**The future of Art School Leadership, Making the Shift Happen**

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TRANSCRIPT

0:00 Thank you everybody for having me here. Just coming in. I've just spent a good point of time hugging everyone around the room so it says a lot about the atmosphere that you have fostered. I can also see a lot of faces around the room that have been with me and I have learned from and gained a lot from. Some of whom misleadingly wanted me to step up into leadership so you are to blame. I can see you. I’m looking at you. You know who you are.

0:33 Thank you to Shelley, Sam, Jill, everybody, Joanie for organising this in such a collegiate way, and having conversations together, to bring us together. I'm conscious of the context in which I speak. I wasn't here yesterday because our exec board as many are, are looking at financial controls and looking at various things.

0:55 We call ours MARS, I’m not sure why we call it MARS, but we call ours MARS. That's the context in which we are in. So, it's a sobering time but I can with hope and with C words as well. The first one for me as a typographer is the deep honour of speaking you from the David Crowe theatre. What a wonderful human being. An inspiring leader and a man who took leadership in a really collegiate, human way. It's a hard act to follow.

1:24 Now as a member of the Exec Board, I'm very aware that UAL is this London-centric specialist institution and a giant beast. I'm not here to talk to you about how to lead. Nor do I stand here in the presence of telling you we did this and that and you need to do that.

1:43 I can see the experience in the room so I am just here to share some of the thoughts in the forefront of my mind and those of my colleagues in the hope that the urgency of our combined task will resonate with you. We are all asking what’s next. How do we lead in significantly challenging time and context? How do we protect what is valuable to us in art and design for future generations? And how do we imagine futures for art and design that are sustainable to come?

2:13 When we speak in situations such as this, we rarely acknowledge that how we speak or look at the world, is shaped by our own context, our own biases and our own agendas. This is really critical to acknowledge because we teach people who come from very diverse backgrounds, and we design for people who are not like us – so one of our primary tasks is to be be able to reflect on ourselves and how we relate to others who are different from us and to do this, importantly, through our practice. So I am very briefly going to introduce myself — education and professional practice. I was born in Chennai, Madras, in India.

2:52 I went to an English-speaking school unlike 90% of Indian children. It was a middle-class upbringing and, in the context of India, was therefore extremely privileged. As a child, I grew up reading books written by English authors primarily, rather than ones in my own language, because that’s all that was available in a colonial school system.

3:12 I identify first and foremost a practitioner and my practice has a direct influence on my approach to leadership. I work a lot with marginalized people – using publishing as a platform and primarily with intercultural communication projects that are related to making change for those who don’t have a voice of their own.

3:33 This is primarily in India, a little bit in the US and in the UK and primarily with independent organisations. My work is translated into other contexts and this sometimes requires a lot of empathy and clarity on my part in order for that translation to happen. It's a dialogue so all of the work up there hasn't been achieved by me alone but with the team of people working in collaboration with each other and that is the joy of it, learning through that practice.

4:04 Now, I am an international student who came to the UK as an to study at Central Saint Martins, and then at the University of Reading’s Typography Department. As David said, I’ve been the Head of College at CSM and before that, I was at the Royal College of Art with several colleagues from the table.

4:21 So for much of this journey, I was not a British citizen and I worked in or studied in some of these institutions with the precariousness of an immigrant. Why do I say this? To explain the privilege, as well as the uncertainty, of the context from which I speak. And that this precariousness and an understanding of that feels like a very important part of leadership today.

4:48 To paraphrase the Pakistani design academic, Ahmed Ansari, who is based in the US, he says, “Many of the concerns, questions and observations that I am about to raise come from my own experiences of negotiating between East and West, trying to figure out the politics of my practice as a designer and a researcher.” This sense of between is a really important critical position in the work that we do and it’s a great place to ask ourselves what useful contribution you can make when you come from various contexts that you have inhabited.

5:22 For me that means coming from the east and based in the west. And to understand this it really means coming to ourselves first as I have mentioned and then looking at a collective contribution. I'm going to digress a bit here because there is more cultures in my family. When a visit any country what I love doing most is visiting a supermarket.

5:43 I think they offer a place for philosophical reflection about life's questions. This makes me a completely useless shopper because all I do is take photographs and annoy people. I am married to a very angry and sad American. But when I first visited America, I was really gobsmacked by the amount of choice that was available and it was really overwhelming for me. How many different kinds of mustard do we need?

6:09 Growing up in India, bigger, faster, better was never thought necessary to be a mark of success. Now, a journalist asked the black American author Toni Morrison are you happy? Because we equate happiness with success. “That's really irrelevant”, she replied. “Why don't we just do something constructive, something creative and then if that makes us happy, fine.

6:36 But if it doesn't at least we would have tilled the garden, baked the bread, written the book.” So this is really about us as a community of people doing something constructive, collective and creative together and taking action through practice. I want to talk about happiness for a moment, because we live in very short-term times and our societies are dominated by nearsighted politics, business and media.

7:01 They appear to be very focused on the now rather than the long-term patterns and trends that shape and impact our world. And in this tech-structured age, our lives on screens prevent us from experiencing the transformative wonders of life. This is quite sobering, because if you read, and the new one is out today, the latest world happiness report, the one I’m referring to is 2024, indicates that since we started measuring this, our young people are less happy than they ever were before.

7:34 There are several factors that contribute to this. Social media and social isolation, political polarisation, as David Attenborough noted, many of the issues we face today are the result of communication. How we frame ideas, how speak about them, how articulate them visually, particularly as educators and practitioners, is something we need to be accountable for. This includes the simplest forms of everyday communication.

8:02 This is a sculpture by Mark Wallinger outside the London School of Economics and I was there with my daughter for a performance and as I approached every person in this tourist area said exactly the same thing. No matter what age, or gender, or background they came from, perhaps this was the first thought in your mind too, it's upside down. But how can a sphere be upside down?

8:28 As Jared Fuller tells us, this is fundamentally a design issue. We value west over east, and in this country, perhaps we value south over north and we educate our children and our students with the same imbalances. Another factor that impacts happiness is rising costs and the job market. This is a picture of migrant workers who are travelling from the city to their rural homes when the pandemic hit India and there was an immediate shutdown.

8:58 In the words of the Indian author Arundathi Roy - The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things in society where the wealthy and the middle class were safe, because they had homes, and the poor were abandoned. So, what does ‘work from home’ mean when you are homeless? I note this here because in our education systems, we still design for a minority not this majority.

9:25 And then there are concerns you are speaking about: AI and its impact on our job market. What skills can we give our students that will allow them to flourish or thrive and do meaningful work in their lives for decades to come? And how do we anticipate this? The final factors causing unhappiness in young people is climate change and uncertainty. Global warming is projected to commit over one third of the Earth's animal and plant species to extinction by 2050. If the current greenhouse gas emissions continue.

10:06 This is a catastrophic loss that would reduce biodiversity but also completely alter our ecosystem and human societies. So, my point is this. As humans, we are the most powerful species in the world. Is it not a part of our citizenship as humans and creatives to look after the non-humans who inhabit this planet with us and support the planet’s biodiversity? How do our educational systems and contexts provide a framework for this? And what can we as a group of art and design educators do about this? What futures that are alternative can be envisioned for art and design education?

10:48 What are the core values and skills of the future and most importantly how do we collaborate to do this work together? To the first question, Christopher Smith who is the Exec Chair of AHRC, noted that part of our cultural work must be to expand our frame in two ways. The first he says, we must make a common cause with science which faces its own threat.

11:16 There is a terrifying growing anti scientism which is also a rejection of curiosity, of culture and of enquiry. And a care for the future. And by standing so far to the side of science and indulging in arguments about differences between us, he says we have failed to make the case that science is a unified field. More unites us than separates us and he refers to the humanities as the human sciences because that's why we study ourselves and the world.

11:47 The second point he makes is that we in arts and design need to be clearer about our role in, for and with society. We need to show how the care for an individual or a group can translate to a much wider commitment and momentum. By leaving this to others he says, have left far too much space for views of the economy and technology that are socially and morally bankrupt.

12:13 We know very well as a community, how since the 2008 financial crisis students and parents have questioned the value of creative disciplines in relation to student debt and future employment prospects. Jonathan Bates reflects that the questions being asked are, “What’s the use of history or literature in a world of insecure employment, not to mention multiple crises’ of climate, health and social division?”

12:43 Or the notion of creative disciplines and an accumulation of the wisdom of the past. Why should we care about the past when the future is so uncertain? Why do we need language degrees when we will soon have instant AI translation? The danger noted by Professor Smith is not theoretical, it’s here. This list of words on the screen are of the words forbidden in American research grants or triggering a review.

13:11 If you have any of these words on a grant, it will automatically be rejected. The threat to knowledge described by Christopher Smith is here. And the question is, how do we as a collective response to this. For me, I believe we need new language to continue to do the work that we do. Look at me, an international student, a person of colour, a woman.

13:36 So many categories and on sheet of paper you might refer to me as B.A.M.E. and count me in your representation categories. This only gives the right and the far right accusations of woke and an opportunity to question what we do. So can we find ways to do the work that we do and imagine, because that is our power, to imagine new pathways to do this?

14:00 Can the UK be a beacon, a plavce of sanctuary for others who are facing threats globally? And how can we harness our strength, the power of imagination to collectively mobilise ourselves? As Shelley said, this day is dedicated to action, and if I am honest this is what we as a community of academics often struggle with.

14:22 We moan about the state of the world, we go to lovely conferences such as this, we fill ourselves with purpose, a little bit of disco dancing from what I hear, and then we return to our normal lives. But with UK universities purging jobs by the minute, we cannot and must not tend to this privilege any longer.

14:41 Now I don’t often refer to him, but Jeremy Till, the previous head of CSM shared an anecdote with me that I found useful and I’m going to read his words to you. Jeremy is the kind of person who has dinner parties, so excuse me if I say dinner parties. “Ted Cullinan, the late great architect, once recounted to me the protocols for his dinner parties.

15:02 This was when he and most of his friends were in their eighties, and inevitably conversation returned to people’s health, failing organs and various ailments. Ted therefore had a rule of only being allowed to talk about what he called ‘organ music’ for the first ten minutes of the dinner, and then you had to move on.

15:22 Now, as I mentioned previously I am married to an American guy, so as you might expect, our dinner table is filled, most days, with anger and outrage, to the point that our twelve year old said very firmly to us no more talking about Trump at the dinner table. And Jeremy makes the same point about this indulgence.

15:43 He says, “First, it takes all available bandwidth of anyone who is not on the same page and this effectively brings us on to their page, leaving us no space to think on our own terms. Second, it means that everyone exposed to the avalanche is left in a permanent reactive state.

16:03 Any of our actions are simply counteractions, and this limits the agency because they are framed by that activity and the values of which we are so violently opposed. This paralysis is true of all binaries. Third, our responses are always saturated with fury.

16:22 Again the other side wins because from the state of your fury, it’s not possible to imagine other futures built out of love or care. I will switch and tell you a little bit about this journey with us, very briefly, because otherwise I will be pontificating for a bit.

16:42 As you know, UAL has set out a mission of creativity and we’re starting to get that sense in our college, that art and design is on the brink of great change, not just our sector and there is a call to reconsider our practices and knowledges of art and design to think more interculturally and broadly.

17:02 To remain at the heart of creative education in an era of polarisation and new intelligence like AI, we need a total rethink because it's happening in our systems, in the skills and also in the sectors we partner with as designers and artists.

17:20 We need to ramp up because this calls for deep commitment to the role that art and design education can play in this planetary bed. We want to see ourselves as a living systems lab. There is a capacity, I was talking to somebody the other day and he said, how many students does UAL, I said 22,000 and he said so there are 22,000 minds that you can actually change to go out into the world and make a difference.

17:47 The University is our platform to practice how we want to be in the world and it is a simple as that. We want our staff and students to be part of a community, to learn to practice together how we want to be in the world. This means leaving something better than we found it and having as little impact in the world throughout disciplines and how we teach them.

18:10 Which means that when you walk into our buildings you need to be practising this, thinking about what you eat, would you buy, how you make, how you are with other staff and students. It also means that as staff we need to think about how we buy things and purchase things as well. Our current generation of students is increasingly highly engaged and we know this. They want meaningful careers, they want us to be more sustainable, they want a fairer society.

18:37 But it's really up to universities to reflect on the systems and structures we uphold and decide what capacity we have to change because students are demanding this of us. And first this means three things. Moving to a value led organisational attitude that you are practising.

Considering the future of disciplines in an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary context and reimagining our ways of thinking, being and practicing. The first step of a value-led organisation is to bring our community together with a single purpose and first is coming together around a question.

19:10 Underlying this question is the understanding that the word human has traditionally excluded many humans - women, people of colour, LGBTQ+, working-class, people with disabilities, indigenous communities, migrants, and people of diverse ethnicities and nationalities of all regions of the world, are not necessarily considered to be human. I am conscious that it isn’t enough to just ask the question, because as heads of our organisations, our role is to lead, to act, to enable this to happen.

19:45 This means clarifying first who we are for ourselves and our students. When I put this up I was criticised at CSM, painfully for me because I am a graphic designer, that all three were the same size. So we needed to flex what those three things meant. And I think this is the foundation of art and design, it’s always about enabling culture, education and art and creative industries.

20:14 And how do we enact that? And bring that together? For us culture is about convening and bringing people both within and outside the Academy. We are based in Camden, one of the most deprived neighbourhoods. How do we engage with primary schools to engage in that to infect that sense of art and design from the start.

20:35 In 2023 we had over 61,000 people visit our events. In 2024 there were 75,000 what did we do with them? Did we speak to them about art and design or did we just give them access to it? So how are we actually engaging in that conversation and bringing the communities in which we are embedded, closer to us?

20:58 Education is clear about how we prepare students for the world and consider the relevance of what and how we teach and business is about the future staying connected to creative industries, challenging them to engage with us. Now there’s a brilliant guy called Kipum Lee who writes about this from a design lens, an article called Institutions as Objects in Fourth Order Design.

21:23 He talks about how we haven’t really designed our organisations and we need a pluralistic way of actually designing them to understand how we shape them. We ask the question what does it mean to be human to rethink what an art and design college should focus on and what it should do as work. This manifests in five principles and values that organise and articulate our college mission.

21:50 We use these values to organize our priorities, communication, events and actually our behaviour to each other. And to explicitly in practice articulate to students and ourselves, our expectations. These values have come from Central and St Martin's DNA. From our own history but also from painful current events. Like many other universities, we had an encampment at CSM last academic year protesting the genocide in Palestine.

22:22 One of the painful realisations we had as a leadership group was that despite all our creative practices that require us to collaborate and bridge differences we had no tools to seek common ground, to develop ways that acknowledge our differences and support making and maintaining these new connections. So we needed to embed it in our everyday and not just our curriculum.

22:47 The second question I asked was what are the core values of artists and designers. I think that we talk a lot about an interdisciplinary context at CSM because that's the basis of our work. You will see there is increasing work that is happening across universities, a lot of STEM universities starting to do creative disciplines. Because there is a sense that that is what our students need.

23:17 To be equipped with life skills they can apply anywhere throughout their future careers. We can't just answer the question and challenges through one approach to our disciplines, we need to imagine new ways. Particularly important when you have the limitations of AI and the way machine learning amplifies and replicates human bias.

23:36 We have poorly chosen data labels that create very unfair behaviours and we place an excessive trust in an AI system as being objective without recognising the extent to which that human decision making has governed it. We need to train students to responsively engage with AI in society and the workplace and we believe a transdisciplinary perspective is essential.

24:00 This is how we are currently organised, in eight disciplinary programs with courses within them and deans leading them. At the start of 2024 we came together as a series of interdisciplinary schools, putting the commonalities and concerns in one place through conversation with our colleagues. This has always been our way but not made explicit.

24:24 For example, we have architecture courses based in an art school context and this has become fundamental to the way we teach and practice, so bringing the superiority of the high arts and combining with design is what our universities do very well. But leading also means staying true to the purpose of where our institutions were set up and to start to think about the language in which we use.

24:51 Our architecture program is called spatial practices. Not an architectural or built environment. The openness in the language then offers different perspectives from different canons. The point I made earlier about how we need a change in language to signal a change in approach. This openness then allows students to find their own forms, own materials, own processes and own approaches.

25:18 By bridging disciplinary boundaries, professional and cultural boundaries and working across disciplines that mean something to us but perhaps not as high walled them. They sit sometimes between architecture and fashion, art and science and others. This is nothing that is radically different, but something that we have taken for granted in the connections that have existed that we have already forged.

25:45 Bear with me on this because I can see Juan in my sight over there. Our schools are not named by disciplines such as School of Art or School of Design we’re Central St Martins, known in short for CSM and we wanted to take a different approach to the disciplines. Each school takes on an alphabet name of the college. C-School, S-School, M-School.

26:10 Bear with me because I know it seems like I am taking the piss. We do not wish to abandon our establish disciplines but we think there is an alternative route in to the knowledge and skills our disciplines offer and that different route is context. The aim is to invigorate our disciplines of art, design, fashion and performance, but using them as tools by which we can then explore the challenges and context of the world, whether that is the climate crisis or AI.

26:44 Our true aim and this will take time because we have to do together as a whole community is to move to a kind of unity of theoretical and practice frameworks beyond the disciplinary, that amplify the disciplinary, in a harmonious manner that constructs new knowledge and uplift our students with different abilities that are inherent in them.

27:08 We are on a journey as I said to these schools of thought as I call them, C is for culture, working from the premise that culture is crucial form of enquiry and expression, working alongside other fields of knowledge. S is for human systems, bringing together art and design practice to the human place based on ethical challenges.

27:28 And M is for material, radical approaches to materials, making, probing fashion, textiles jewellery and material innovation. Sitting across them, which my circles don’t show is that the combination of all this knowledge and skills is to see that a student has choice about how they approach their own journey through that.

27:53 To my final bit, how do we collaborate to do this work together? By expanding our ways of thinking. So when I did my Master’s at CSM, I read texts such as this. This was knowledge presented to me that we still present as the knowledge. This is how the world is framed and seen, pretty much like that Mark Wallanger sculpture. But there is a different story.

28:20 We know that printing predated Gutenberg not only by means of xylography, in China, from at least 700 CE but movable type in East Asia, metal type in Korea in the 16th century. So the astronomy of print does not describe this outward-moving galaxy suggested by McLuhan, but is a universe with multiple points of origin. It’s a pluriverse and Asia as one of the cradles.

28:50 We know that every decision a designer makes, whether that’s a typeface, image, or a colour, affects the message being communicated. So art and design must always acknowledge its context to be meaningful. And looking at the world around us, this context has dramatically changed. Which takes us to the next point, we need to consider different ways of being with each other. We need to acknowledge where our students come from, the contexts and lived experiences they bring, and we know as centres of art education we need to think about the skills our graduates need to remain adaptable and resilient.

29:31 There is an emphasis increasingly on active learning, cultivation of your aptitude, self-determination and supporting students to create an environment that is suitable their own development at their own pace. We must be ever conscious as I said at the start, that what it means to be human means diverse and very different experiences.

29:52 Helping our students understand that that is the fundamental way to prepare them for the future. By enabling different ways of practice, I spoke about it being a living systems lab and I meant it. We are fortunate to have just two campuses at CSM. We need to find a way in which our universities can be safe communities of practice but also areas of challenge in relation to the world. One of the first things we did was look at the canteen.

30:24 Can we speak about climate change and have a climate action plan in the university if we still eat beef and use plastic in our building? Can we offer non-sustainable materials in our art shops? How do we practice better, less impactful choices together, because being human is not separate from being an artist or a designer. And this sense of humanity and its limitations gives us a pathway to AI as well.

30:51 Our approach to AI right now is very data driven and repetitive. We take a western canonical and colonial approach much like we did with the example of printing and the teaching of it to the design of artificial intelligence. We are fascinated by AI's outputs and what Chat GPT can do for us, we find AI art appealing, by being concerned by its lack of deeper meaning. We limited in our approach to technology because we look at it solely from a human intelligence approach.

31:26 Yet our engagement with other animals and living creatures tells us how much we have to learn from non-human perspectives and the more we learn about emotions that are shared by others, the more we’ll need to rethink our own context, biases and agendas. If in the future we are to consider AI as sentient, being able to perceive or feel things, we need to change and shift our position first.

31:55 When I lead, I sometimes falter because all leaders are human as well. In those times I am so privileged to walk into the college and have access to students who I look to for inspiration. I'm constantly humbled by them because they take bold and decisive ways of leading everyday. In the environments we provide they always enact small but increasingly bigger acts of resistance.

32:26 They are no less anxious or fearful than us. The difference is they seem to feel the fear and do it anyway. When I see work such as this I ask myself what is it that we are so afraid of, taking that one step or that chance? On the left is work by a third year student Poppy Banham. It’s a painting of a woman with widespread legs that caused The Guardian to report it because it was reported by the police in Hay-on-Wye, of all places.

32:57 On the right, is a recent work by Petra Phagestom whose collection for the MA project was literally driven by spite. Anything that annoyed or irritated her, she absorbed and turned into her final collection. To lead, we can't just look to leaders, we need to lead together. We need to start to practice these small acts of resistance within us, to slowly and gently increase that practice together.

33:28 My ask of you today, is let us adhere to our own ten minutes of organ music and that privilege of anger and fear and worry behind, to take collective action. In the words of another practitioner, Michael Beirut, ‘In a moment of tremendous technological and cultural change, [we] can make the case that art and design is not just a craft, but a fundamental way to understand and engage with the world.’ I know just as Toni Morrison guided us that if we do the work, happiness will surely follow, no matter how uncertain the contexts feel for us right now. Thank you so much.