

# THE Development OR Demise OF TBM?

**PETER KARDIA:** The point of this discussion is to focus on the serious and far reaching changes being made in the provision for art and design education in Kent and to make your views known on how the changes are likely to effect the area of work you have been concerned with in art education in Maidstone College of Art.

It is clear that what is happening in Kent is following the pattern of change in the national provision in art and design education. Many of us believe these changes have nothing whatever to do with furthering the development of a genuine educational policy. They are to do with cost-cutting in education and they follow government thinking that for most of the population education in the true sense is out and vocational training is in.

I think it would be useful for you to say exactly what the new proposals entail for your area at Maidstone College of Art.

**DAVID HALL:** As is probably well known the NAB has recommended, for whatever reason, and it has never been made clear, that consistent with their more general national planning recommendations, art and design education in Kent should be rationalised. These recommendations were first indicated two years ago.

This obviously implicated the Local Authority and I believe vigorous representations were made, however, it seems that the main form of the proposals could not be reversed.

When finally the new figures for the provision for fine art and graphics, which were basically the degree standard provision in art and design in Kent, were announced last December it was found that they were each required to reduce by something in the order of 50%. Where Kent had previously provided a total of 76 places in fine art and 80 places in graphics at two of its art colleges, Maidstone and Canterbury, it was in future able to offer only 40 places in each category.

A view had to be taken as to where to locate these reduced courses since the belief was that it would be impossible to continue courses at both Canterbury and Maidstone with such limited numbers.

The decision was made by a Steering Group, comprising of Principals, Vice Principals and the Education Officers, with some representation from Staffing. It was that fine Art should be offered in the Canterbury site only and graphics at Maidstone.

The logic of this decision as far as I have been able to make out was that there is more of a technological base at this end of Kent. Medway College of Design, which as I am sure everybody knows is part of the rationalising I have already referred to, is to join with Maidstone and Canterbury to form the Kent Institute of Art and Design. Medway College, which is eight miles away, does not offer degrees but does have HND and B Tec Courses, some of which are graphic design orientated. The thinking apparently was that with this proximity to the Maidstone graphics and the technology from the Time Based Media (TBM) area a substantial technological facility could be created.

As far as Canterbury was concerned the claim for the Fine Art department to go there was said to be strengthened by the presence of an Architecture School. I think that what is intended is an interrelation in an inter-disciplinary way to develop what will be referred to as a public art option.

There were in fact many different views expressed, all of them very pragmatic and all resulting in the proposal that the position of TBM, which I established at Maidstone fifteen years ago, has been an option in fine art, and it was that position which should now be altered and placed within NAB's design/photography category.

I think the proposal from the Inter Collegiate Fine Art Staff Working Group for this recategorisation was motivated both by the desire to preserve the existing division between painting, sculpture and printmaking and the belief that with only between 36 and 40 students a four way division would mean too few students in each area. Their idea was that TBM was the only study programme appropriate for recategorisation and be placed within the *design* field.

An influential factor here was the discovery that accompanying the cuts in the established fields of fine art and graphics the NAB recommendations had involved an additional 25 places being offered under the heading of new initiatives and these were to be offered at Maidstone within the design study programme.

As an extension to the idea of the development of a technological facility at this end of Kent came the notion of the establishment of a separate self standing degree which would include film and video production and other related elements. For example, it is thought possible to develop animation, in addition with, also at Maidstone in graphics, electronic design for the media. There could also be a tie up with photography.

Not all of these issues were discussed at the meeting of the Steering Group I have referred to but have emerged in the many informal meetings which have taken place since then.

As well as these possibilities there is a great deal of concern that the equipment and studios which we possess should be used to service the HND and B Tec courses in the graphics field.

The position I found myself in as these discussions progressed was one in which I did not oppose the recategorisation of TBM and the reasons why I took part in this this position will emerge as we continue this discussion. One very important consideration was the idea of a new free standing degree which I have always seen as having considerable possibilities.

My regret was, however, that the ongoing fine art option was to be lost **before** establishing a new alternative.

**PETER KARDIA:** You must have been very concerned at taking the decision not to argue for a continued place for TBM in fine art. It is true that fine art seems to be reacting by following reactionary times and emphasizing once more those parts of its practice that can produce saleable commodities. I should think also you have had a good deal of experience of dealing with the anxiety which seems so prevalent when educational institutions, even in fine art faculties where one might expect it to be otherwise, are faced with new configurations of practice. The invariable tendency seems to be to alleviate the anxiety by reducing the new configurations and taking them back to familiar



# DAVID HALL TALKS WITH PETER KARDIA

components. Attempts to conceptualize any new practices which arise tend to be resisted vigorously. You are keen to see the possibilities of a new degree followed up. Are you in a position to say if you think any substantial effort will be made to get it under way? Have you any confidence that if and when it is set up those who make the decisions will be able to see it as a course which involves a wide spectrum of activities as distinct from yet one more vocationally orientated design course?

**DAVID HALL:** I very much hope so. The strange thing is that although of course one does not seek crisis situations, nevertheless the present time could offer a great opportunity. I have always said that the provision for film and video should be much greater and that the link up with fine art has never been entirely satisfactory - it seems to have been totally inadequate especially in Britain.

If a new course could be designed with adequate staffing and equipment and a curriculum with a broad philosophic base which would contain a wide spectrum of activity it would be possible to continue the progressive experimental creative work which we at present undertake as well as do work which would satisfy the requirement for students to move into industry. And here there is an argument that says traditional distinctions between the two, was the rapid growth and influence of independent production, are now decidedly blowing at the edges. It would also be a great advantage to have this free standing degree as opposed to what has always been a struggling option in fine art where there has never been adequate funding. I believe that it would be possible to do more in this new situation than has been possible in the last fifteen years under the umbrella of fine art.

**PETER KARDIA:** It is quite interesting to hear you express such ambivalent thoughts about the relationship TBM has with fine art. Virtually all of the courses similar to the one you have been running here at Maidstone originated in fine art faculties and without the openness, which one tends to find here, TBM as a mixed media course would not have started. As a matter of fact it didn't happen like that at the Royal College of Art. There it was Sir Hugh Casson as Professor of Environmental Design rather than the Professor of Painting or Sculpture who provided the impetus for mixed media work to start. Maybe this says something about the people who had the Professorships at the time.

As you put it TBM has been a fine art option at Maidstone and as a result the dominant model of activity has been the individual artist working in the highly adaptive way which we associate with a painter or sculptor. Creative work undertaken in this manner can take its beginning to be highly provisional, can accept radical alterations, it can allow each succeeding step to suggest reorientation and there can be continued alteration to the whole end purpose of the work.

Of course it is not only with the all hallowed individual that such flexibility and adaptiveness can take place. As you well know it is possible for people working together to become sensitised to each other and exchanges not dissimilar to the internal messages which the individual transmits within his/her own creative system to then begin to pass between members of the group - but this state of affairs is not common.

Educational practice in the art and design field tends to fall back on firmly established but rather vaguely defined notions of the creative artist. It is very unsatisfactory but since in the UK there seems to be an antipathy to theories of creative behaviour, at least in so far as they can be applied in art schools, there has tended to be a reliance on ostensive forms of definitions.

In this way we can point to instances of practice that are profoundly involved with the elements of creativity in their concern for the use and manipulation of primary signs, we can point to practice deeply committed to disorientations and preoccupied with continual questioning of the received view of the world.

The point I am making is that if, for one reason or another, your requirement is to severely restrict your links with fine art there is urgent need for an alternative model of creative endeavour to be articulated.

**DAVID HALL:** Of course I am aware of this. On a very practical level I think it is important to make a distinction between the way we have operated here and some other film and video courses. We have always worked on the basis that we are running a course in which the student working with film and video is given the opportunity and responsibility for being in control of the whole process of production. This is very different from a training programme where a person ends up being a specialist cameraman or a sound recordist for example. If we are thinking of those who are able to be successful professionally in any one of a number of fields I would make the point that the course provides a person with far greater facility than those simply concerned with vocational training and providing experience in only very specific skills. Here they leave after having worked with the whole spectrum of activity, concerned with conception and authorship, with the development of the idea and working it through in which ever medium they are engaged with, editing and on to the final presentation. This range of experience makes it possible for them to take up in an intelligent way any one of a wider range of options professionally.

**PETER KARDIA:** I am sure that this is true although I have very strong misgivings when I hear you, with the record of achievement you have in this place, voicing what seem to be vocationalist arguments to justify what you have done here. I certainly support many of the criticisms you have made of fine art although I tend to think it is the limited way many fine art courses are run that is the problem rather than the intrinsic possibilities of fine art itself.

In art and design education we have tended to use the concept of fine art as an obstacle to the intrusion of vocationalism. But the speech that it makes to state its case has been faint and in times of difficulty it retreats and sees its creative endeavour as bound to media that have become traditionally enshrined. It's a confusion of process with product.



**DAVID HALL:** I am not sure at this stage how profitable it is to go on and discuss what might be thought to be fine art issues. As all of us who have worked in art and design education know our position as teachers is paradoxical. On the one hand we need an open ended flexible system that allows students to have choice and yet on the other hand there clearly is the requirement that the student should also have experience in depth in the use of a specific medium. For this reason I have always thought there is a certain cogency in the arguments of those who in pressing for a commitment to a particular medium claim they are working positively against the mistaken view that a person can have an idea first and then find a medium to express it in.

One thing I am keen to emphasize is what I have always seen as the potential which film and video has for exposure beyond the framework of traditional art activity and to be a form of expression in other areas and conditions. It has been my view for some time that we need to rethink the conventional divisions between art and design and that we ought to explore the potential for the intervention of creative activity between the various fields of art and design activity.

I think this sort of change should have come anyway but the changes would have been made from an academic point of view and in an appropriate manner and not hurried along because of the need to make cuts in art and design education. There are already occasional glimpses of the sort of possibilities when we consider, for example, some features of Channel 4's mode of operations. I believe TBM students should be able to seize hold of these opportunities. I think that this sort of extension where different venues are opened up for display are very important for art.

With the establishment of the new Institute in Kent it is crucial that it should contain a provision which allows film, video and electronic production work. At this stage we know that at degree level we still are going to have some sort of fine art course and also a graphics course. TBM represents a resource which has been built up over the years and which I have worked at ever since I came to Maidstone - it would be regrettable if for some reason the Institute did not avail itself not only of the technology we have but also the availability of our educational expertise in this area.

**PETER KARDIA:** The crucial practical questions then are how will things be progressed from now onwards? We really need to know how the Institute is going to approach the problem of establishing the new degree - presumably the Director will get an appropriate advisory board together to make recommendations. The composition of the Board, the way in which it will be open to views from various directions and will have extended educational objectives rather than that of simply proposing the establishment of some narrowly based vocational training, all of this is important.

I have to say that I am inclined to be pessimistic. We tended to think, when courses like the one you run here were continuing, that the work we did provided a medium for critical thinking and views were put forward which contradicted those put over by the media industry. The infiltration of the requirements for vocational training into this area of practice is insidious and fundamentally damaging.

I find it difficult to make up my mind how to respond to your approach to, what is for you at Maidstone, a major crisis. I think I admire the positive attitude you have and your thinking certainly seems to recognise and propose alternatives to the escapism which characterizes a good deal of the work done in the past in Fine Art Faculties.

**DAVID HALL:** I stand by what we have been doing for the past fifteen years in TBM and it has been informed by just the features you mentioned. But as I have already said I have a belief in the necessity for change and I think that useful change does not always take place gradually. Sometimes there are hiccups in the system and a big leap is taken.

The situation we are in at present could just provide the possibility of making a very important step forward - unfortunately we can't be sure about this.

Equally, what comes out of the change could be something narrow, conventional and impossibly restrictive - which is what you mean.

I am looking at the moment for the opportunity to devise a degree course structure which does not belong to the more traditional approaches to art and design degree structures. It is essential for this that the remit include a broad philosophy of media studies. I agree that this certainly should not be hurried into some patched up and very narrow vocationally oriented course.

**PETER KARDIA:** Do you know of any proposals for the setting up of the advisory board?

I would have thought it was crucial that you should play a major role in determining the composition of such a board and be very responsible for drawing up the proposals for the new degree.

**DAVID HALL:** Yes, there is an intention to both conduct an independent external feasibility study, and to draw together a panel of representatives from the degree validating body (the CNA) and industry.

My main concern here is that in all of this it is remembered we are not considering some institution in the abstract - we are thinking about a place that has a very specific history with a whole complex of historically established skills and resources. Obviously we are out for change but we do not want to jettison all that we have achieved in the last fifteen years.

How it will all end up is anybody's guess but what I want is to make use of the opportunities offered by the new initiative provided by the new Kent Institute. What we really need is an updated media study facility which will provide opportunities for a wide range of studies including the kind we have hitherto undertaken in TBM. ●

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