



Mona Casey in interview with
Elizabeth Rowe (Artist)

Tindal Street Studios, Birmingham
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MC Where did you complete your BA and MA?

ER I did my BA at De Montfort University in Leicester completing my first year in Lincoln, where there was a Franchise College for DMU at that point, and then I did my MA at Birmingham City University.

MC How soon after completing your BA did you enter Postgraduate Education?

ER I had quite a significant gap of probably around seven years, in between graduating and starting on my postgraduate course.

MC What did you see as the benefits of doing an MA course and gaining an MA qualification?

ER I wanted to re-engage with my practice in a more critical sense. Although I had continued to make-work in the intervening period between my BA and MA I wasn't very happy with what I was making so it was a fresh start. Also, I saw it as a point where I would start to practise professionally. Up until then I had spent most of my time teaching Art & Design in secondary schools.

MC Why did you choose Birmingham to complete your MA?

ER It wasn't a place that I would have considered myself. Even though it is a big city quite close geographically to where I was living at that time it wasn't on my radar. My tutor at De Montfort recommended Birmingham.

MC So there was no real reason to come here, other than a recommendation by your tutor.

ER I think at that point I didn't have any kind of awareness of arts practice in the UK outside of London and the colleges and galleries that operate there. I had no knowledge or recognition of regional activity at that stage.

MC So generally not being aware or not knowing about basically what was happening in Birmingham in terms of the art scene.

ER Yes Birmingham but also other places as well. I suppose I had a certain level of engagement with what was happening in the East Midlands, by which I mean Leicester and Nottingham. Beyond that I didn't know anything.

MC So why did you not do your MA in the East Midlands?

ER At that point my aim was to get onto an MA at a London college. However, my tutor at DMU recommended that I might want to look at Birmingham as an option and I thought that I would put in an application fairly early on in the year and it would be a kind of test bed, a way or getting a feel for the process. Then at interview Henry Rogers (Course Leader MA Fine Art, BCU) offered me a place on the course and started to talk about funding. At that point I had no understanding about how an MA might be funded and hadn't heard of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). I was going into it with very little understanding of how it might work. So Henry picked this up very quickly and said he'd support a funding application on my behalf. So effectively, if I'm really honest my decision to come study here was based on getting that funding. If I hadn't received funding I wouldn't have come here. Also, I didn't get into a London college that year so my options were either to wait or go ahead with this funded place at BCU – I wanted to get on.

MC What year did you graduate from your MA?

ER 2004

MC And what did the art scene in Birmingham look like at that point.

ER There were some recent graduates from BCU who were running a space called Spectacle where we had an MA interim show. Also, in the same part of town two other BCU graduates Karin Kihlberg and Reuben Henry were running a space called Springhill Institute. However, it was an opportunity that Birmingham Artists (who were also running a space called Periscope) were running in a shop window in town that provided a meeting where I really became aware of what else was going on in Birmingham. I was selected by tutors at Margaret Street to take part in this programme an aspect of which was some mentoring. I was paired up with an artist based in Birmingham called Ruth Claxton. Once I had graduated Ruth invited me to come along to a group called Self-Service that arose in response to Midwest's catalyst (Midwest were an agency brought in by ACEWM to support artist led activity in the region). Through that I met yourself when you were running COLONY, Matt Westbrook and Cheryl Jones who were running Insertspace, and other artists who were practicing in the city such as Tom Bloor and Nikki Pugh. That was when I started to hear about the history of art activity in the city and get involved myself.

MC What do you feel are the benefits of staying in the city you've studied in?

ER One of the main benefits of staying in Birmingham is that the cost of living is cheaper here so it's feasible to imagine that you can make time to continue with your own practice, i.e. have a part time job and so many days of the week to continuing to make and show and write about your work. Also you have a community or network where you have studied. I think if you go to a strange city it's very hard to break into any kind of art scene unless you already know people there or you've got a reason for going. If you remain in the city where you studied you've dialogue that you've already built with people and hopefully you have some sort of infrastructure in term of access to spaces and materials. The people who know you and your work will be the ones who offer you exhibitions and opportunities.

MC How do you feel your BA and MA art education have contributed to the development of your art career?

ER You could suggest that I wouldn't have had any art career without my art education if I hadn't had time and space to develop a practice in the first place. But I imagine your

question is more about what skills they might have given me to practice professionally rather than just think about making work. On my BA there was negligible teaching in professional practice, it was before the time when this became embedded in course provision. However, there was one tutor called Andy Hoogenboom at DMU and he was willing to spend a bit more time with us and share some of his experiences of working as an artist by talking about shows he was in and just commenting on the art world outside of the university. I remember this one occasion where we went round to his house. I can't even remember what the premise of the visit was. But it was quite significant in that there was a bit of down time in a non university space to hang out with someone practicing professionally and just hear anecdotally about their career, which starts to give you a picture of what this world might be like that you could potentially be sitting in and provides time to ask questions about some of the more practical aspects of setting yourself up post graduation.

MC You brought up something that's quite interesting earlier in terms of the notion of skills, or something to do with professional development. Was there a sense of any of that or what kind of skills did the MA give you other than those that would contribute to the production of your work more directly, were there any, in terms of a liaison with the outside world, for example

ER I've already spoken about the opportunities that came about through BCU's collaboration with Birmingham artists and the interim MA show at Spectacle. (Though the Spectacle exhibition was student directed and I don't recall much guidance being given by tutors about venues that already existed or ways to find spaces/installation etc). There were opportunities to practise talking about work through seminars and formal presentations though little actual teaching about how to present! So there was very limited provision of skill based teaching of professional development skills. Liaison with the art world in Birmingham came about mainly through chance rather than guidance or introduction. Awareness of the art world beyond the region happened through formal talks by tutors and visiting artist's about their work. We also had a visit to London that focused on some of the larger institutions such as Tate Britain and the Serpentine.

MC In your experience what do you see as the Art (educational) institutions effect on the regional arts ecology? How do you see the position of Arts education in the art scene?

ER I think the educational art institutions role in regional ecology is vital. Now that I know a little more about what is happening nationally in terms of art colleges and their role, its easier to be a bit more critical about what is happening in the region and my experience of studying at BCU. There just seems to be a gap between what is going on in the arts school in Birmingham and what is happening in the city beyond. It's quite easy to see ways that things could be joined up to enable students to move from being in the educational institution to practicing beyond that with the result of retaining more graduates in the city and building the art scene in the region. What you don't see are tutors from the Art school, leaving their base and going off site, sign posting the way for students and initiating conversations between space/professional/student. They don't have much of a presence at artist-led events in the city and it makes me wonder what the reasons for this might be – perhaps when tutors have to travel for example. There are exceptions to this, with the staff from the Bournville site having more connection with what is going on locally.

I know there are a lot of people who are practicing in Birmingham who have connections with the Art school for one reason or another with many of them having been students at BIAD but they don't seem to be utilised as a resource by the university.

MC Post graduation, what do you feel is the Art (educational) institutions responsibility and role in enabling their graduates to develop a sustainable cultural environment?

ER I imagine lots of staff are climbing up the walls with the amount of work they have to do and would suggest they don't have any time to be responsible for graduates. However, I would argue that the professional success of graduates is a crucial factor in an educational art institution's sustainability in terms of their profile and the quality of future intake. Often it only needs a key member of staff who is supporting students and graduates by attending their openings, retaining some kind of dialogue with them and also offering them bits of work as they become available at the college to make a difference. So, offering them employment, but also continuing to offer them either moral support through continued guidance and dialogue or practical support in terms of access to materials or facilities and with work.

Nottingham is an example, where I get the impression from people that I know who practise in the city, that at Nottingham Trent that there is perhaps just one person who worked on the BA who maintained contact/ links with students and was very active and visible in the Artist led scene in the city and joined up those two places.

I've just been up to Glasgow recently and again I think they are a really good example of a city where the Art College, is really fundamental to the ecology of that city. A fantastic example of how professional development skills can be built by providing a project for students to own and explore is The Mutual, which was set up by students studying at the School of Art. From what I gather it is a space that operates for BA students as an exhibition platform and curatorial space for them to play around with while they are studying.

I imagine the inspiration for The Mutual was Transmission an artist led space set up in 1983 by graduates from GSA. The space and programme at Transmission are run by a rolling committee who change every two years and are overseen and responsible to their members, with pretty much everyone who is practising in Glasgow being a part of that membership. Many of those members have served on the Committee themselves and have gone on to be successful practitioners, so they bring a lot of experience and expertise which sets up an amazing model of intergenerational support. Transmission is an established route for recent graduates to get a first step on the ladder outside of university and a great way for them to develop their professional skills in all aspects of art production. Not just making artwork but curating, co-ordinating, installing, handling, writing, fundraising, strategising...

MC What I'm trying to understand is the Art schools impact on that, because Transmission's model is a really interesting one, which has been adopted by Catalyst in Belfast for example. I'm trying to find out what the relationship is between that and the Art School as such.

EL At GSA within the first couple of weeks of starting the MA course students are given a tour of art spaces in the city and Transmission is flagged up very early on as being one of the routes that they can potentially pursue when they graduate (among others – there are many components to the art scene in Glasgow). It is something that keeps them in the city. It is a

model that is made visible to students by the art school and then graduates feed the membership and committee so there is a symbiotic relationship between the two.

On a broader level this demonstrates a successful model for an Art school in a region's ecology. Where the profile of artist's and spaces in Glasgow generates a high calibre of student applications to the art school who then graduate and are aware of how to get or generate continued support in their city because the Art school has facilitated relationships and signposted the way. Educational art institutions need to celebrate and support the success of artists and spaces in their city to make careers visible to their students.

MC Thanks very much Elizabeth Rowe.