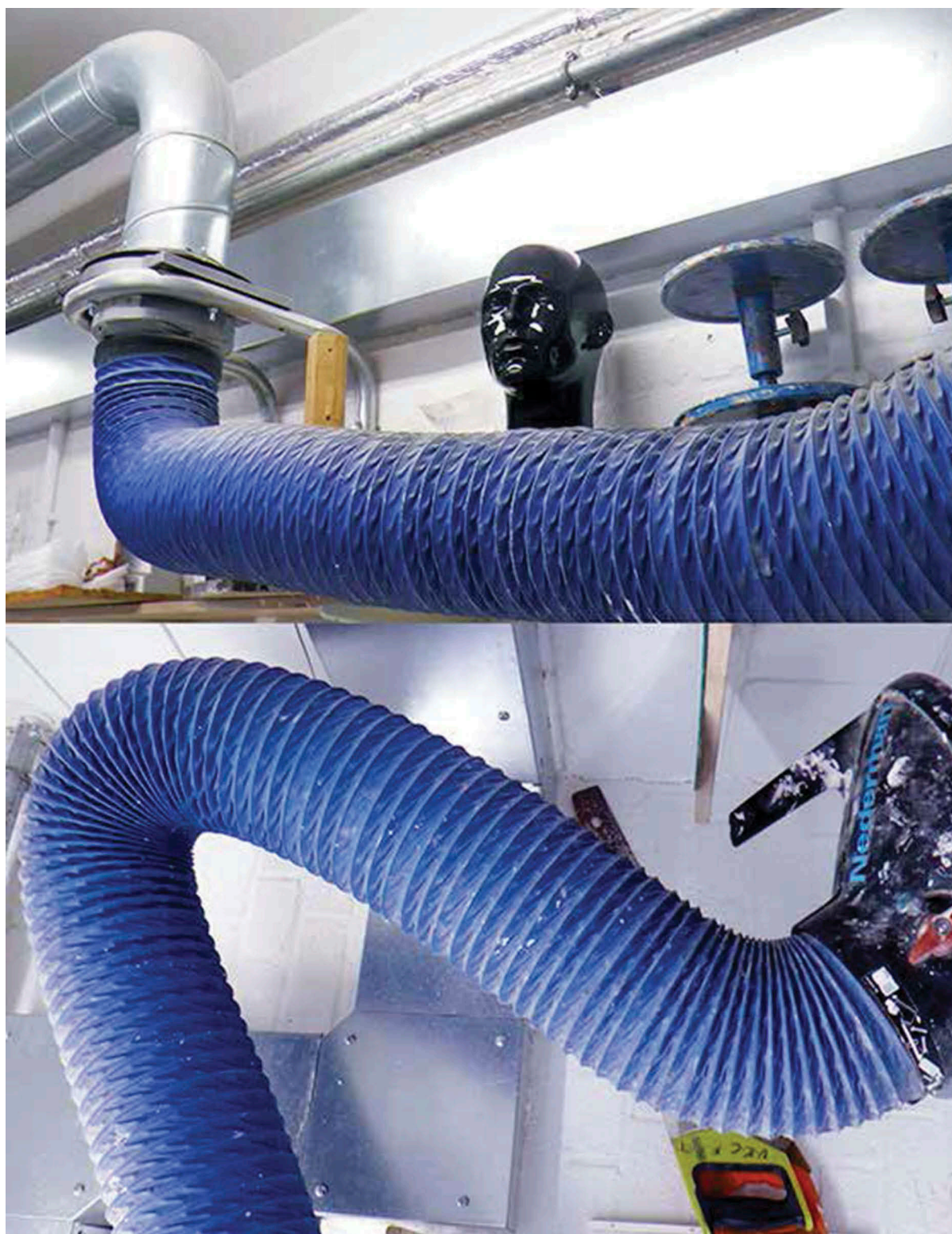
I

a space with tools or machinery for making things

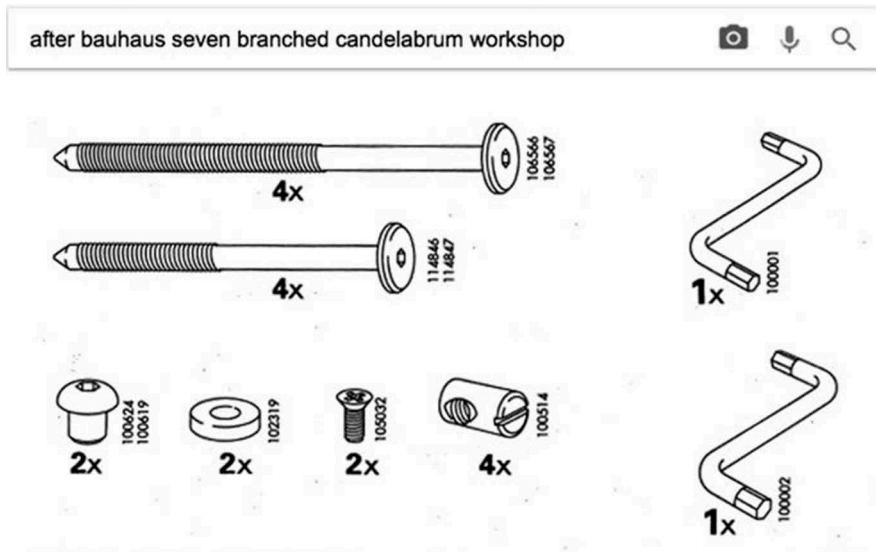


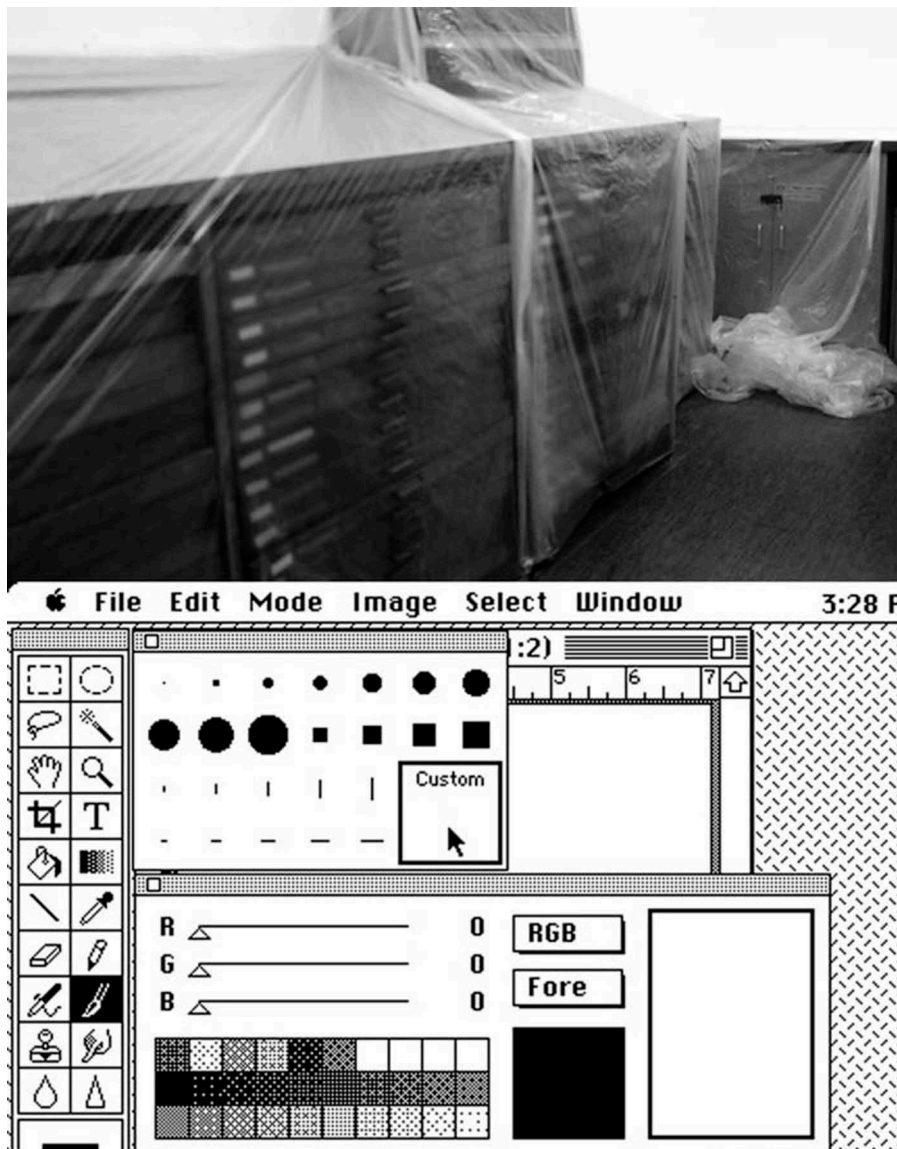












II

performance using intensive group discussion and improvisation in order to explore aspects of a production prior to formal staging

DRAWING INSTRUMENTS







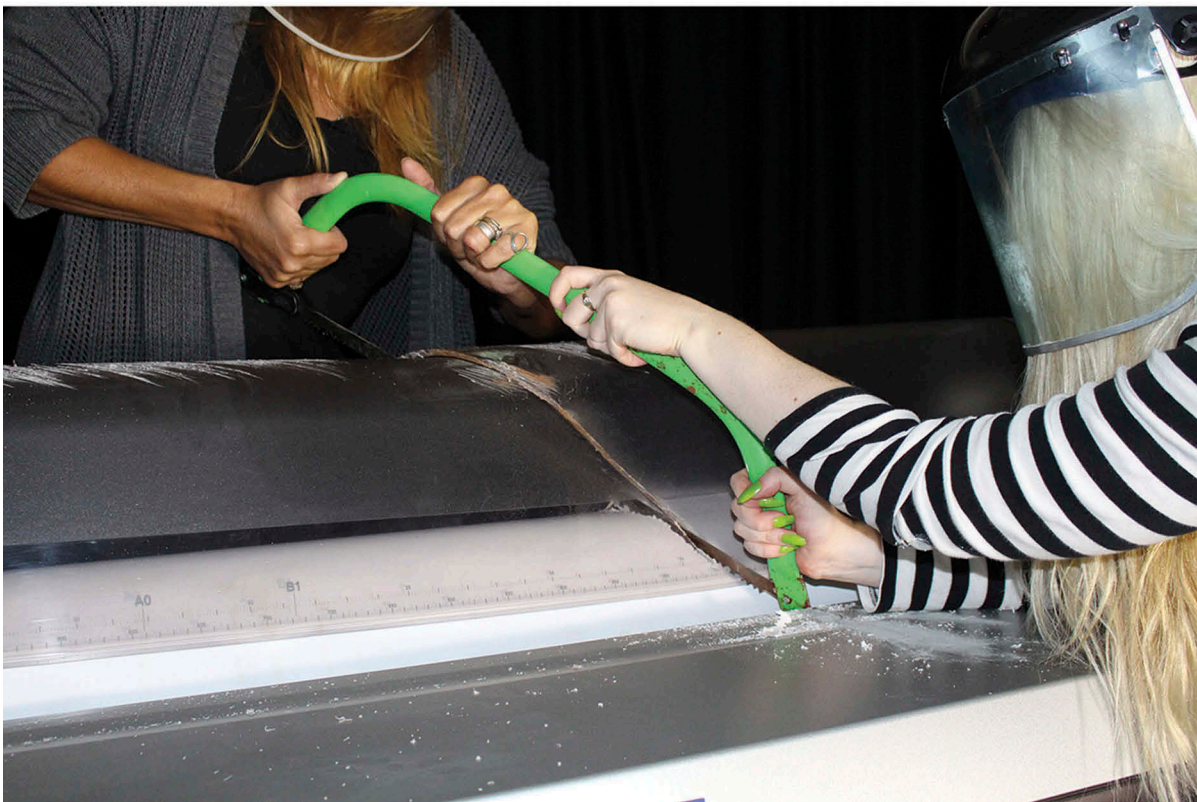
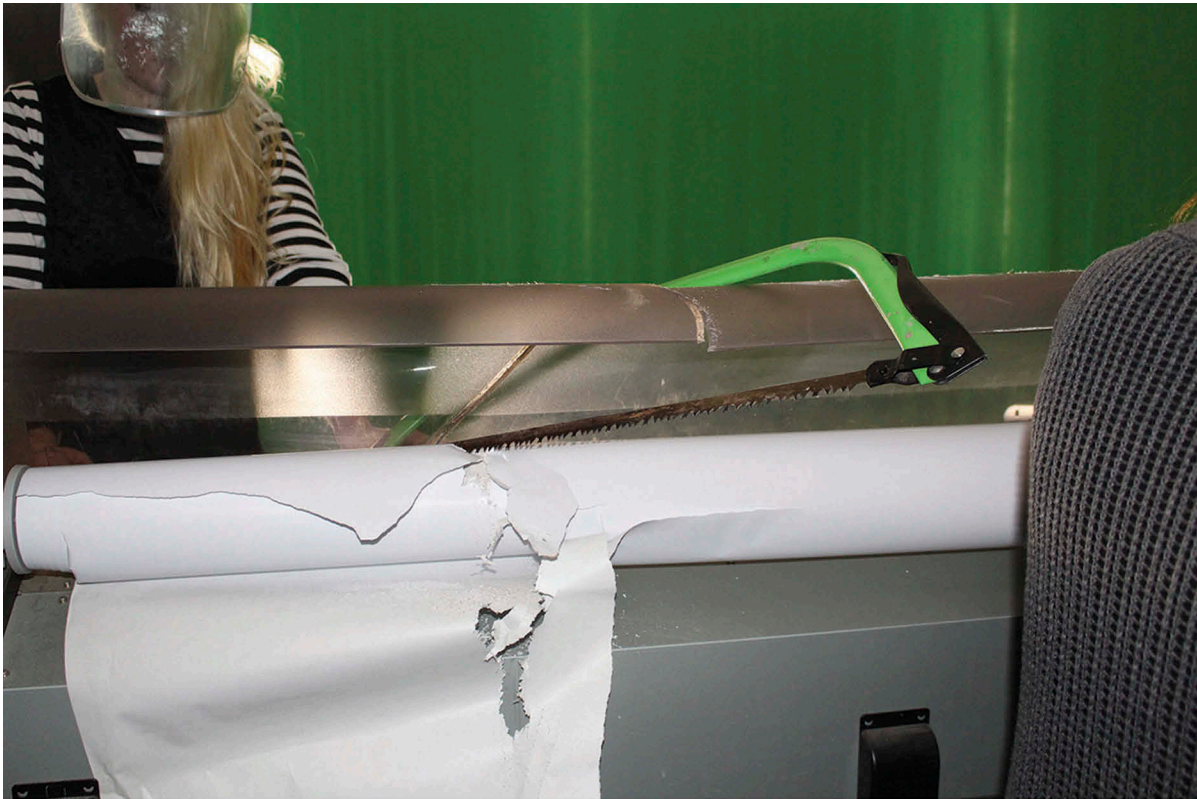








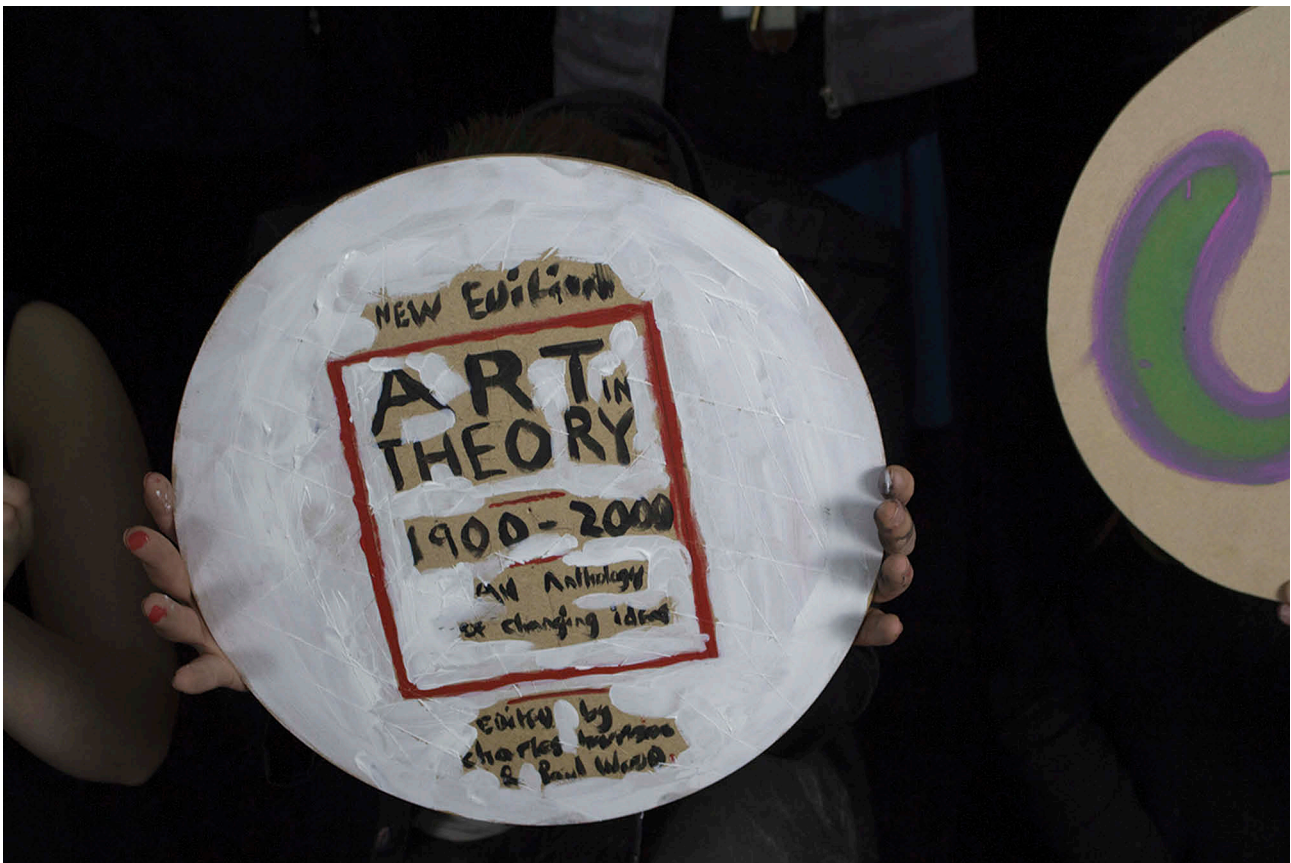


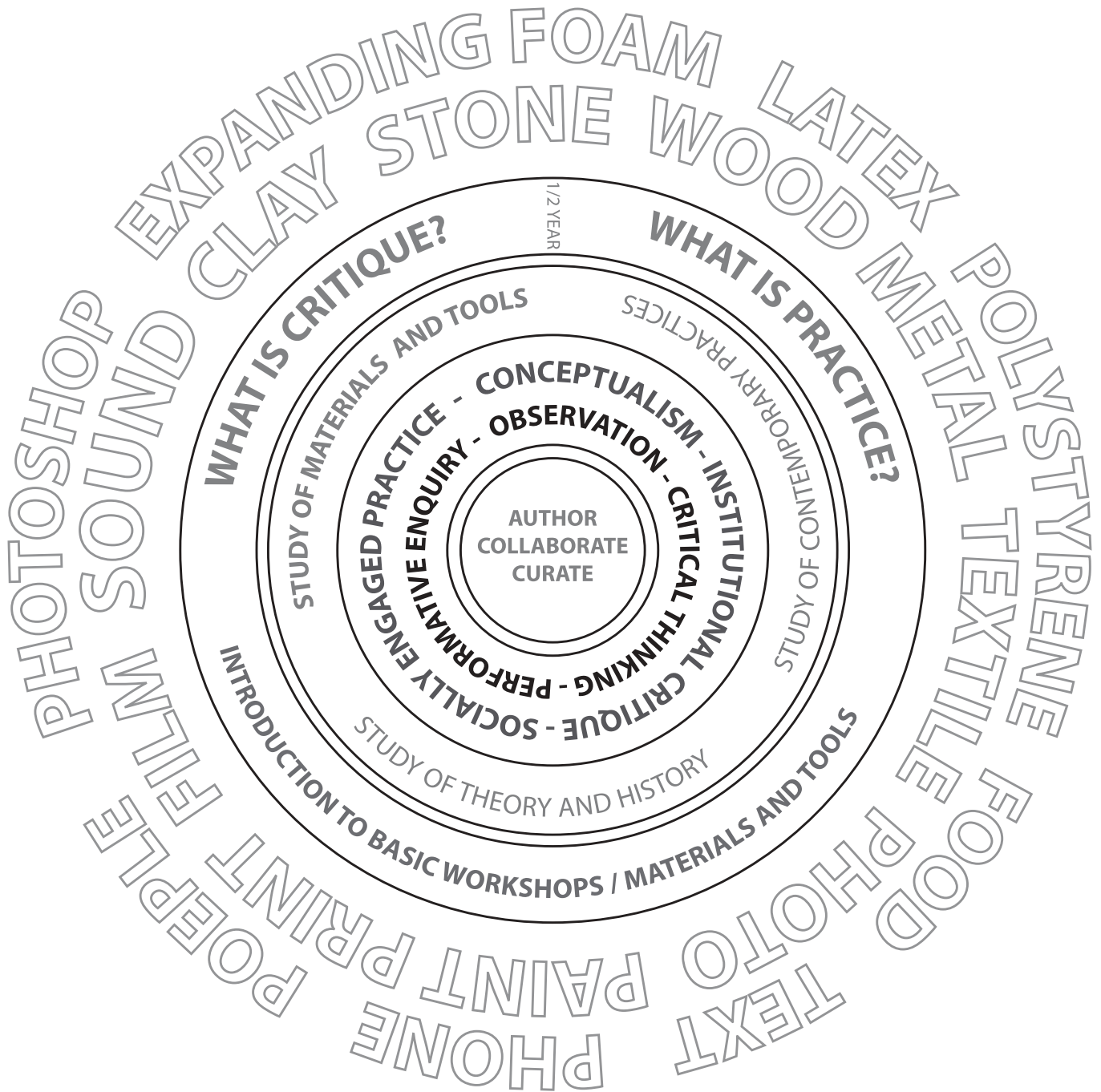


III

a group of people engaged in intensive discussion and activity on a particular subject

PAINTING AGAIN, IN THEORY







EPILOGUE

We are in danger of Art Schools becoming irrelevant – as either quaint ‘vocational’ silos or dry intellectual hubs. It is hard to imagine a future where money continues to be invested in state-of-the-art workshops for the focused study of artisan craft. Digital culture has been innovative in new approaches to making but this technology is also costly and so rapidly updated that art schools cannot compete with industry standards. On the other hand, if technical support spaces are abandoned in pursuit of more critically engaged practices that do not rely on such skills, the tradition of making disappears and we are left with an Art that is materially bereft. From my time teaching for over ten years and through the experience of the workshops I’ve been engaged with over this last year, I am convinced that students do not want to stop learning how to make things well.

They do not want an environment that has no spaces for dirty, smelly, tactile production. At the same time we do not currently have a culture of commitment to craft. This is partially to do with the ubiquity of digital platforms that encourage instant gratification, whether through generating music through an app or being able to search for pretty much anything online and have it delivered within 24 hours. It is also connected to the legacies of Conceptualism, Post-structuralist thinking and Institutional Critique that still dominate the canon and this is perpetuated by the economics of what is affordable and sustainable in a given school.

A random assortment of machines and tools that were once heralded as the new, lie like bygones in cupboards and corridors. Meanwhile Modernist furniture, once the object of great design and craft, is now cheaply available en masse from IKEA, and DIY has become akin to prescriptive assemblage. The idea of spending hours a day practising and experimenting with the qualities and limitations of a given medium for artistic purpose becomes divorced from the world in which most students are living. It becomes a fantasy, an idea of what Art is, or what it means to be an artist. The irony is that many students and educators partially subscribe (in theory) to this romantic idea as it is this image of the artist that is widely understood – as a model – even though it bears little relation to current experience.

At the same time, the students I have worked with have a confident openness to immediate response and a sophisticated ability to engage with the disjointed landscape in which they find themselves.

For this project, we have worked collaboratively and intuitively and in the end, through the making of images, films and this publication, new propositions have emerged. On reflection, my current stance is that performative workshops that engage with the assets (tools, machines) of each particular school and that foster within them the culture of observation, critical thinking and relevant enquiry that are key to the tradition of Art, have become fundamental to developing the future of material learning and making at Art School.

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Christine Ellison is an artist and educator, originally from Dublin and now based in the UK. She is author of the blog 'Agency of Noise: Platform for Enquiry into Noise through Performance' (2012–), and is the founding member of POLLYFIBRE: girlband from a post-digital dimension (2005–2015). Her work spans drawing, textiles, costume, sound, film and performance, and has been exhibited both internationally and in the UK and Ireland; including at RAPID PULSE International Performance Festival, Chicago, Kaunas Art Biennial, Lithuania, The Whitechapel Gallery, London, Embassy Gallery, Edinburgh, Performa, New York, and DEAF Electronic Arts Festival, Dublin. Ellison is an Associate Professor in Art at The University of Reading.