

# Introduction to the REFRAMED project

**By Hannah Hull**  
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Here I would like to give some background to this project in terms of my previous research and projects, give insight into how this exhibition has been realised, and suggest how I see the position of this exhibition in relation to a broader debate.

With regards to my art practice, the roots of this project are in the First Time Gallery project. This saw 12 non-artists develop conceptual artworks for display as part of the Goldsmiths' BA Fine Art Degree Show. I guided this group, including my Mum, through a fast-track approximation of the course I was graduating from. The group posed questions to me throughout the project about the purpose and value of art. This process roused some opinions I appeared to have absorbed by osmosis at art school: untested assumptions that had very little to do with my own art practice, but defined others, and might at some point restrict my own. I grew a greater awareness of how and if the art concepts I had learnt could resonate within society, and question the benefit of this type of engagement beyond my own art practice.

This developed on to Open Gallery, a project wherein 14 non-artists from backgrounds in addiction, homelessness and the criminal justice system developed conceptual artworks for exhibition. Somehow the level of self-reflexivity in this group was higher. The notion of conceptual art was simultaneously pushed further and more effortlessly absorbed. Although dedication to the actual project was much lower, this was counterbalanced in how the project resonated in a more clear and meaningful way with the participants; the depth of their understanding of the process, the level of both complexity and clarity in the finished works, and the strength of their relationship with what they had created was infinitely superior than that which I had witnessed with the First Time Gallery.

Joe Baden, who invited me to work with these participants, described the show as "as culturally authentic as it comes." Although one could take issue with the term 'culturally authentic', I feel that it could be said that this show had a cultural resonance that went beyond being simply 'raw' or 'edgy'. I think the way in which the exhibition spoke to people could be attributed to a heightened understanding of self in the artists, achieved through experiences of homelessness, prison and addiction, although this subject matter was rarely directly addressed in the work. This is not to say extreme personal conditions produce this quality in work by direct consequence, but that it can perhaps produce a type of understanding of the human condition that produces a situation where art can be made that runs deep, and without explicitly addressing the situation that bore this understanding.

The interest in this potential relationship between conceptual art and those from 'vulnerable adult' backgrounds (used here in reference to homeless, addiction and criminal backgrounds, although this term has a wider usage) led me on to work with self-taught artists from such backgrounds – specifically artists associated with Goldsmiths' Open Book project, Cardboard Citizens and St. Mungo's. My relationship with these artists has formed the foundations of REFRAMED.

The works in this exhibition have been produced in response to an ongoing dialogue between a group of self-taught artists with backgrounds in homelessness, addiction or the criminal justice system practising in largely traditional media, and a group of established, trained artists practising within a conceptual and highly critical framework.

The purpose of this project is to further investigate the existing and potential relationship between conceptual art and art made by those from 'vulnerable adult' backgrounds; and to challenge and inform the ideas which I have developed as to this relationship. This is not just an experiment, rather a test of my personal belief that a candid conversation between artists from these two backgrounds can be in some way valuable to both.

There was an open brief regarding how participants engaged in the project, and how the responses in this exhibition manifested themselves. All participants were invited to meet one another on 19 May 2009, which formed a mixture of informal 1:1 chats and group discussion. Exchanges such as recommending reading material and artists, collaborating on ideas, 1:1 meetings, telephone conversations, letters, a group interview without my presence and other requests for further information were made to inform the artists' responses.

The ongoing dialogue between the artists has been sometimes awkward, sometimes inspiring and sometimes progressive. Everyone has entered into the project with an open mind and with candidness, which allowed a set of assumptions from either side (including my own) to be revealed and tested.

In particular, there were overlaps between artistic discourses and social discourses, which are easily and mutually interchangeable. The responses of the conceptual artists present many different roles of the artist in relation to society: commentator, associate, critic, mimic, medium, educator, and so on. There were issues in discerning when artistic concerns became secondary to social concerns, and sometimes an aversion in confronting how social concerns might fall outside of the remit of the artist.

Much discussion formed a weighing up of the value of a self-taught background compared to art school training. Both trained and untrained artists expressed some discontent with their education in favour of the other – of feeling like a product of their education. Both expressed the constrictions of their respective practices: the self-taught in terms of mobility in the art world and the trained in terms of mobility within their practice. Both of these could be seen as a sort of artistic freedom, and may at times appear mutually exclusive.

In terms of the conceptual artists, I find that this desire for more freedom within their art practice - a more expressive approach, less attention paid to continuity in style and so on – is perhaps caused by a loss of ownership over their learning. A feeling that they have been taught about art, and have been told what they can and can do within it. I personally found art school to be an acceleration of self-learning, within the support framework of those that had gone before me. I was given tools to aid and improve my self-expression, and my continuity in style is naturally reflective of my focus - rather than an attempt to artificially convey this - and it is clear to me that any work I produce will inherently continue to reflect this style in some form regardless of my awareness of adhering to its components.

What I can see happening within this exhibition on both sides is a locating and questioning of ideas about art, collected somewhere along the way, that have now turned round to restrict us, and how integral these are to our respective practices. For me this process during the First Time Gallery formed an affirmation of my learning, rather than a rejection, and this is what I feel has resulted for some artists in this project. A clarifying of the value of an art school education, or a more firmly rooted disregard of this in favour of self-learning: self-affirmation and ownership over ways of learning.

I would just like to take this opportunity to thank all of the artists. I am indebted to all of them for their time and investment in this project. I have been honoured by the involvement of artists whose work I highly respect, and without their humour and rigour this exhibition would not be the same.

This dialogue will continue throughout the course of the exhibition, with further contributions from artists. Those with an interest in the issues surrounding the exhibition are invited to join us at the closing event on 19 June, 5pm-7pm, where we will draw a line under the exhibition and discuss how, if and why this dialogue might continue. Please contact Hannah Hull on 079 3252 8888 / [mail@hannahhull.co.uk](mailto:mail@hannahhull.co.uk) for more information.