

Before the workshop

I was impressed by Renee's preparation, in terms of sheer amount of work and breadth of vision. The design of this workshop forms part of an overarching vision, aligned with the Unit structures of the course, UAL's focus on Social Purpose, etc.

Renee Identified key issues on the course, points that needed improvement. Addressing social, racial and environmental justice was too often a flat, superficial exercise.

During the preparation Renee included me and other staff, sharing slides, asking for our opinion, discussing preparation. This made us all more involved, which is great.

I Wish I had more time to discuss to do justice to the material.

1st Day

Renee managed gracefully a difficult set-up, with broken extension lead, sound not working.

Breath at beginning, feet on the floor: this should be done more, in other sessions. To include, invite the body into the learning activities is brilliant. Reminded me of some Bauhaus tradition of doing so, and yoga or meditation classes. Decolonising to consider thinking not solely the precinct of the brain, but a holistic experience?

I noticed Renee's position in the room; sharing that she preferred to sit down rather than 'dominate' the room, considering how easily hierarchies are established in a 'classroom'. Renee sitting in the middle of the room, amongst the students, during the discussion later.

The use of humour is always welcome: "like marriage counselling: me and my partner against the problem". And "You don't know how smart I am in Spanish" from Modern Family.

The exercise reading a text in different Languages was excellent – bonding, funny. It was funny that native speakers didn't realise we couldn't even identify how their language looked on the slides: 'Which one are you reading? The Greek one!'. I was happy to be invited to join, it felt bonding to be doing the same as the students. And also it felt like a part of me was seen that had never appeared in my work at UAL: me in my mother tongue.

There was some pride about languages: "Luxembourgish (it IS a language, not a dialect)", Cypress, Cypriot dialect (suppressed);

The session later led to discussions about politics, being politicised and/or not knowing what to do. Anti-racist as well: what do you do; Operation Demetrius and the Troubles in Ireland; fists as sign for justice as well as against.

Something that got me thinking a lot personally was the “native informant” discussion, brought up by a student: Queer person asked to become ‘experts on queerness’.

2nd Day

Some beautifully poetic moments in the paper/ making session:

- Icarus wings in folded black paper. Student noting that their idea of freedom was different until they hit certain limits they weren’t aware of.
- “Freedom is/looks like that to me – pieces spread/floating in a void” (ripped paper fragments with notes [in Chinese] on them, on black paper)
- Ripped portrait on black paper with red showing through – violence, anger, protest

Drawing Room Visit

Perfect final element of the workshop. Embodying the embodied thinking. Of all the things that had been discussed and practiced in the previous days, suddenly there was a real-life, real-world, highest quality art exhibition in established institution showing manifold examples of this ‘embodiment’ Renee has been talking about, examples of ‘what it could look like’.

The slow looking activity was great. Something we should practice more on the course. Learning to look.

I discussed with Renee how her prompts for looking, divided into ‘visual evidence’ (in the work itself) and ‘contextual research’ (from outside), echoed and clarified my thoughts for the Thematic Analysis lecture – alignement for the students.

This activity led the students to make deep observations (deep in the sense that they linked something tangible, practical, in the work, and some notions further afield to merge both into depicting meaning), e.g. between obstructed/hidden parts of portraits and the plantation ‘stealing a part of its workers’ (perhaps a bit literal but nevertheless pregnant with interpretation)

There were some surprising take-away for some students. One was consistently told on her previous course that works on paper were of lesser value than sculptural ones, that drawing on paper was a habit to overcome somehow. And showing all those splendid works on paper in the Drawing Room, she realised there were other ways to think about it.

Som students realised how one can make art as protest, even if it is in a subtle form.

Also the potential of visual language to express what cannot be said in words

Overall Renee's precise timings worked very well, managing to keep the students engaged while at the same time allowing enough time for longer looking and deeper thoughts to emerge