

Note included in introduction of the publication:

During the development of this project Sam Curtis was made redundant. Due to changes in the way the government will fund adult education, his employer was no longer able to continue supporting Seymour Art Collective.

1. Merging artistic labour with wage labour: a guide for graduate and emerging artists

Studio Practice



Stealth Practice



Studio Practice

Get a job to pay the bills. Make art in the studio in your spare time. Exhibit your work and potentially gain a secondary income through commercial sales and/or commissions.

Stealth Practice

Get a job to pay the bills. Turn your workplace into your studio, merging artistic labour with wage labour. Your colleagues, environment and everyday situations become material with which you can manipulate and shape. Keep your activity hidden but develop a project that can surface and become visible as art.

2. Seymour Art Collective

Since 2008 I have been employed by a Further Education college in central London to work specifically with people who are homeless or who have a history of homelessness. One of the courses I teach started off as an informal art drop-in group based at a homeless day centre. In late 2009 we developed an artists collective with the aims of encouraging people to work collaboratively, to make decisions together and to become more independent in their thinking and ultimately their lives. Over the years, the Collective has become a vehicle by which to promote social cohesion between individuals who, because of their experiences on the street, can be fiercely independent and untrusting.

The course I teach acts as a base and grounding for the Collective to operate from. I facilitate the Collective's rolling programme of exhibitions and events, encouraging the group to make decisions and take control of their future. The amount of leading I do depends on how able, motivated and independent individual artists within the Collective are at that point in time.

My ethos has been to enable the Collective to work as artists in their own right and for them to develop their individual practices. The structure of an artist collective has been useful in promoting and supporting collaboration, in developing group consensus and in understanding issues of conflict and dissent. It also allows for artists to remain anonymous, if so desired, which has been important working in this specific context. Artist collectives have become increasingly popular due to their association with collaborative processes, cross-disciplinary practice, questions around authorship and more recently with bypassing the traditional commercial gallery system through the establishment of independent networks and communities. So the artist collective as a structure has also been useful in trying to gain visibility within the contemporary art world and break away from the more traditional circles of art made by marginalised groups.

Seymour Art Collective's history to date:

2009

The Collective is born

2010

Patrick Heide Contemporary Art - Seymour Art Collective – *Commercial Exhibition*

Subway Gallery – Art Mine – *Commercial Exhibition*

2011

The Showroom – Seymour Art Collective in residence – *A weeklong residency*

Tate Britain – Make Art Dynamic – BP: Going Public Collaboration – *Mobile Studio*

2012

Gasworks – In Conversation - *Ismail Ali and Sam Curtis from the Collective in conversation with Katie Orr*

Tate Modern – Seymour Art Collective present in the Staar Auditorium – *Collaborative talk*

Tate Modern – World Mental Health Day – *Performance event*

2013

Centre For Possible Studies – Seymour Art Collective in residence – *A two-month residency followed by Make-Shift Fridays, a series of open workshops*

The Showroom – reprojecting (london) in collaboration with Ricardo Basbaum and The Showroom – *Exhibition and public walk led by the Collective with accompanying A3 printed guide produced in collaboration with Hato Press*

3. My role as an artist or my role not as an artist

I am employed as a Further Education tutor and not as an artist. Generally, my employer is not aware of my sub-career as a practising artist or that my art practice has been concerned with the concept of turning non-art day jobs into studios and bases for art projects. Whilst in the guise of an artist, I wouldn't say that I have shouted out loudly about my work with the Collective, but then it's not been kept secret either.

It's the framing of activity that makes things possible. I can frame my role as being:

"an artist with socio-political concerns, who works over a prolonged period of time with homeless and ex-homeless artists to develop a collective. This collective collaborate with leading art organisations, galleries and professional artists to produce a rolling programme of exhibitions and events. The artists are provided with opportunities for individual professional development and access to high quality visual art opportunities."

Or:

"a tutor delivering an informal art course. The course supports homeless and ex-homeless students in developing their social, communication and technical skills alongside improving their well-being. The course offers extra curricular opportunities for students to exhibit their artwork and work alongside professionals."

Depending on who I'm talking to, I can choose either framing or somewhere in between. To some extent it's about sexing up the way you talk about what you do; this is standard practice in the art world. I don't see the fact that I'm working with vulnerable people as any reason to not utilise professional language to describe what the Collective do and my role within that. It's competitive out there and I think it's important to raise our standards in order to participate in the industry, gain recognition, opportunities and chances of funding.

My employer has been supportive of the Collective and my work. They value the real-world experiences the artists have gained and the enterprise aspect of what we do. But my role is generally understood in terms that Ofsted value; performance targets, teaching and learning strategies, equality and diversity, differentiation and so on. And why wouldn't it be? I've never put an argument forward calling for my job title to be changed to Artist. Contemporary artists who work in social contexts often work in complex ways; to an outside audience the age-old question rears its head, where is the art? It's been easier for me to not enter such discussions. Discussions, which could tease out my hidden intentions, reveal my dual career and demand recognition in my own terms. Even I struggle to get my head around the whole situation, so to expect my non-art trained managers to understand and recognise my work in artistic terms is perhaps, unreasonable. A short lecture discussing art since the dematerialization of the art object through to post-autonomous and participatory practice could be employed here, but there is a part of me that enjoys working in stealth mode.

Is Seymour Art Collective part of my participatory practice? I'm not sure if the term lives up to the reality of my relationship to the artists involved. This project's longevity has allowed for strong relationships to be built and bigger roles to be fulfilled. I would say that we often co-produce and collaborate when working on projects with partners. At other times I lead workshops and teach, and at those points it could be perceived as more of a participatory practice. And at the really chaotic times, when I'm not sure what's going on, I wonder whose practice are we participating in anyway?

4. Visibility

For a couple of years, I have been slowly exploring how my work with the Collective, being employed as a Further Education tutor, sits within or forms an extension to my art practice. Personally I don't feel like I need to be called an artist by my employers, or collaborators even, in order to maintain an art practice. Most of the artists within the Collective are aware of aspects of my work but we've not sat down to really discuss how my skills, training, expertise and industry experience as an artist contribute to their individual development or to that of the Collective as a whole. The visibility of what I do has been really up and down and has surfaced in different guises. Working in collaboration with art organisations and galleries, my identity as an artist has normally followed after a period of time being known as Sam the college tutor. Working with a range of

partners and contributors in organising the Collective's programme, I am often and continue to be seen as just a tutor. This is not a problem and I feel that having two identities can give you more scope to work productively in a range of contexts, two languages can be used and two conversations can be had in any given situation depending on which hat you're wearing. The space between the hats and languages can reveal some interesting things. Previously I carried out a two-year stealth residency in Harrods working as a fishmonger. Here the space between contemporary art, specialist fish knowledge and luxury retail's own languages and hats was pretty wide. Working in the education sector, using art as a way to engage marginalised groups of people leaves less of a space, but a space big enough within which to play.

Increasingly, I have begun to capitalise on the Collective's success and have raised my visibility as an artist in my own right. I have a section on my artist's website devoted to the Collective to inform visitors, who may be interested in my art practice, of my long term involvement in a more socially focused project. But through the process of making myself more visible, I have felt some discomfort with the feeling that I may be exploiting artists who are deemed vulnerable. I conclude that it is perhaps exploitative but in a symbiotic sense. We all help each other along our own paths. The art organisations and galleries we work with, the Collective members and myself all benefit from little exchanges of social and cultural capital, whether that's art world prestige or the cache accrued from helping people who are marginalised in society. After nearly four years of working with the Collective, this is only the second more formal validating process I've undertaken, aimed at discussing and making visible my role as an artist. This feels fairly modest as I usually try to validate my activity as much as possible in terms of visibility and self-promotion. I know that as time goes by, I will be able to alter the level of my own visibility. But will it be beneficial to label and point to certain activities as being art? Or will it be better to just quietly withdraw from the art world framing, submerge the work and carry on with the day job?