

CONTINGENCY, ELASTICITY, *TETRIS* AND THE MUSES: EXPLORING SHIFTING STREAMS OF THE CLASSROOM AT THE 8TH ELIA ACADEMY

Michael Greaves



INTRODUCTION

Curiosity, hybridity, research and social change are terms that are often used when describing actions relating to the idea of art and making art now. Not limited to art and art practice, these concepts span a number of contexts and operate in ways which might not have been imagined by earlier users. The 'smudge' of these terms also leaves residues which evoke action and lead to new ways in which to operate, enact and converse with the complex nature of the technological world we inhabit.

These concepts are also central to the process and practice of making art, and teaching art for that matter, and it is within these concepts that the matrix of what goes on in both the studio and the classroom unfolds. The reader may note the author's reluctance to tie down a 'how' or a 'what' here – my approach is moving more towards a 'why.' This is because these concepts are slippery and move along a continuum that includes the individual, the small group and then the public sphere, both in and outside of the process.

In this paper, I intend to draw a wide circle, a long bow, within which to place these terms, and to use anecdotes and conversations drawn from the 8th ELIA Academy (European League of Institutes of the Arts) held in London (5-7 July 2017) to provide a context for further discussion. My intention is to provoke the reader's questioning of their own 'why' in relation to practice, teaching and this new technological world which we semi-analogue beings inhabit.

ORDER AND CONTINGENCY

The teaching process can be described in a number of ways. One might be as material that is projected, and as a process that follows a path. Information is gathered, analysed, considered, formed, partitioned, packaged, performed, lined up, connected – among other things – before it is presented to the learner. This sequence can be logical, as described, or it might constitute a number of elements in a different order. What is consistent is that usually this information is presented to the learner, and has some sense of method and process, some intended outcome. Within the institution, this outcome is a measurable outcome, and is usually attached to some outside mechanism of funding, efficacy or prestige. What is hoped for at the end of this process is that a transformational change will occur in the learner, from the material and experience that is presented – that somehow all of the work undertaken by the facilitator will come good, and right, and in the end make a meaningful and relevant set of experiences to arrive at the desired outcome. The teaching process must also be responsive, as well as inclusive, adaptive and elastic – there must be contingency.

"Contingency is quite simply the fact that things could be otherwise than they are."¹ Contingency is present in every transaction, even if sometimes it is not even tacitly acknowledged. Jeremy Till, head of art and design college Central St Martins and pro-vice-chancellor of the University of the Arts London (UAL), affirms contingency in arts education as vital to both the survival of the sector and in maintaining efficacy in the teaching of the arts beyond the institution. In "a happy accident of reading that brings what has been at the periphery of one's vision right to the centre,"² Till discovered contingency in the writing of Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman,³ who regards the concept as both essential and at odds with the modernist project, which places a rational order at its pinnacle.

To interpret Bauman very superficially, the moment of contingency can be sympathetically reduced to a questioning of the order of things – things that might in a way seem proper, related to the constituents that engage with this order and somehow sympathetic to the idea of it. Contingency in the arts and in arts education sits at the 'fold' or hinge between where things are and where they need to be. One explanation of this paradox is that education is now explicitly linked with standards and measurable outcomes, which directly influence the ways in which the classroom is constructed and the kinds of agency that both students and teachers have in this space.



Till uses his passion, architecture, to unpack Baumann and ideas of contingency, order and the rational, situated in the physical and lived environment that architecture inhabits. He applies his argument to the relationships between Aristotle, Habermas and Hegel,⁴ but it is his discussion of Le Corbusier that most impacts the idea of the arts, and the notion of teaching from the inside and from the outside – or the ideal and the actual.

The ideal and the actual sit at the centre of issues of elasticity in teaching and learning, parallel to the differences between the creative industries and the cultural industries. Charlotte Webb notes that it is harder to imagine the end of capitalism than it is to imagine the end of the world,⁵ and this just reinforces the ways in which the constructions or architecture that we have placed on our actions constitute a paralysis. Hence Le Corbusier's vision for Pessac, born in the 1920s, was modified by the contingency of its inhabitants and their needs.⁶ The same phenomenon can be noted in the educational environment, where an order is seemingly at the core of many decisions aligned with inputs and outputs. The argument really turns on the idea of a duality, one half of which is constantly under threat through fiscal policy.

Charlotte Webb and Fred Deakin explain:

For Bauman, contingency is the twin of order: 'Awareness of the world's contingency and the idea of order as the goal and the outcome of the practice of ordering were born together, as twins; perhaps even Siamese twins. The reason is simple: one does not have the need for order unless one has experienced disorder; one does not conceive of regularity unless one is buffeted by the unexpected [...] Contingency was discovered together with the realisation that if one wants things and events to be regular, repeatable and predictable, one needs to do something about it; they won't be such on their own.' And what one does is to act as the surgeon, separating the Siamese twins, knowing that one will probably be sacrificed so that the privileged one, the one with the better structure, can survive. Contingency cannot be tolerated in the modern project, be it architectural, political, social or philosophical.⁷

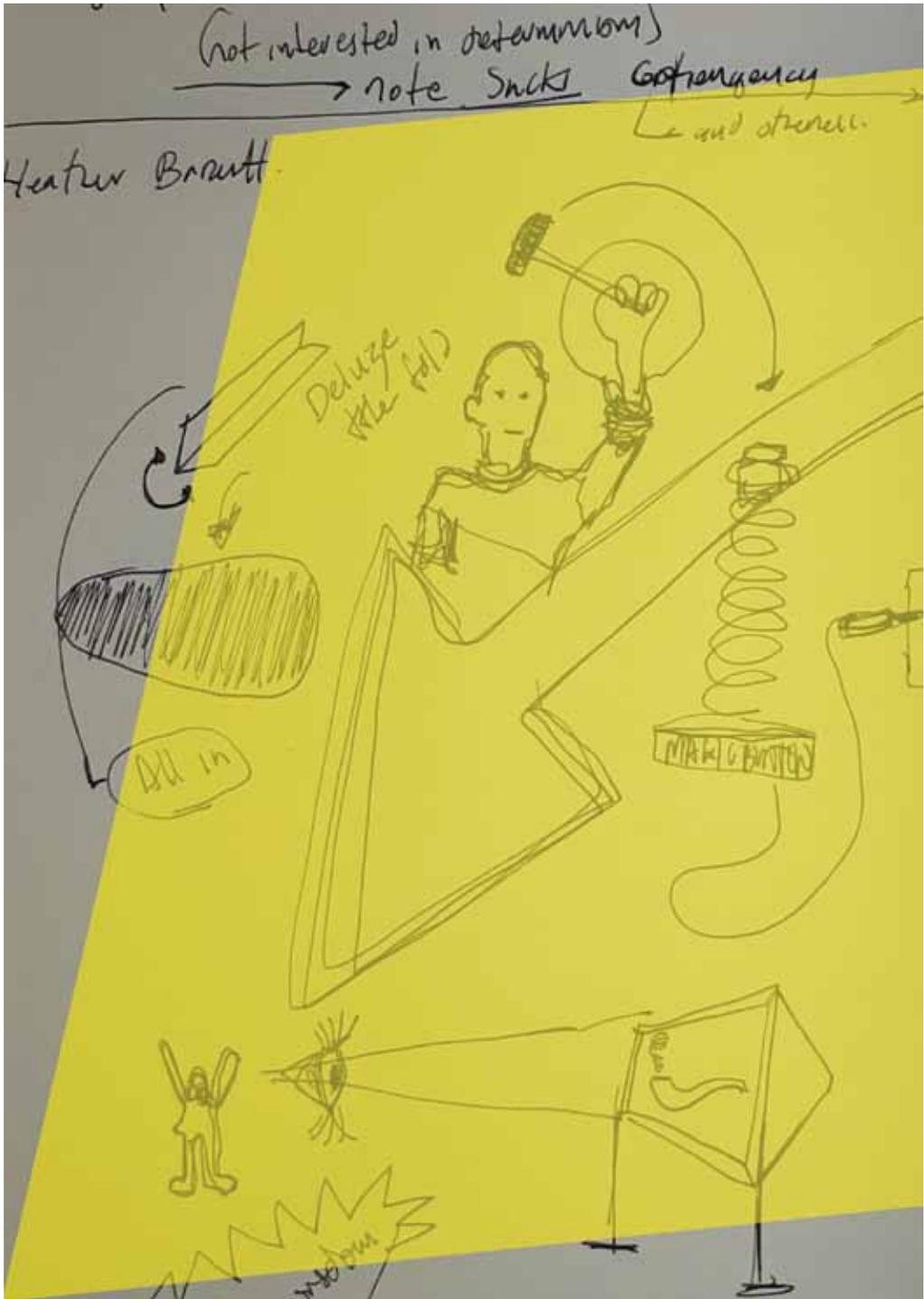
A focus of many of the discussions between conference attendees and presenters was the recognition that there is a noticeable 'creep' in the classroom, in terms of the teaching and learning process, and a reshuffling of what it is that is being done and why it is being done. This process reflects a greater weighting on fulfilling fiscal requirements, and then relating these to student outcomes for future funding and programme resourcing – akin to the slow removal of contingency in gearing things towards a single outcome. There is a rationalisation applied to what happens in the classroom, how a student should progress and the measurement of that progress. This is reflective of an inputs/outputs syndrome, where the efficacy of a course or pathway of study is measured in terms of the job market and associated data.

Many of the "things" that I am pointing to are fluid, do not have a set time frame, are adaptive to markets and, in short, fall outside the institution but have a direct effect on what the institution is. While this may not be a perfect reflection of the entire sector, nor that specific to the arts, what I am trying to convey here is simply that the notion of contingency is especially important to education, for the student and for the institution. And meeting some of the measures of the idea of education and its outcomes has meant that the idea of contingency, and how it manifests in teaching and learning in relation to key drivers of qualification efficacy, has become somewhat uncertain.

INSTITUTION AND INSTITUTIVIDUAL

In the keynote presentations at the 8th ELIA Academy, the urgency for a balance between rationalisation for the market and contingency was a constant theme, consolidating contingency as an underlying change agent in considering and reconsidering how we as educators plan and prepare for the unstable and exciting future.

Heather Barnett spoke of connections and relationships between art and science, slime mould and networks, or primal survival modalities that relate to both people and to organisations. She identified the network relationships



between single-celled organisms, working in unison towards a shared survival goal, and how these are reflected in real-world contexts of travel and city planning. Slime mould – considered a non-important member of the natural world, inasmuch as the function it performs would not be missed if it became extinct – actually provides a real and necessary lens through which to view the ‘more important’ human world. This was a moment of clarity in showing how the arts and design operate in two contexts in the world. Charlotte Webb and Fred Deakin opened our eyes to the possibility and promise, as well as the raft-like nature of the “post-digital art school,” combining the fluid nature of the start-up with the potential to both be a financial entity and a microscope on the human potential of technology. Bart van Rosmalen closed the conference by invoking one of the most important vehicles for reflection for arts and teaching practice, “the Nine Muses.”

What connects these seemingly disparate nodes of considering elasticity in the classroom and in the arts is a reflection of the core of what is important to teaching and the arts – and it is not outputs, nor is it data gathered to substantiate the efficacy of a programme. Rather, it is people, connection, communication and the body. Here I can do no more than sketch out a cross-section of some of the interrogations made at ELIA in 2017.

But where are the learners? And how are these learners reflected in the matrix of the institution? The position of the college or university, and how it relates to the learner, is fundamental. The learner might best now be described as an *institutivudal*. The institutivudal is now fundamental to considering how we might continue institutional efficacy in teaching, both in the present and in preparing for unimagined futures.

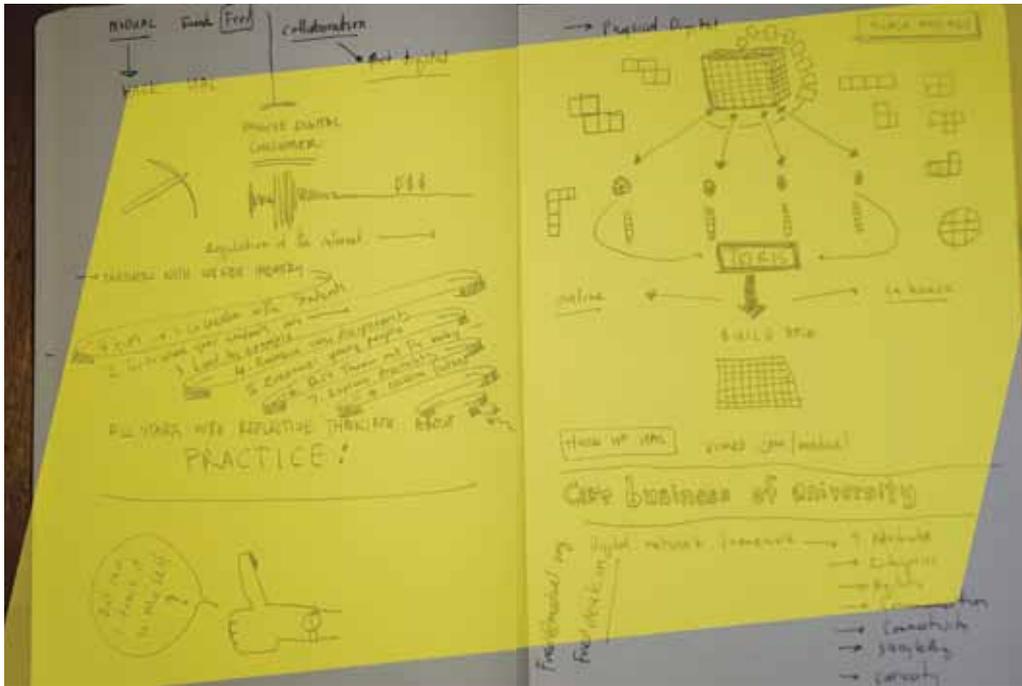
In a conversation on the changing nature of the institution with Johannes Bruder and Matthias Tarasiewicz, Dušan Barok foregrounded “the institutivudal.”⁸ In his contribution, he identified the importance of contingency for higher education in the arts. Dušan is a writer, editor and artist living in Bergen, Norway, and for over a decade has been the editor of the Monoskop wiki for collaborative studies in the arts. Dušan has an open and fluid mind – somewhat removed from the studio, but still a part of the studio – and it is in this crossover that the term *institutivudal* makes most sense.

The institutivudal can be simply described as an individual who over their lifetime has learned skills, methods and techniques, along with forming networks and subcultures in which to enact these skills, methods and techniques in ways which inform and add to the individual’s life experience and relationships. The institutivudal may have a very good working knowledge of design, art or music methodologies, and may use these skills in the ways that best suit them in the mode that is most relevant. They may be part of networks of people from different backgrounds and professions that jigsaw their skills together in terms of the institutivudal’s relationship to the fiscal marketplace. They might look for alternative learning modes and methods, at any time that is necessary to complete the task at hand, all the while building a set of skills that are specialised and open to change. The term institutivudal well describes any student of the digital age today.

So, if contingency is something that is different from what is, then suggesting that a student arrives at the institution armed with a “moment of contingency” is not beyond possibility. It can originate from outside of the institution and as well as from the inside.

The nature of the institution and the institutivudal are not in fact too dissimilar – but the ways that they operate are different, and it is in this operation that contingency lies. The institution is a slow-moving thing, a compound or a nucleus of things, that is built on a foundation of knowledge that has been thoroughly interpreted, applied and formulated to reflect the history of knowledge, the world, the outside. It needs to be slow-moving; it also needs to be resilient, but capable of change.

The institutivudal on the other hand is like an electron whizzing around the nucleus. The nucleus might be the institution, it might be a process, it might be an idea, group or thing. But what is important in this description are the concepts of fluidity and attraction. While the institution might be attracted to something, the speed at which it can change is limited by the weight of the compound. The institutivudal, however, unburdened by the weight of process, can shift and move at will, collecting skills, ideas and relationships at large. This is contingency.



Taking Jeremy Till's analysis of contingency, via Bauman, and the opposition to a rational model of a modernist order, contingency in education needs to eschew measurement of what happens in the classroom so that it is not solely based on outcomes, and can be measured in terms of how the institution and the institutivudual can network and create the learning and teaching space.

Fred Deakin works within this modality of the institutivudual in the practice of teaching and performing the elasticity of the classroom. Deakin's "Modual" platform performs this in the context of the structure of the market and the creativity of the individual. Although this analysis is based on a 'start-up' model, gearing application and invention toward a digital world, many of the processes he performs with his students can be applied to the arts as well.

Deakin's Modual is an intensive two-week digital workshop held at UAL that supports cross-disciplinary student teams to launch their own start-ups, projects and studios.⁹ Deakin defines his motivations for this project as being to encourage "an intentional switch from a passive digital consumer of information to an active digital creator"¹⁰ and, in the process, to enact a contingent practice insofar as the challenges and blend of the digital and the analogue inform and generate new kinds of digital learning strategies beyond those familiar from the usual institutional model. The connections that student generated-material make for the learner, and for the community of practice that the learner wishes to be a part of post-institution, are made apparent, and real-world interactions and collaborations shift the classroom into the world, in both a composite and reflective way.

Modual has partnered with creative industry leaders Mother (advertising agency), UsTwo (digital agency), Makerversity (make space) and Somerset House (creative start-up hub), as well as the Manchester School of Art and Falmouth School of Art to collaborate in online projects. The programme seeks to bring together students trained in different creative processes and build real-world networking and technology skills through a creative open process. In short, to add contingency to ideas of natural progression and development in programme materials, packaged in an alternative and active way.

Students manage, communicate and define their progression in the Modular programme during this intensive two-week participation period. While the course is enacted online, the blended practice with face-to-face teaching and learning is extremely important. Simply proposing that material and information be available, as in the just-in-time model of learning, is not enough.

This is reflected in how Modular students make their choices when presented with solely online or classroom interaction. As students work through the programme, they are assigned work in the digital environment or in the classroom environment – this alternates until day seven when the students are given the choice to work either totally online or in the classroom. It was not surprising, Deakin notes, that on day seven of one course only one student came to the classroom, while the rest chose to work at large via a digital format. However, Deakin notes that on day eight all of the students were in the classroom under their own volition – reflecting the tool-like nature of the online modes rather than any need to focus exclusively on the easy option of an online delivery model. It is also worth noting here that the majority of the students are already well versed in online technologies and ways of interacting, and that the need for analogue interaction should not be overlooked.

Although Deakin presents the programme in open mode, he sees it as a very serious undertaking. The programme is not just about throwing students together, utilising up-to-the-minute digital modes and applications and presenting it as novel. It is more of an original and refreshing amalgamation of current and traditional methodology that returns the efficacy of the moment to the students to create and to formulate concrete ideas and conditions for experimentation and projection. That these ideas are seen through a lens of contemporaneity is a value that cannot be defined in terms of the 'slowness' of the institution, but in effect celebrates the differences in the roles of the institution and of the institutivudinal necessary in unfolding contingency in the 'elastic' classroom of today.

This duality comes to bear at almost every turn when we think about how and what to do to reflect the changing marketplace and world outside of the institution – along with the 'what' and the 'why' that educators plan and carry out tasks within the institution.

Bart van Rosmalen weaves a narrative that reflects the duality of a kind of teaching, doing and reflective space, with the idea of counterforce in interactions, ideas of markership, attitudes, experience, material experience, and so on. Van Rosmalen describes the transition between the high-level thinking of the PhD, the institutional pinnacle, on the one hand, and the act of making, or narrating in the act of making, on the other: He describes curiosity and hybridity in the learning process of teaching and making – how often the act of making is inhibited by an expectation of behaviour or outcome. He notes that the unseen toil of the studio, that which goes unnoticed, is often the most important factor of all.¹¹

Van Rosmalen uses narrative and invokes the nine classical Muses in this unfolding of the process – a process that one can see happening in the classroom all of the time, but an action that is often, in experience, sidelined in the drive for a quantifiable product.

Van Rosmalen expresses the birth of reflection through Greek myth:

The Gods were doing their deeds day after day. But there was nobody to see it actively. It all passed unreflected [sic]. So they got questions whether this was 'good work' or not. They went to Zeus their chief on a strategic moment. He had won that day a fight with the Titans, the giants of that time. Zeus himself also wanted to be seen for that. So looking for a solution Zeus went to bed with the Goddess of memory: Mnemosyne. Out of this relation 9 muses were born. Their task was to sing about the deeds of the Gods. Remarkable moment. Reflection came in the world. We started to understand 'what was going on.' To my students, I often say that the muses were researchers *avant la lettre*. And interestingly enough they do it through making, it starts all with making. Thinking comes later.¹²



A DRAWING ANALOGY

Process and thinking were seen as key to how the elastic classroom operates in the conversations had in the breakout sessions at the 8th ELIA Academy. These two elements were often condensed into a single form – whether body, drawing, acting, networking, proposing, and so on – in relation to outcomes-based programmes. When teased out, these intermezzo occasions perform a very important role in the transformation of a student in the teaching and learning moment.

Let me position this idea in drawing. During the whole conference, in all of the keynote sessions and breakouts, I found myself drawing. This is not a usual activity for me in this setting, as I usually perform a more direct form of written notetaking. My drawing started as doodles, simple lines, tone and object forms, taking on stranger connections, one form leading to another. After some time, these drawings began to identify points of departure, thought, resolution. But what was most important in these drawings for me was the way that play with materials, in association with critical content, began to identify key points and moments for learning and consideration. Terry Rosenberg speaks of *ideational drawing* as a process of thinking-in-action and action-in-thinking via drawing, both as a process and a thinking space.¹³

The drawings that I made throughout the conference lie beneath these words, and reference connections to the words of the papers delivered as well as to the kinds of representations that I have experienced of the classroom and the teaching process, recessed in memory. These drawings are not sharp, they are not clear, nor are they associated with particular outcomes if I were to associate them with a classroom activity. However, through the elastic moment and via the notion of ideational drawing, these artefacts represent a free space of process and thinking that ultimately helps me to understand and consider a wider moment.

For me, this was a lightbulb moment in thinking about how the elastic classroom might operate, and how process and thinking can coalesce in teaching, uncoupled from any idea of outcome. My doodlings simply represent the creative process, which over time has been shoehorned into a criterion-based system of assessment.

CONCLUSION

Why are the educational spaces and the performative spaces so separated? How is it that certain things should be happening here, and others there? Why should one kind of process succumb to another, and why should one be more important than another just because they can be factored into a table or graph and related to some other kind of thing that makes it more meaningful? That the university does something and the institutividual does another seems to contradict almost every known construction of knowledge.

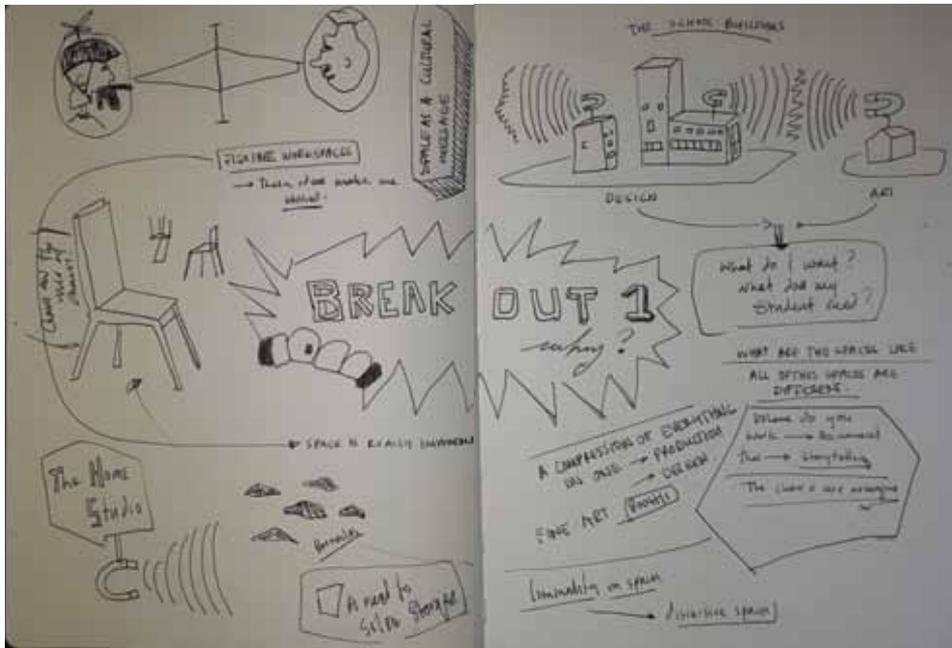
According to van Rosmalen, in the ancient Greek world, after having expended much effort in politics and philosophy, the members of the Agora moved to the theatre, where the same participants took on vastly different roles. This combination of activities – a serious side and a more playful, curious side – seems natural, yet so often absent from the classroom today. There is a value in shared activity that bridges the behavioural characteristics that define a classroom. For it is through a public and performative enactment of space and an elastic idea of learning through making and making alone that the lived experience contributes directly to the learning experience and augments it, despite a pre-programmed desired learning outcome.

What the 8th ELIA Academy has given me cannot be adequately defined in a written text. It was the lived experience of the conference – the many interactions, face to face, with educators in curious, physical and informal settings – that suggested to me ways in which the classroom should be identified as a space for interaction, not outcomes. It also suggested that using the methodology of *Tetris*, where a series of predefined shapes need to be kept constantly in motion to complete a line of the puzzle, the playing board itself needs to retain some efficacy in the process.



During the conference, Jeremy Till located the need for a contingent practice in teaching, emphasising that modern ideals need to be malleable to the DIY efforts of the institutividual, and that the ways in which funding is being supplied to arts education is having a real effect on the kinds of foreseeable outcomes that students are contemplating. Charlotte Webb and Fred Deakin reminded us of the need to address the transition between the analogue and the digital in a meaningful way, arguing that although the process is inevitable, it is a process that we need to project towards a usable future, not just any future. And Bart van Rosmalen reminded us of the need for interaction and play and for allowing the separate worlds of the serious and contained, on the one hand, and the open and performative, on the other, to combine in order to acknowledge the many selves that make practice possible – not just following a single direction that is identified by trends and 'productivity,' and that IS the bottom line.

Michael Greaves is a lecturer in painting at the Dunedin School of Art. His partially abstract paintings locate a frame of vision that multiplies, to be read as something that is attempting to locate a fluctuating position of assemblage as opposed to static vision. At play in his practice are the relationships that link the object, the translations of the object and thing, and the possible ways of representing these. Michael has completed a Master of Fine Arts degree (with Distinction), due to be awarded in December 2017.



- 1 William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann's Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 52.
- 2 Jeremy Till, "Architecture and Contingency," *Field*, 1:1 (2008), 120-35, at 125. See www.field-journal.org.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 125-6.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 5 Charlotte Webb and Fred Deakin, "Discovering the Post-digital Art School: Education for Possible Futures," keynote presentation at the 8th ELIA Academy, Central St Martins, University of the Arts London, 5-7 July 2017, http://www.elia-artschools.org/userfiles/File/customfiles/presentation-by-charlotte-webb-fred-deakin_20170707185036.pdf
- 6 *Ibid.*, 133.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 129-30.
- 8 Dušan Barok, "Sources and Resources," paper delivered at the Economics of Aesthetics Conference, FHNW Campus of the Arts Basel, Switzerland, 18-20 June 2015.
- 9 Modul: modualworkshop, www.vimeo.com/modual.
- 10 Webb and Deakin, "Discovering the Post-digital Art School."
- 11 Bart van Rosmalen, "The Living Experience," keynote presentation at the 8th ELIA Academy, Central St Martins, University of the Arts London, 5-7 July 2017, http://www.elia-artschools.org/userfiles/File/customfiles/the-living-experience_20170707185036.pdf.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Terry Rosenberg, "New Beginnings and Monstrous Births: Notes Toward and Appreciation of Ideational Drawing," in *Writing on Drawing: Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, ed. Steve Garner (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2008), 109.

