



An interview with Clyde Hopkins (CH) and Chris Wainwright (CW)

This is an edited extract from an interview that took place in April 2003 between Professor Clyde Hopkins, Principal Lecturer in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art and Design, The London Institute and Chris Wainwright, artist and Dean of Art at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, The London Institute.

CW Can you give me a brief overview from your education as an art student to your current role as an artist and lecturer at of Art and Design.

CH I found myself as a sixth former up at the edge of Lancashire and I knew that I really wanted to do a foundation course, but financially it would have been very difficult. The nearest course that I wanted to go to was in Leeds. So instead I looked at a couple of Universities, Newcastle and Reading, which offered four-year Fine Art degree courses. I applied to and got accepted for both and decided to study at Reading. After I graduated, I worked in my own studio for a while, which was financially fairly difficult. At the time I was living on the edge of Hampshire and I wrote to the County Council telling them that they needed an art advisor and that I was it. They gave me a job teaching art in a sixth-form college in Southampton, which I did for about six months. It sounds odd, but I think I taught myself how to teach in that period. I started getting some part-time teaching jobs at various colleges in the mid 1970s. I spent quite a lot of time teaching at Hull as a 0.3 lecturer. Like a lot of other practitioners, I did a whole lot of part-time teaching in various colleges throughout the UK in places like Manchester, Canterbury and Reading. I was also doing odd days at various colleges, like Cheltenham, the Slade and Chelsea. I finally decided to apply for a job as Head of Painting at Winchester School of Art. To my surprise they offered me the job. I worked there for about eight years from 1982 until the Head of Fine Art, Bill Crozier, retired and I was asked to assume that role, which I did for about two years. I then applied to Chelsea in 1990, which is where I've been working ever since on the BA and MA Fine Art Painting courses. That's largely it in terms of art teaching.

As for my practice, I suppose I started showing work more regularly from the mid 1970s. I had a studio in Greenwich along with a number of other artists at that time, and I just felt that I really wanted to spend as much time making work as I could. As more people got interested, the exhibition opportunities seemed to come along reasonably regularly. I was quite pleased when an artist selected me for a Serpentine Spring Show in the late 1970s and things began to take off a bit after that.

CW You intimated that you weren't quite sure of the reasons for aspiring to work in full time art education. I can relate to that in a sense that there is a kind of attraction, which is sometimes financial, but it is also to do with seeking a form of recognition.

CH I don't know if this is quite answering your question. I remember thinking long and hard about applying for the job at Winchester; it was slightly odd because a painter and lecturer that I'd known for some time, and who was a carrier of the modernist cannon, had actually asked me to write a reference for the same post. I suspect like yourself, I'd always been rather highly principled about being a part-timer and I guess (to be quite straightforward about it) I tended to be fairly rude about some of the more established full time members of staff I might find in colleges. They certainly weren't all like that, but one or two I came across tended to think they had a sinecure, that they weren't trying particularly hard with the students and seemed to have largely given up on their work. It seems rather arrogant now, but nonetheless that was how I felt then, and I did think long and hard about applying for the job at Winchester. I remember that I talked to my wife quite a lot about it. I felt determined that, just as things were beginning to move along rather better in terms of making and exhibiting work, I was determined not to let that stop. I wasn't quite sure how I was going to do this but I felt that I had enough energy at the time to make sure I could balance those two things.

CW How do you feel about that decision now?

CH I suppose that twenty years ago I couldn't imagine why energy levels, if that's what they are, should drop. But I can't deny that for the last year or so I've probably found it quite hard to maintain equal energy in both areas.

CW You've touched upon some of the imperatives as to why artists take on a full time role as an art educator to support their artistic practice, which we all know is precarious in itself as a means of providing a continuing financial return. I guess a speculative question is what might have happened if you had stayed out of the establishment so to speak, and whether or not we can explore a more positive steer to the fact that some artists choose to be educators and that it isn't just a pragmatic or financial imperative to support artistic practice. I've always thought of you as someone who made a conscious decision to "teach as a practitioner", I use that term quite deliberately as opposed to becoming a teacher who practices.

CH I can't deny that it's difficult, somewhat strange, to think myself back twenty-five years or so. I suspect this may sound pompous but I felt when I was working as a part timer, at Hull for example, that senior staff tended to entrust a group of younger staff to actually deliver the course with some energy - in a way we felt passionate about. I was very keen on devising first year projects that I thought would be the ultimate answer as to how to draw expressively or to encourage students to get the most out of using colour within painting. I suppose I was touched by some other lecturers' enthusiasm, just as much as I was by often working with a youngish team of people with whom one would have many arguments about art. When I took the post at Winchester, or indeed at Chelsea, I don't think I came into those roles feeling that I had to do this solely to earn

the money to keep going. I found it quite interesting then, and even now, to describe, with seemingly great boredom, just how straightforward my life can be on occasions, maybe four days working at a college and three days in the studio. It sounds a rather martyrish environment, but when things are working out, I find it satisfactory. I feel I have been able to sustain this for very long periods. I use oil paint most of the time and having four days away from the studio is no bad thing. I can let things dry and I can reflect a bit more on them. I don't deny that when I've had some fellowships or sabbatical time, it's marvellous to go into the studio everyday. However, I haven't felt for quite a lot of my teaching time that working about four days a week is a horrendous imposition. I can handle it as long as I lead a relatively uncomplicated life for the rest of my time.

CW Given that almost binary distinction between the studio and teaching time - three days in the studio and four days teaching - there must be some kind of filtering process that allows some things to flow between the spaces and other aspects you edit out.

CH I think one thing on balance and it may sound like a cliché? - working with a group of students, who in the main are younger than oneself, some of their energy and enthusiasm rubs off. I am almost reluctant to acknowledge that, but it does. There are days when the sheer curiosity or eccentricity or particularly personal take, or some notion or idea really does cheer me up or remind me of something I read, or something I hadn't thought, or aspect of art theory, or context that I just haven't considered for a long time. Equally there are times when I know I've come into College and my head is still buzzing around with some work I'm doing, or preparation for an exhibition, and I'm aware that I will get caught up in the burdens of administration

CW Maybe it is more a case of how ideas flow internally and how they change conceptually, as much as through external influence. You kind of think you know where you are in the studio, then you leave it and go and do something else and you come back and perhaps the work is not what you thought at all. The studio is quite a lonely place, a kind of discursive environment.

CH That's right. There have been occasions, like at Winchester or Chelsea, where I've tried, not entirely successfully, paying a student to work as an assistant. I've come to realise, that not being a David Mach-like sculptor, that it can sometimes be quite an exhausting job to try to supervise someone out of the corner of your eye as well as getting on with something yourself. In terms of The London Institute they have actually been very supportive. I was pleased in 1998 when I was offered a show at The London Institute Gallery, which is a good central London space and trouble had been taken to fit it out for me. I suppose because it was within the Institute, more students than might otherwise go, made an effort to see the show. I think that maybe because I don't give very many slide shows of my work to students anymore, perhaps because I'm too lazy or grandiose. Students will, as I know they do with many part time and visiting staff, go to see exhibitions of staff work. This allows them to know that person's work. But it was pleasant and rewarding to be able to have some straightforward dialogue about work I've made and to listen to some sharp criticism from some of them.

CW There are many examples of artists who have though their practice and influence in art schools, turned out students as images of themselves. It then takes quite a long time for those young artists to re-establish themselves and create their own identities. That is itself an interesting phenomenon which one could look at and make judgements in terms of a pedagogical approach. I guess though you don't subscribe to that approach in these days of facilitating the student's individual learning: so where does that leave the experience and skill of the artist as teacher?

CH No I don't. In the time I mentioned (the late 70s early 80s), like many people in my position - at that early stage in their career - I was rather more dogmatic about what was the way forward. If I were to survey the amount of gestural, colourful abstraction that I promoted at Hull, I might hang my head in shame! but at the time there was a currency for such painting. I believed quite passionately that there were certain things that could be achieved in working this way. Ever since my own student experience I have felt some reservations about people who teach rather too heavily by example; it can appear that there is a fixed discipline or style to be followed.

CW What do you think your students want of you then? They identify you as an accomplished artist, a committed teacher, and they have access to the work you produce.

CH I think that some students continue to want criticism (sometimes rather over literally), I want to say something about myself here and I think it applies to a number of staff in any art college. There might be an assumption that one can give an absolute or absolutist point of view about a piece or a body of work. I'm not sure this is true. I think they expect - I hope I'm not becoming too dewy-eyed about this and it is something I've tried to promote - but they expect some trust to exist between you as an individual member of staff and their expectation as to what they might receive. Some of that learning experience, or however you describe it these days, may not be to do with practical or contextual or critical skills being passed on. It might be about a sort of humanism that one would like to try to keep alive within a community of staff and students. You're not going to make everyone happy all the time; individuals are going to have their problems. I don't particularly like working with groups of students where criticism or criticism of other students seems to have run out of control. There are factions who have highly developed ideas about the correctness of their position, or have very negative feelings about any other art or view of creativity, or development other than their own. It can however, sound pompous to talk about what one individual can engender.

There was a kind of system in operation from the 1950s to 1970s, where, if you were lucky, you were probably taught by someone who was broadly successful within the world of visual arts, almost regardless of the kind of work that they made. I made the assumption that if they were a good or successful artist, then they would probably be a good or successful teacher. And quite often that was the case. I think that kind of simple relationship that perhaps they're a practitioner, or an artist first and that they may have something sensible, useful, encouraging, critical, dynamic, to bring out in individual and groups of students is still what interests me today. I can fully understand why institutions and courses need to have checks and benchmarks applied to them, but without being

too nostalgic, I do have a belief that an interesting or successful practitioner will make a tutor capable of helping the students to fulfil their potential.

CW I think I instinctively agree with you about that kind of scenario of the practitioner as a successful and valuable teacher, but what I'm aware of, as I'm sure you are, is that the role of the teacher is under fairly consistent scrutiny from a number of sources. We all go through that and live within that kind of accountability culture. But going back to the other role as an artist, does that level of scrutiny of your contribution to student learning compromise the level of self scrutiny that you employ in terms of your own practice, or do you feel you still remain as self critical as an artist?

CH I think until a few years ago I would maybe have said, "yes, I think it is possible". For quite a long time I've worked in what are called group studios. Certainly a few years ago, and it still happens from time to time, I think it can be very useful to have another artist coming into the studio for a short while and making a few observations about things that they see. I guess that's one way of keeping on your toes. I would find it hard to say that at the moment, I am relaxed about making work. I don't think that I would expect myself or indeed want an external body to bring the kind of scrutiny to my own practice which I have - sadly - come to expect of national or local review bodies who constantly examine our aims and objectives, learning outcomes, what we teach and how we teach.