

ARTIST ONE ON ONE

By Mark Sheerin

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THE MACHINE IN THE GARDEN:

ART AS INDUSTRY IN RURAL CAMBRIDGESHIRE



The Practice of Theories, group exhibition, 2016. © Paul Allitt



David Blandy, *Shack*, 2009. © Mike Cameron

On a red letter day in the 19th century, the American writer Henry David Thoreau was meditating next to Walden Pond when his pastoral reveries were interrupted by the whistle of a nearby steam train. The episode inspired the title of a seminal US history book: *The Machine in the Garden*. It came to mind after my visit to the rural arts centre known as Wysing, a modernist campus which means business, even as it sits in splendid isolation with fields on one side, a B-road on the other.

It may be no coincidence that a former text book came to mind. Wysing is a hotbed of study, currently exploring the legacy of UK polytechnics, with plentiful exchanges with the University of Cambridge. While the arts centre sits on the edge of a sleepy village once given over to farming, it is now a hub of artistic industry, a nationwide resource for art theory and a factory of inspiration. It is, clearly, a focal point for a lot of hard work. Thoreau himself might have found life taxing here.

Director Donna Lynas picked me up from Royston station and drove me past the fields and dormitory housing developments which characterise this part of South Cambridgeshire. The arts complex, which she helped rebuild between 2005 and 2008, looks like a transplant from a science park: statement architecture clusters next to a 17th century farmhouse. Such are the mechanical parts of a programme that annually comprises four residencies, two exhibitions, numerous study weeks and study days.

The newer buildings may already be almost a decade old, but the seating area in the light and spacious reception where we sit and talk still feels as clean and crisp as the straight lines which characterise the studios and gallery. A theme emerges as Lynas tells me: "It was really urgent to sort the site out and get the buildings built and use that as a way of thinking about what the organisation was doing, and develop this idea of a workplace".



Wysing Arts Centre exterior. © Mike Cameron

“It’s a proper working space because there’s nothing else to do,” she continues: “There’s no shops; we’re not even in a village; we’re on the edge of a village.” Instead she describes a featureless agricultural hinterland in which there aren’t many pleasant walks to be had. But as a direct result of this austere setting, she underlines her primary focus: “Wysing is a workplace. People come here to work. Whether that’s coming to work in studios, work in residencies or events, we want people to come to those knowing they’ll find something new out”.

Not since this site was a dairy farm in the 1980s has the village of Bourn seen so much industry. “Farming has been in decline in this part of the world. I mean, this whole road that we’re on used to all be working farms and in the 80s that went into decline and they all got sold off, which is when Wysing the site was bought initially.” Now the local farmers are as likely to be running paintball games as producing milk. That’s if any have stayed put. The changing demographics of the environs here are enough to keep a geography researcher very busy. “The villages around Wysing are not populated by people working the land or working in the farming industry. They’re actually working in the high tech industry in Cambridge, you know, as part of some of these massive global companies, or they’re working in London which is really close to us.”

As a result of the wane in farming and the professionalisation of her neighbours, the Director rejects the ‘rural’ tag, with its associations with local crafts and the kind of transcendental thinking which Thoreau might have advocated. “I don’t feel rural,” she says, “which is quite a weird thing to say, because we’re looking out onto fields. My office looks onto a field with horses and you can watch birds all day long”.



Donna Lynas portrait.



Left: Wysing Polyphonic, music festival, 2016. © Mike Cameron

Center: The Syllabus, 2016. © Chelsea Pettitt

“The context of this rural site is not actually as rural as you think,” she adds, as a party of cyclists pass the window, wheeling their race bikes towards the busy cafe. “It’s more the scale of the space,” Lynas explains: “You could never have this much land or this many buildings in the middle of a city”. There are ten buildings geared towards the intangible pursuit of art, so in London the developers would be circling.

Along with corn dollies and horse brasses there’s a more surprising thing you won’t find at this community in the East Anglian wilds: utopian ideals. Though Lynas does point out that the properties were first purchased by a pair of optimistic couples that wanted to create an idyll for artists to work in. It remains an idyll, but the audience has got more serious and critical. If Wysing still creates ideal working conditions, it perhaps does so in the vein of an art school rather than a commune.

Indeed, 2016 sees the centre fully engaged with arts education, with a programme that explores the legacy of the polytechnic. Polys, as they were fondly known by a generation of art loving students and tutors, were, during the 1970s and 1980s, the vocational alternative to the UK’s once elite universities. Critically aware spaces for learning, many of our most creative minds once went there to learn or teach a left wing blend of art techniques and left wing theory. It was, looking back from an era of tuition fees and customer-oriented education, a golden age.

One more aspect of the appeal is the polys’ geographical dispersal. Lynas tells me that most vital work was being done outside of the metropolis: “The event that we had a couple of weeks ago focussed on Professor Gavin Butt’s research around Leeds Polytechnic. It was a period with bands coming out like Scritti Politti, and coming out having read Derrida and Lacan, becoming quite Marxist and creating these bands as collectives.”

Interest in the polytechnic scene could not come at a better time. Lynas appears to be dismayed by changes in higher education, namely: “the whole push towards the creative industries and universities being run more like businesses and what that’s doing and what might be being forgotten or left behind”. If polys were once spaces for radical art practice, she asks, where are those spaces now?



One imagines the firebrands that taught at Leeds, Newcastle, Manchester and so on, will have been appalled by the developments that came after the rebranding of their schools as new universities: “There’s this kind of route that was introduced in the 1980s, through the whole YBA phenomenon, which was the embrace of the emergent art market,” says Lynas. “I think we’re coming out of it, I hope. But there was a period where the art school became a route, and which art school you went to, became a route to commercial gallery representation and the market”.

Wysing Study Day, 2015. © Chelsea Petitt

Another development in the education of artists is increasing academicism. Our conversation touches on the number of those completing PhDs in visual art and art theory. “The visual arts is really rooted in philosophy,” Lynas observes. “It is a visual field of study but it can be incredibly politicised and it can reflect what’s going on in contemporary life.” She adds: “I think some artists really embrace that and read all the time, and are constantly referring back to philosophical writing.” As a result, the best art teachers are those who reinforce that. We have moved from the poly to the postgrad.

Although in 2016 the educational turn at Wysing emerged from a symposium the previous year, Lynas herself had a remarkable schooling. “My own education was quite strange,” she says. With little trace of an accent, the Director tells me she grew up in Northern Ireland and lived through the Troubles in one of the country’s most divided communities. But one unexpected benefit was gaining a place in one of two experimental schools in the region. As Lynas recalls: “It was a school which was designed, purpose built, with no internal doors, really open plan experimental teaching, arts led curriculum, 50 percent intake from both sides of the community”.

“I look back on that as an incredible experience and a really freeing experience,” she continues, and one gets the impression that her love of learning was instilled here at an early age. Lynas did her time at art school in Dundee and still relishes any chance to learn from the artists with whom she works. She says: “I feel really privileged to be constantly able to have ongoing conversations with artists who have been here over the years... They’re on the end of an email, and there’s a constant dialogue going on all the time with quite a large number of people who’ve been through this place I feel like that’s what makes it very special.”



Wysing Arts Centre reception area, 2015.
© Sylvain Deleu



Wysing Polyphonic, music festival, 2016.
© Mike Cameron



Wysing Study Day, 2015. © Mark Searle



Braving the midsummer rain with two of Wysing's readily supplied umbrellas, we take a short tour of the grounds. Passing the Heath Robinson-esque ramshackle performance space known as Amphis and a shed used in a memorable film by artist David Blandy, we come at last to a couple of the residency studios. Lawrence Lek and Laura O'Neill are two of four artists currently in residence with six more taken in over the rest of the year. Lek sits at a laptop, electric guitar and pile of theory texts close at hand. O'Neill comes downstairs to join us and share her own thoughts.

"I think it's just a good environment," she says. "There's so much space to play with. Everything's quite broad, but we're doing something all together. There's a radio day coming up so that's going to incorporate all our strands."

A veteran of the art residency, Lek compares Wysing to a spell in a London. "Often there it's just desk space, in a room, so even though it's more crowded, artists can be quite isolated for a long time, but here because it's quite isolated people talk."

Both artists have responded to the polytechnic theme for different reasons. Says O'Neill: "My mum went to a polytechnic. She did hairdressing. So it was fascinating me, this idea of what was going on. I do have a good understanding how that sort of educational system was working back then."

Lek on the other hand draws on his Chinese background to offer insights into the value of the polytechnic experience. "In Asia, to generalise hugely, education is an aspirational thing.

The Uncanny Valley, group exhibition, 2015.
© Paul Allitt



Donna Lynas portrait.

It's the idea that it's a vehicle to help you get from wherever you are, no matter where you're from, to get to where you want to be," he comments.

It is interesting to learn that both artists are using their time at Wysing to study new art techniques. And it is salient that in both cases this is involving getting to grips with new software packages. Such practical skills would surely be taught in polytechnics were they still around. Now they are largely self-taught with the help of YouTube and other online tutorials.

As our conversation winds down, Donna comes past to show me the cafe and the other studio buildings. "There's lots of studio visits and meetings and talking about ideas," she points out. "I think having a peaceful, calm atmosphere does allow for space to think but we do a lot



of talking, so it doesn't always feel this peaceful." In fact, what with visiting groups and villagers, "There might be a collision of things happening".

It's nothing, however, that will disrupt the smooth-running production of ideas and artworks in a most unlikely, most out of the way context. "I guess you're constantly thinking, What are the optimum conditions? What is the best environment for artists to make work in?"

"One of those is for there to be quiet periods," she says. "The other is to have very intensive dialogue periods other times." Quiet you might expect from this monastic set up in Bourn. But debate is the engine, or the locomotive coming into earshot. As Thoreau discovered, along with the tutors at Leeds Poly, you cannot stop change.

Lawrence Lek, Shiva's Grotto, included in the exhibition, The Uncanny Valley, 2015. © Paul Allitt