

**Claire Bishop, History of Art Department, University of Warwick
Final Academic Fellowship report**

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1. Name of the project

Rethinking Spectacle

2. Keywords

Contemporary Art, Spectacle, Aesthetics and Politics, Participation

Art History and Visual Culture

3. Summary

The premise of the research project was the recent claim that contemporary art has become 'spectacular' and increasingly indistinguishable from mass entertainment. To examine this, I devised an open-ended module to look at the variety of ways in which the term 'spectacle' has been used throughout the twentieth-century. The issues raised by the idea of spectacle – spectatorship, participation, the political uses of art – can be mapped through a substantial body of theoretical literature on the intersection of politics and aesthetics. On the basis of this historical survey of changing theoretical ideas, students were encouraged to think critically about the ways in which present-day artistic productions are equally inseparable from political positioning.

4. Activities

The module was devised as a research-led weekly seminar for third year students, who have a background knowledge of art history. Before I describe the activities in detail, it's probably helpful to give some background as to my motivations for devising the module.

The first point of entry concerns the module's point of departure, which is the use of the word 'spectacle' amongst leftist art critics as a way to denigrate works of contemporary art that are playful, visual, and popular. This has been the subject of an ongoing conversation between myself and Dr Mark Godfrey, of the Slade School of Fine Art, University of London (now a curator at Tate Modern). The use of the term 'spectacle' raised a number of questions for us when applied to visual art. Was there a way to rethink the use of this term, which for Debord denotes social relations under capitalism as mediated by images – rather than images *tout court* (*Society of the Spectacle*, 1967)? The Situationists rejected visual art as an institutionalised system, so does it make any sense to apply the term to contemporary art circulating in museums and galleries? Does the invocation of Debord's term by senior art critics and historians denote a suspicion of visual pleasure, and a resistance to mass audiences? What other terms have superseded spectacle as a description of the current conditions of capitalism? Mark and I wished to organise a conference on this subject, and had entered into discussions with Tate Modern for organising an event entitled 'Rethinking Spectacle' to coincide with the end of the Turbine Hall installation *Test Site* by Carsten Höller.

A second prong was my ongoing research into participatory art since the 1960s. In gathering case-studies, it was noticeable that the term spectacle is repeatedly invoked as one of the main motivations for this type of art. Against a passive consumption of objects, artists have sought to encourage the active participation of viewers: giving them some kind of agency within the work of art is generally seen as prompting a more active and critical approach to society at large. It was my hope that teaching a module on spectacle would allow me to rethink my research from the other side: to research the inverse or opposite of my argument and understand more clearly the position from which contemporary artists are producing work.

A third angle was my familiarity with critical pedagogy as an extension of the research into social participation. The two key texts here were *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) by the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1989) by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. Freire argues for a revision of education away from a 'banking' model of learning, in which teachers deposits information into pupils to produce manageable subjects under a paternalistic social apparatus. Instead, he develops the idea of a participatory, 'problem-posing education' in which students are critical co-investigators in dialogue with their teacher. One of Freire's key terms is *conscientização*, a critical consciousness that allows people to understand their social reality, to enter the historical process and act as subjects. As is well known, Freire's book has been enormously influential in the history of education particularly in Latin America.

Rancière's book, by contrast, is an examination of equality through a forgotten incident in educational history: the maverick C19th teacher Joseph Jacotot. Jacotot, who is French, finds himself teaching a class that speaks exclusively Flemish. They have no language in common, rendering impossible a straightforward transmission of knowledge. Jacotot resolves this by reading a book with the class, painstakingly comparing the French and Flemish texts. What interests Rancière is Jacotot's presumption of equality of intelligence between himself and his students; the point was not to prove that all intelligence is equal, but to see what can be achieved under that supposition. Moreover, this presumption is a method and not a goal: equality is continually verified by being put into practice. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, like much of Rancière's writing, is a rejection of his former master Althusser, who wrote in 1964 that 'The function of teaching is to transmit a determinate knowledge to subjects who do not possess this knowledge. The teaching situation thus rests on the absolute condition of *an inequality between a knowledge and a nonknowledge*.'

While the ideas of Freire and Rancière are not strictly commensurate, they share a commitment to the idea of teaching as a process of mutual learning. I was keen to see if they could be put into effect through teaching at Warwick. The non-hierarchical open space of the Reinvention Centre offered a great opportunity to realise this experiment. I also hoped that the space would counter my negative experience of seminar teaching to date, which has been characterised by a few people dominating the class while the rest remain silent; by a sense that hardly any students are doing the set reading, either because they're not motivated and/or feel no investment in the texts; and by a pressure upon myself to 'perform' in front of the class and be, in the words of Lacan, a 'subject supposed to know'. All this was exacerbated by my memory of being taught at BA and MA level, where I found it hard to focus on reading texts for a seminars, and from which I emerged with a well-'banked' body of knowledge but utterly ill-prepared for orally articulating ideas and defending my position.

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The project began in January 2007 as a 13 week course for 12 students. I had a loose outline of the course that I'd developed over the preceding summer: a list of about 8 themes and key texts, which could be explored in loosely chronological order. I had not prepared the subjects in depth as I wanted the project to remain open for both myself and the students. I wanted them to feel as if they had the space to research these issues independently. This approach was rather risky, as it meant relying on them to come up with some of the content for the seminars, but I hoped this approach would also keep the seminars interesting, both for them and for myself.

The first seminar was not ideal as I had to be away from Warwick at a conference in Venice. I set the students the task of working in groups of four in the Learning Grid. They were asked to define spectacle (without recourse to dictionaries or the web), to provide examples of spectacle (including images), and to upload this information onto a 'research blog'. To achieve the latter I organised a visit during the seminar from Rob O'Toole in e-learning. I also set them three texts to read; each group would collaboratively write a short, 500-word review of the text and paste it on the blog in time for next week's seminar.

From then on, each seminar followed a similar format: at least three texts were set as reading, which each group would discuss, review and upload onto the blog. Everyone was encouraged to read each others' reviews before the seminar, but I think only the most enthusiastic actually did this. The reviews provided a focus of attention for the reading, and also tended to require additional research beyond the text itself (eg. who is the author and why did he/she write this?). In addition, it encouraged group discussion and writing/editing skills. The students tended to approach the reviews as if they were book reviews in a newspaper, with an emphasis on readability rather than being a series of bullet-points (I enjoy writing so my hope was that this would be enjoyable for them too). They could summarise the main points of the text's argument, but I also wanted to read their comments on its style, and add some personal opinion (such as whether or not it was convincing, engaging, difficult etc). Being allowed to criticise the texts is something I was never allowed to do at BA/MA level, but seems to me important not just to work out your relationship to the argument, but also to hone critical judgment, articulating precisely *why* a text is irritating/dense/unconvincing, etc.

The more diligent students also chased up secondary literature, and noted other ideas, terms, films, or works to follow up. Keeping track of the blog added to my workload each week, but it was worthwhile for several reasons. Firstly, it enabled me to see if the students had grasped the key points of the text, which I could then deal with in the seminar. Secondly, it threw up secondary literature and examples that I hadn't got time to check out for myself. Thirdly, the students were unanimous in their feedback about its usefulness: the blog seemed to facilitate good discussion amongst the students, which paid off in their increased confidence during the seminars; it also diluted the tendency for one or two people to dominate the seminar, since each group had its own area of expertise. Finally, the blog also functioned as a kind of noticeboard, onto which summaries of seminars could be posted, along with any changes to the schedule, links to helpful websites, podcasts worth listening to, video and sound clips, etc.

The seminars were organised around discussion of the set texts, while linking these to visual material in the form of films, videos, images, and so on. The facilities in the Reinvention Centre made the screening of film and video a real pleasure, and a student-led approach was particularly effective when it came to researching certain films and selecting the highlights of each for group discussion. One week I hired a minibus and took the students to see five shows of contemporary art in London; this provided invaluable material for discussion, and allowed students to see a variety of institutional spaces, from a major museum to commercial galleries. I also arranged for a pod-casting training session with e-learning; we borrowed an mp3 recorder for the field trip to London, trying to document reactions to Höller's slides in Tate Modern; in general I think the students agreed that this was not a useful addition to the module. Other tasks were more informal, such as suggesting that one group undertake a *dérive* by using the map of Stanford University campus to navigate the Warwick campus (this was for the week devoted to Situationism).

As far as possible I tried to give the students maximum flexibility over the structure of the course. There was no syllabus, and the reading for each week was decided (from a range of options) at the end of each class. This received mixed feedback, as I think the majority of students like to feel they know where the module is going (see feedback, below). The students were, however, aware that the whole module was building up to the conference at Tate Modern, which would take place during the Easter vacation. This would feature papers by myself and Mark Godfrey, Tate curator Frances Morris (who set up the Turbine Hall commissions), artist Andrea Fraser, art historian Ina Blom (University of Oslo) and the Dutch art critic/theorist Sven Lütticken. The Reinvention Centre Fellowship money was invaluable in realising this conference, from covering the transport costs of getting each student to Tate Modern to securing an additional speaker (Lütticken). I was thrilled that Fraser, a leading performance artist based at UCLA, could participate in the conference. Thanks to the Reinvention Centre money I could also invite her to be in discussion with the students for an hour beforehand. This was a fantastic opportunity, for which the students prepared extremely well, even if the encounter wasn't perhaps entirely what they had been expecting; Fraser is an intimidating character and it was difficult to engage her in a relaxed discussion.

Concerned to produce some form of dissemination from the module, I had been anxious to launch a Rethinking Spectacle website at the same time as the conference. I managed to do this in a preliminary form, although it has not been maintained or updated since April (see resources, below). My hope was that the students would be motivated by the idea of linking their research to a publicly-accessible research site that would include an annotated bibliography and short 'case studies' on key works, drawing on their reviews of texts and exhibitions that we had seen. We spent one seminar preparing and editing this site, but I underestimated both the amount of time this would take, and the students' ability to edit each others' work. I think this task is more suited to postgraduate students, who have greater fluency of writing, and who are feeling less pressure to perform well in their final exams. In the feedback it did not score particularly highly, reinforcing for me that their main concern is for good exam results, not the public impact of what they are learning.

In Autumn 2007 I returned to the module with a smaller group of art history students (only 7) who had chosen not to accompany the rest of their colleagues to Venice. The module operated quite differently now that I knew how it would unfold and which texts were more and less productive to read. As such, there were fewer surprises for me,

which made it a less exciting module to teach – if more reassuring for the students. Three of the four students were exceptional, and one in particular took a strong lead in initiating a class on Baudrillard (from which I feel as if I've learnt a great deal).

This time the module was only 10 weeks long, so I omitted the podcast training and the editing/writing workshop. However, I kept a strong emphasis on the blog, which has produced some good case studies; one of the students is now writing for art magazines as a result of honing her skills on this site. The Reinvention Centre grant came in useful for frequent trips to London to see contemporary art exhibitions; it also covered the students' attendance of talks, and paid for a visiting speaker.

5. Outcomes

These can be discussed on two levels:

- Student feedback and achievement in examinations
- Public feedback

Students:

The first time I ran the module, student feedback was my primary concern, since the twelve characters were both my research collaborators and pedagogic guinea-pigs. Overall the feedback was positive (see appendix). However, good feedback means little if the examination results were poor; I was anxious that an open-ended, research-led approach might leave them stranded when it came to examinations. Of the twelve students, six got a first in the final exam (comprised of two papers), three got 2.1s and three got 2.2s; this spread surprised and pleased me as I expected more 2.1s and fewer firsts, especially given the theoretical bias of the course (which is unusual for the History of Art department).

Moreover, it was extremely satisfying to find that, of the five students were awarded firsts overall in the History of Art department this year, three had followed the Art & Spectacle module. At the other end of the scale, of the three students who received a 2.2 in the Art & Spectacle module, two received a 2.2 as their overall result.

Conference:

Despite having sold only 90 tickets three days before the event, an advertisement in *Time Out* managed to pull in a large crowd and on the day the Starr Auditorium was almost full, with 230 people. I mentioned the Reinvention Centre in the introduction, and its logo was on the information sheet handed out to every delegate. Marko Daniel, events curator at the Tate, noted that he had never seen so many Tate curators at a conference; I take this to reflect the timeliness of the subject and its scope for further research. In the days following the conference I received positive feedback from academic colleagues in London, as well as messages from European critics who had listened to it online. I left the event with a strong sense that this 5 hour event could be stretched into a three-day conference addressing what I now perceived to be discrete issues: the legacy of Situationism; the late capitalist museum and spectacle; audiences and spectatorship; medium and technology; Bourdieu vs Rancière. (The latter I have taken forward into an application to the Institute of Advanced Studies to have Rancière as a visiting fellow at Warwick in 2009; we successfully received the money for this, but unfortunately Rancière is unable to come.)

In terms of dissemination, wherever possible I have enthused about the Reinvention Centre to colleagues at Warwick and at other universities, both here and abroad. I think it is a real asset to the culture of the university, but I am unsure of my ability to persuade my colleagues to be creative with the teaching initiatives it invites, particularly in relationship to new technology. In May I held a revision class for all third years in the space, which allowed two of my colleagues to experience the Centre, but I suspect that for most staff there is level of security in a 'banking' model of education; you have to be curious about others' views to undertake this kind of collaborative research. I suspect that it is also much easier to adopt this approach with contemporary art, whose values are more open to speculation than canonical material.

The experience of teaching this module and receiving a Reinvention Centre Fellowship has also been formative of a new direction in my own work, exploring the recent interest in experimental pedagogic formats by contemporary artists. An early version of this paper appeared in *Modern Painters* (September 2008) and subsequent versions have been presented in New York, Wolverhampton, Amsterdam and Chicago.

6. Implications

I had begun the research project with two additional questions:

- Can a collaborative research project with an emphasis on writing and editing (as a way of digesting information) provide an effective alternative to assessed and non-assessed essays?
- To what extent is it possible to conceive of and implement group assessment in History of Art?

Having now taught this module, I am pessimistic about the possibility of introducing collaborative assessment within History of Art. This is primarily because seminars are not frequent enough to permit mentoring and assessment of group activity. My previous experience of collaborative assessment was at MA level, on a course where students have access to staff 5 days a week; the approach was more studio based and led to the production of a collaborative exhibition. At undergraduate level in the humanities, the sheer volume of students and administration (especially in small departments such as History of Art) prevents the contact hours necessary for mentoring a collaborative research project. In addition, the type of material being presented in each seminar on this module (theory + contemporary art) doesn't easily lend itself to a collaborative output. My attempts to get the students to edit each others' work was on the whole a failure; my sense is that the majority of students are struggling to keep on top of the dense theoretical material presented in each seminar, without adding the problem of making this material comprehensible to a third party. So at the moment the question of changing methods of assessment remains an unresolved problem for me.

The other implications of the Rethinking Spectacle project are perhaps theoretical reflections on the possibility of student-centred teaching in the contemporary university.

Freire argues that the poles of teacher and student need to be reconciled, so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students. He conceives education as a process of becoming, a reflection of his understanding of subjectivity as necessarily incomplete. But what drives this desire to know? Similarly, in Rancière there is no account of the motivation that encourages students to learn with the teacher. Through my own experience of teaching, and the contradictions that ensue from relinquishing some (but

not all) control of a module to the students, it seems to me that the pedagogic process is founded on a more complicated dynamic than the simple collapse of two previously distinct and straightforward roles (teacher, and student). Working in an educational system that is geared so wholly around the valorisation of good examination marks as outcome, I am cannot fail to be aware of my power and responsibility when setting examinations and marking them.¹ In short, staff can concede a degree of freedom and flexibility to teaching, but can never overcome their privileged position within the institutional system of the university. This is not to say that I think it can or should be overcome; only that its theorisation needs to be more complex than Freire and Rancière allow for.

In his Seminar XVII, delivered in 1969, in the aftermath of the turbulent events of 1968, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan presents four ‘discourses’, each of which describes a social situation and the underlying (unconscious) agencies it contains. The four discourses are basically an investigation into power relations and situations of desire within them. I see the advantage of Lacan’s system being that *four* agencies are brought into play in each scenario, rather than just two (eg student-teacher, or analyst-analysand). One of the four discourses that Lacan presents is the discourse of the University, which has a self-evident relationship to the problem I am presenting. (The others are the discourse of the Master, the discourse of the Hysteric, and the discourse of the Analyst; there is a clearly implied value judgment from the discourse of the Master – as the worst – through the discourse of the University and the discourse of the Hysteric, to the discourse of the Analyst as the preferred model). Unfortunately there is no simple way to explain these discourses. All of them take the form of a *matheme* in which one psychic element (in the bottom left position) is the truth or hidden motivation of a desiring agent (top left) that acts upon an Other (top right), producing a surplus outcome or loss (bottom right).



In the Discourse of the University, this is represented by the following *matheme*:



Here the dominant position (the top left corner, S2) is that of knowledge, the master signifier. It is a commandment that says ‘Continue. March on. Keep on knowing more

¹ I did try and make this task more creative by asking the students to put themselves in my position, and each to come up with two exam questions for the revision class. Many of their suggested questions were uncannily close to those I had set, which reassured me that the aims of the module were being understood and digested, despite the requests for more structure on the feedback forms.

about more.' (S.XVII, p105). The university enunciates itself from this position of 'neutral' knowledge as a categorical imperative. It acts upon the 'raw' uneducated subject (the student, *a*), producing $\$$, a subject barred to itself. Žižek has suggested that it is important not to view the barred subject just in Foucauldian terms, as a subject of knowledge/disciplinary regulation, but also as what eludes knowledge and its disciplinary grip; the barred subject is also a surplus or remainder that cannot be contained and controlled. Significantly, it also fails to identify with *S1*, which is the truth of the university discourse, hidden behind the bar, is power: the ideological biases that inform the performance and transmission of knowledge. In other words, knowledge in the university serves to legitimate other structures of domination. Essentially, the discourse of the university attempts to regulate both students and teachers to make them responsible, accountable, and productive both within the field and within a larger ideological system. The upshot is that for as long as this ideological structure remains in place behind knowledge (in this case, a neo-liberal bureaucratised infrastructure in which the student configured as a consumer-subject of assessment and learning outcomes) *the discourse of the University is inflexible*. There is no scope for admitting 'deviant' practices or desires within established assessment protocols.

There is much more to be said about the Lacanian discourses, such as the degree to which the other discourses might present alternative models. For example, Christopher McMahon has suggested that the discourse of the Hysteric might present an alternative in which students would 'be more able to produce writings which raise questions over and against the logos and/or the conventions of the discipline', since the 'hidden' position in this discourse is *a*, his or her fantasy, which takes the form of questioning (eg. in a university context, who assesses the assessors?). Provocatively, McMahon rejects the discourse of the Analyst as an option; for him it is a belated position, ethical yet apolitical and thus incompatible with teaching. I am not convinced by McMahon's thesis, but it does foreground the need to think more openly about the aims and function of the contemporary university

Faced with these dilemmas, and wary of trying to find the 'right' way to teach in an increasingly bureaucratised and corporate university system, at the moment my only conclusion is that any changes to the student-teacher relationship will remain superficial unless accompanied by larger changes in the ideological framework of the university as a whole; a task which is seemingly insurmountable given the present level of state interference in education. A more flexible approach to assessment may be one small place to start.

7. Resources

Everything about the module can be found on the spectacle website:
<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/arthistory/research/spectacle/>

The Tate Modern webcast of the conference at
http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/rethinking_spectacle/default.jsp

The 'research blog' can be viewed by members of Warwick University only at:
<http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/spectacle/>

8. References

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin, 1985
- Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press, 1991
- Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Norton and Company, 2007
- Slavoj Zizek, 'Homo Sacer as the Object of the Discourse of the University', <http://www.lacan.com/hsacer.htm>
- Christopher Robert McMahon, 'Hysterical Academies: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses', *Language, Society and Culture*, issue 2, 1997, <http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/tle/JOURNAL/Articles/McMahon/McMahon.html>

9. Contact details

All the students are available for comment; the department can supply contact information.

Dr Mark Godfrey, Tate Modern: 07946 542340

10. Supplementary information

The research blog contains images, video links, and writing by both myself and the students.

Feedback from questionnaires (Spring 2007):

I asked the students to grade on a scale of 4 (excellent) to 1 (poor) the following components of the course:

The research blog:

Eight students gave it the top rating; three students gave it the next highest.

Podcasting training session:

Eight students gave it 3; two students gave it the lowest rating.

Trips to London

This was an overwhelming success: ten students gave it the top rating; the others gave it the next highest.

Use of films, DVDs etc:

Another popular aspect: eleven students gave it the top rating; the other gave it the next highest.

Discussion-based analysis of texts

Eight students gave this the top rating; two each rated it 3 and 2.

Developing the module week by week rather than following a set outline:

This received mixed feedback. Only two students gave this the top rating (and these two who went on to get firsts in the exam). Seven students gave it the next highest rating, 3; two students gave it 2. I should add that I handed out these feedback forms before

doing a final revision class; at the end of this several of the more anxious students reassured me this was immensely helpful in finally bringing the module's themes together. However, I couldn't have supplied this at the beginning as I didn't know it myself. It's a careful balance between giving the students some freedom and letting them feel occasionally lost.

Working in small groups:

Again this seems to be mixed, but overall positive:

Four students gave this the top rating; five gave it the next highest, 3; the rest gave it 2.

Use of the Reinvention Centre:

Mainly positive: four students gave it the top rating; 6 students gave it 3; two students gave it 2 – I imagine (from the Reinvention Centre feedback forms completed before Easter) this may be to do with the discomfort of the seating.

Connecting the module to the Tate conference:

I think the students had a mixed time here; some of it was pitched too high for them, and some of the papers were not as closely connected to the module as I had hoped. Six students gave it the top rating; three gave it 3; one person gave it the lowest rating.

Connecting the research blog to a publicly accessible website:

This made me realise that the idea of producing 'real' research for a public is not a priority for third years who want to pass their exams! Only one person gave it the top rating, the majority (eight students) rated it 3. Three rated it 2 (the last student couldn't attend).

The discussion with Andrea Fraser:

Four students gave it top rating; five gave it the next highest. Two gave it 2. (The last student couldn't attend.) I should have asked for more detail on this. Personally I thought it was a fantastic to expose the students to this kind of artist, but they may have been put off by Fraser's rather intimidating manner.

Overall rating of the module:

Half the class gave it the top rating; four gave it 3; two gave it 2 (and one didn't answer).

In general the written feedback was more helpful; I have copied the most interesting responses below.

Comments on the T&L:

"It's very different to any other module I have taken before, it took me a while to get into the new method of teaching and learning."

"I think it was quite fast paced and a lot of reading which after last two years of university we haven't been used to. I'd hope that each year students will find it easier, after being more challenged in their first two years." [this alarmed me – what have they been doing in the last two years?!]

What did you find most interesting/useful?

"the best aspect was the trip to London!"

"the mock debates and being 'forced' to argue a point on the spot"

"the fact that we were challenged to do our own research, write reviews etc. Discussion encouraged."

“a very fresh approach to learning and helpful use of new technology... blogs, sound clips, etc.”

“using our knowledge on site – ie in London”

“the discussion in seminars”

“covering new art media and period than before. Looking at actual contemporary issues. Process of blog and symposium.”

“most interesting was the weekly discussion where key ideas could be extracted and informally discussed.”

“exploring new concepts and being encouraged to argue our points on the spot”

“no more student presentations – good!”

“seeing contemporary art works in London and understanding their relevance to the course. Also the range of different images we looked at – film and audio and photographs, etc”

“putting up blog entries, sound clips, etc”

“in general I found using the research blog very enjoyable”

“I found the group discussion every week, as well as the shared out-of-class work, a very productive and insightful way of learning.”

Suggestions for improvement?

[The majority of this feedback revolves around the need for more structure and a sense of where it is going. This is something I have to balance more carefully when teaching it again this Autumn.]

“stronger overall structure – aims and goals, perhaps”

“been clearer as to where it was all leading/how it all linked together”

“perhaps could have a clearer structure – it is interesting and beneficial to do it as research-led project, but unfortunately we have to be marked on it in a clear, structured way so it would help if the course was a little more tailored to this.”

“I would have preferred... a stronger overall structure to the module and a better overview of how the topics inter-related.”

“I think the course will naturally be better organised next year, after the experience of this years, as it was it's first year.”

‘potentially it should be longer, we have covered a lot of stuff’

“as it was quite experimental I feel unable to comment”

“more input from the lecturer – no high quantity but some instruction to aid understanding”

“possibly a little more structure – sometimes I felt a bit lost”

Reinvention Centre:

Did you feel you could contribute more than usual when in this space?

“No, I never felt able to contribute because the material was very different to modules I have taken before, I never felt as though my participation was intellectually relevant – my contributions seemed trivial and uninformed”

“yes, the format was very conducive to participation”

“I felt I had to, whether or not I could understand, that seemed part of the module's purpose – because it required a line of questioning.”

“the relaxed atmosphere of the space helped, but only if I read the texts beforehand”

“yes”

“yes definitely”

“Definitely. Liked the fact that participation was encouraged and did find a difference being in Centre to horrible rooms in Humanities.”

“definitely. The space and research-led style combined well”

"I spoke more, but not sure if this was helpful or the right input!! But the space did offer the choice for group discussion which was good"

"Definitely – not only was the environment more relaxed and informal but I found my attention levels also remained high."

Did this method of teaching help with your dissertation?

"slightly"

"no"

"not really for me, it was a completely different subject matter"

"more in content than approach but yes. Weekly seminars which were very active kept my brain functioning"

"it gave me skills to research and inclination"

"not just learning or being told information but being made to think critically"

"I had already done a large part of my research for my dissertation before I started the module, but it would have been helpful had it come earlier in the three years..."

"it highlighted the importance of wider reading and the usefulness of comparing and critiquing various sources"

"yes, in fact I used a similar blog to conduct my dissertation research"

"Yes – although unnerving to be so independent and questioning in approach, the line of thought was relevant"

"Definitely – helped in the way I approached texts and collected notes critically, rather than passively accepting whatever was written down."

One of my aims with the course was to try and impact positively upon postgraduate recruitment figures in the History of Art department. Five out of twelve students said they would be interested in pursuing an MA following this module; sadly I haven't been able to persuade any of them to stay at Warwick, although one may return in 2008. (This problem also relates to the ongoing issue of Warwick's History of Art MA fees compared to our rivals.)

Art, Participation, Teaching

[text pasted on the Student as Producer website, 17 June 2007]

For the last three years I've been engaged in a critique of viewer participation in contemporary art. This has arisen as a result of two trends: firstly, the conspicuous rise of participatory structures in art since the early 1990s, and secondly, the embrace of participation and social inclusion in New Labour (and EU) cultural funding policy. The rhetoric of both is uncannily similar, and yet their ends could not be more different. My research has therefore focused on the importance of making distinctions between modes of participation (pseudo, symbolic, critical etc). This issue is both political and aesthetic, and has an obvious bearing on the forms of critical pedagogy under discussion on this site.

Receiving a Reinvention Fellowship this year has enabled me to pursue this research in relation to a concept that is often perceived as the opposite of participation: spectacle. (Most justifications for participatory art come from a desire to oppose spectacle as passive, seductive, commercial, etc.) My third year module 'Art and Spectacle' is research-led in two ways: it furthers my own research, and encourages independent, research-led learning in students (here I appreciate the distinction made below by Rust & Jenkins). Through the work of philosopher Jacques Rancière, I realised that the histories of spectacle and participation insist on a number of recurrent binaries: active/passive, authentic/false, synchronic/diachronic, static/dynamic, mediation/immediacy. Privileging the positive character in each binary can actually serve to reinforce each pairing; on the other hand, the simple goal of overcoming them is no less fraught with problems.

Rancière provides an alternative model by which to think both education and participation in theatre/art. In his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), he explores the work of maverick C19th teacher Joseph Jacotot. Jacotot, who is French, finds himself teaching a class that speaks exclusively Flemish. They have no language in common, rendering impossible a straightforward transmission of knowledge (what Freire calls the 'banking' method of education). Jacotot resolves this by reading a book with the class, painstakingly comparing the French and Flemish texts. What interests Rancière in this case study is Jacotot's presumption of equality of intelligence between himself and his students. Moreover, this presumption is a method and not a goal: equality is continually verified by being put into practice.

While I have a number of reservations about Rancière's proposition of equality, I have experimented with teaching 'Art and Spectacle' as an ignorant schoolmaster. My paper for the conference will address this experience: the possibilities but also the limitations of rethinking the student as producer. Crucial to this consideration will be the question of whether it is ever possible to escape what Lacan calls the 'discourse of the university': the inevitability of one's position of privilege and experience as a teacher and 'subject supposed to know'.