

Just what is it that makes today's degree shows look so similar, so unappealing?

A Reflection on the Degree Show Conundrum

The title is, of course, a provocation. It is also a take on Richard Hamilton's iconic collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) that in turn borrowed its title from an advert in an American home interiors magazine. But I think you know what I mean; why do most fine art degree shows look more like incoherent collections of individual artworks than compelling group exhibitions? After all, the very first "degree shows"—the Paris Salons, in operation at the Academie des Beaux Arts in Paris from 1667, originally showing works by recent graduates from the Ecole de Beaux Arts – practically invented the idea of the public art exhibition in the first place, and managed to set an industry standard for hundreds of years. So why don't degree shows attempt to do the same today and re-invent not only themselves, but also the format of the group exhibition more generally?

If I have to pinpoint the moment salon style degree shows began to feel outdated despite all the works on display being unquestionably contemporary, it would have to be when the curated, thematic group exhibition became the format of choice for the professional art field. As the main vehicle for both independent curatorial authorship and the pedagogic ambitions of public art institutions, the thematic approach to curating radically changed the expectations on how an exhibition should hang together and be experienced. Rather than grouping works together according to previously established categories such as historical periods, national schools, or individual artistic trajectories, the thematic exhibition demanded to be read as a distinct field of meaning, potentially offering multiple entry points for audiences to become engaged with its subject matter whilst providing a reassuringly comprehensible frame.

The practice of organizing exhibitions thematically gained momentum with the establishment of the curator as author in the 1970s, became increasingly common in the 1980s and '90s, and turned into an ubiquitous industry standard around the millennium with the opening of Tate Modern and its thematically curated collections displays. Beyond that point, group exhibitions invariably had to be *about* something, or pivot around a shared sentiment or common starting point, to be taken seriously. This made degree shows – usually made up of works by students who had been admitted to art school precisely because their practices differed from each other and were not possible to make sense of under one overarching theme or question – look amateur in their lack of coherence. As discursive frameworks became increasingly important for the production of cultural value and public validation, collective presentations of artworks without such framing devices suddenly became difficult to read as *exhibitions*. Looking rather like displays of assorted works with no meaningful connections between them, they seemed to lack critical clout, be more geared towards the art fair and commercial gallery circuit, and therefore of lesser critical and cultural importance. To put it bluntly, the degree show rather appeared as a reservoir of individual works longing to be picked up by galleries and curators in order to be circulated and attributed value to, than a critical practice setting the agenda for its own public presentation.

But the ambivalent status of contemporary degree shows does not end with their lack of discursive frames and dated display aesthetics. An even deeper concern is the relationship between the overall educational goals and the end-of-year exhibitions at art academies. As many art schools focus their teaching on critical, collective and socially engaged processes, as well as context-specificity and the public sphere, it seems oddly misplaced and counter-productive to end almost every BA and MA programme in Europe with a white cube scenario more commonly associated with commercial contexts and the conventions of individual authorship. Rather than reflect the aims and goals of the education as a whole, the degree show appears as a standardized gesture stuck on at the very end of the programme. It seems that even if the emperor has a brand new set of clothes, all roads still lead to the white, empty centre at the middle of empire, making the standard gallery show scenario look practically unavoidable and misleadingly neutral ideologically.

This contradiction is mirrored in the often awkward relationship presented by degree shows between the presumed collective spirit of the group exhibition situation and the competitive pressures of individual exams. Many art schools examine their students based on the individual work they present as part of the collective degree show. But large group exhibitions are rarely situations where individual artworks look their best – neither is the aspiration towards individual excellence a good premise for making interesting group exhibitions. The tensions between individual aspirations and group dynamics are also underpinned by a false sense of agency over the situation as a whole. The rhetoric surrounding the working process leading up to end-of-year exhibitions often revolves around the students taking charge, “doing something with it” and re-inventing the format. But it is easily forgotten that more often than not, the students have neither chosen the place or time for the exhibition, nor each other; a set of circumstances that can feel disempowering and be difficult to navigate as a group.

Although the degree show is thought of as a ritual, marking the students’ passing from an educational- to a professional context, it rather ends up being an exception – an unlikely scenario the students will never encounter again in their careers as artists. In my experience, everyone involved – the students, the curator, the venue (if there is one: in Scandinavia it is common that degree shows are hosted by public galleries, but this is far from the case in many other countries where degree exhibitions are often staged in the students’ studios or elsewhere in the school) – feels compromised in one way or another by the specific situation of the degree exhibition: the venue does not invest the time or money in the occasion like they would for a professional exhibition, treating it more like an act of goodwill than a bone fide contribution to their programme; the curator is bound to working with the works selected by the students and ends up in a position that seems more like a facilitator, making it difficult to apply their practice and ideas in the way they normally would; and the students are often caught between a rock and a hard place, having plenty of public attention, but without the professional means and preparation a public gallery exhibition would usually involve.

So, what is to be done? Of course, not every degree show has to let go of the conventional modes of display and incongruent meaning production the format has become associated with. But at the art schools that take pride in being at the forefront of critical practice, this ought to be the goal. I would like to think that it is at the art schools, rather than at the professional galleries or the curatorial programmes, that the format of the collective

exhibition could be re-invented in a meaningful way, and that it would be a missed opportunity for the students not to take on this challenge as part of the degree show situation.

Exhibitions can be understood as spatial expressions of the societies within which they are created. But they are also situations for testing out new visions for those societies, in actual or symbolic terms. To repeat the standardized format of the degree show inevitably means to reproduce certain assumptions of the role of the artist and the relation between artist and society. If the school has ambitions to question or re-negotiate those relations, that should be reflected not only in the students' individual practices, but collectively, at the moment when the students and the school meet the public – especially now, when voices from philosophy to climate justice advocates are arguing for the end of the era of individualism, something which undoubtedly will transform the way we think about the role of the artist and about art education.

To create the conditions for that to happen some groundwork needs to be done. Firstly, the final exams should be decoupled from the degree shows to let go of individual anxieties of failure and success, freeing up mental space to take risks and experiment together with the format and its challenges. Secondly, the degree show should be seen as a learning situation, rather than a final result, where experimentation and the testing of boundaries is encouraged as much as it is within the students' individual practices throughout the rest of their education – and it goes without saying that what is to be learned must remain open for negotiation in dialogue with the urgencies of the times, avoiding the situation stagnating into another set of repeatable conventions and expectations.

From such a perspective, the degree show could rather be used to reinvent what a collective exhibition can be and, indeed, how art meets the public – beyond the standards of both the historical Salons and the contemporary curatorial assemblage. Not least because the curated, thematic group show that once rendered the Salon-style exhibitions hopelessly unfashionable, is now itself beginning to look increasingly tired. More than fifty years after it became established as the exhibition format of choice for any self-respecting public gallery, the so called “essay” exhibition's claims to collective meaning production looks more like the mirror image of a society that excels in coming together through abstract relations rather than real proximity and care – symbolized by assemblies created through conceptual frameworks where each artwork is presented first and foremost as autonomous, remaining essentially unaffected by every other work in the space. Seen in this way, it seems imperative that rather than staging scenarios to be consumed like interior magazines or read like essays, the end-of-year exhibition should be a moment to consider future possible forms of collectivity and how to express them spatially.

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Hjelde's essay *Showing-Knowing: The Exhibition, The Student, and The Higher Education Art Institution* (subsequently published by *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, Volume 19, 2020).