

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

J. G. Ballard and Making: An Experiment in Collaborative Practice

Thomas Knowles, Birmingham City University, thomas.knowles@bcu.ac.uk

Beth White, Birmingham City University, beth.white@bcu.ac.uk

Abstract

J. G. Ballard and Making was a pilot project which ran in the second semester of 2017 at Birmingham City University. It brought together students and teachers from the schools of English and Fashion with the open brief of responding creatively to Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* (1973) short story collection. In this paper, we sketch some of the pedagogical methods and techniques employed on the project such as the exquisite corpse, and outline the challenges and rewards encountered in responding creatively to Ballard's text.

Ballard's (1930-2009) work is highly visual, steeped in the visual cultures of the twentieth century. He once described himself as a frustrated painter: 'I think I always was a frustrated painter. They are paintings, really, my novels and stories' (Goddard and Pringle 1976: 9). Several studies have drawn attention to the great debt which he owed to the Surrealist and Pop Art movements. The *Vermilion Sands* stories are inspired by Surrealism and the cinema. They are set amongst sand seas, singing statues and sand yachts, and peopled by jaded film stars and sinister auteur directors wearing psychotropic clothing. The stories centre around different creative collectives - each attempting to surmount, or revelling in the malaises of beach fatigue and cultural exhaustion. In response to these stories, students produced spiral staircases to nowhere; motorcars with word-cloud exhausts; a filigree of metallic flowers gazing at us through decadent gauze; vegetative, singing typewriters producing music to which jewelled insects, emerging from the pupil of an enormous eye, dance.

Keywords: collaboration; interdisciplinary; collage; J. G. Ballard; pedagogy

Introduction

J. G. Ballard and Making was an eight-week pilot project which ran in the second semester of 2017 at Birmingham City University. It brought together students and teachers from the schools of English and Fashion and Textiles with the open brief of responding creatively to Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* collection of stories (1973). The students collaborated on a series of creative responses to Ballard's work including collage images and sculptures that they presented at the J. G. Ballard Conference, *J. G. Ballard and Making* in June 2017. In this paper, we sketch some of the pedagogical methods and techniques employed on the project such as the exquisite corpse, and the challenges and rewards encountered in responding creatively to Ballard's stories.

Why J. G. Ballard?

The works of the British author J. G. Ballard might seem an odd fulcrum for a collaborative project. The erstwhile science fiction writer and literary provocateur famously populates his works with eccentrics

and loners, Romantics, dreamers, and those that tend to have cast off their need for the society of others. Alienation and an incapacity for or failure of empathy - which Ballard calls variously 'the death of affect' or 'beach fatigue' - are common signs in such figures.

Ballard's characters make strange things. These are frequently surreal, composed of discarded or seemingly useless objects combined in counterintuitive ways, and they offer oblique windows onto the conditions of modernity. It is possible to see these strange creations as the epiphenomena of disturbed minds, as futile and dispiriting as the wall that Kafka's K builds in *The Castle* (1926). There is certainly an element of the Kafkaesque in Ballard's fiction, but it is also possible to read a revelatory and revolutionary potential in his characters' efforts to understand and concretize abstract and conceptual problems through the physical manipulation and arrangement of objects. Such repurposing invokes the radical gestures of artist collectives such as the Letterist International and the Situationist International, *detournements* that hijack the slogans and images of consumer capitalism in order to undermine and critique.

The 1960 short story *The Voices of Time*, sees a dwindling human population coming to terms with the twin entropies of the human genome, which has exhausted its capacity to evolve, and the heat death of the universe, in which the end of our solar system is merely the latest in a long sequence of expired civilisations. An ever increasing need for sleep, terminating in coma, is afflicting large numbers of people. The result of experimentation to find a cure for the malaise, Kaldren has had his need for sleep surgically removed. His inability to dream has deleterious effects on the young man, but he keeps himself busy anticipating the end of the universe, and scheming to build a new world for himself out of what he calls his 'Terminal Documents'. These include the Association Tests of the Nuremberg Twelve, Beethoven's blind quartets, the complete works of Freud, and an automatic novel.

In the 1982 short story *Memories of the Space Age* (1982), the protagonist Mallory finds himself compelled to travel towards, rather than away from, a mysterious disaster area - a signature Ballard move. The weird disaster has left swathes of the population suffering from a degenerative sleeping sickness that progresses towards a trance-like state in which time stands still. The cause seems obliquely related to the now-abandoned US space program, and its epicentre is the rusting gantries and overgrown launch platforms of Cape Kennedy. Mallory carries with him a collection of objects that includes...

The tape machine on which he recorded his steady decline; an album of nude Polaroid poses of a woman doctor he had known in Vancouver; his Gray's Anatomy from his student days, a unique work of fiction, pages still stained with formalin from the dissecting-room cadavers; a paperback selection of Muybridge's stop-frame photographs; and a psychoanalytic study of Simon Magus. (Ballard 2009: 1040)

Mallory refers to this collection of objects as 'now almost meaningless' (Ballard 2009: 1040), but the peculiar resonances of each of them with elements of the story, as well as with elements of Ballard's biography and interests, in fact imbue them with symbolic charge. One could view them as sequencing codes for a reconstruction of this and perhaps a number of other Ballard stories. Similarly, the

narrative is broken into numbered sections that do not necessarily appear in chronological order, inviting this process of reconfiguration and interpretation.

In *Myths of the Near Future* (1982), the protagonist Sheppard calls a similarly eclectic collection of objects his 'survival kit', and hopes that 'a framed reproduction of Magritte's *The March of Summer*, a portable video cassette projector, two tins of soup, a well-thumbed set of six *Kamera Klassic* magazines, a clutch of cassettes labelled *Elaine/Shower Stall I-XXV*, and a paperback selection of *Marey's Chronograms*' (Ballard 2009: 1068), will help him to find his dead wife.

There are many more examples of the recombination and juxtaposition of objects in Ballard's works, and they share the function of stimulating an imaginative way out of an unacceptable reality - be it the death of a loved one, capitalist consumerism and its media landscapes, ecological collapse, the failure or absence of empathy, or artistic and creative malaise. It is very often the latter that fuels the experimentation of the various art collectives of Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* stories, before treating of those in more detail, I want to link this back to collaborative practice.

Ballard and Collaboration

Surrealism and Pop Art were huge influences on Ballard; his novels and short stories frequently reference or feature Surrealist works, and he wrote about the importance of Surrealism in essays like, *Time, Memory and Inner Space* (1963) and *The Coming of the Unconscious* (1966). Indeed, many of his fictions seem to take place in landscapes familiar from the canvases of Max Ernst, Salvador Dali or Yves Tanguy. For Ballard, the Surrealists were right not to accept reality as they found it, to follow their obsessions and neuroses, and he consistently championed the transformative power of the imagination. But Ballard was alive, too, to the potential for the imagination to be overrun by what he called the *mana* personalities of history - for the recuperation of radical aesthetics by reactionary and neo-fascistic forces in modern society.

Ballard collaborated with artists and filmmakers on a number of occasions, and his collaborations share an inspirational source with some of the canonical theorists of collaborative practice. The 1956 exhibition, *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London was a collaboration by artists and architects, who produced immersive science-fictional environments through a blend of emerging and imagined technology, art, and science. The artists and architects behind the exhibition, the Independent Group, included the sculptor and collagist Eduardo Paolozzi, painter Richard Hamilton, and the Brutalist architects Alison and Peter Smithson. The exhibition had an enormous effect on Ballard's imagination. As Ballard scholars David Pringle and Roger Luckhurst have shown, his set of early short fictions that take place in the desert resort of *Vermilion Sands* feature artist collectives producing work that bears striking resemblance to avant-garde exhibitions of the 50s and 60s, such as those at the Institute of Contemporary Art. During this period, Ballard would stage his own exhibition of crashed cars; produce a series of four text collages called *Diagram for a New Novel*, and take out a series of full-page advertisements in magazines featuring combinations of pornographic imagery - some of which were supplied by Eduardo Paolozzi - and text that riffed on themes that would be explored in later short stories and novels.

Art Movements and Collaboration

Conscious collaboration is clearly not a new idea and early examples of interdisciplinary practice provide real insights into participatory learning. The aforementioned independent group is a highly significant example. The group formed of writers, thinkers and creative practitioners, worked across interdisciplinary boundaries and created a radical approach to looking and working with visual culture. David Robbins explains the approach further in his book, *The Independent Group Postwar Britain and The Aesthetics of Plenty* (1990).

The approach was inclusive and respectful, drawing from inspiration as diverse as communication theory, anthropology and non-Aristotelean philosophy. The approach also spanned the entire cultural landscape of post-war Britain and inhabited the spaces between a multitude of concepts, practices and disciplines. (Robbins 1990: no pagination).

Further early examples of collaboration and artistic synergy include the Soviet Constructivist movement who were also in favour of art as a practice for social purpose and actively rejected the idea of autonomous art. The movement found followers across the continent especially in the Dutch artistic movement known as De Stijl. This movement was founded on four key principles, most notably collaborative practice, and brings together a collective of writers, artists and architects for the purpose of universal harmony.

De Stijl stands out because its aspirations were as social as they were aesthetic. By ostensibly removing the individualism of the artist in favour of precision and universal harmonies, the De Stijl group believed they were laying the groundwork for a future utopia. (Alex Bigman 2013: no pagination)

Today the principles of true collaboration remain the same, to combine the disjointed knowledge of diverse individuals for the purpose of creating original ideas and new work. The Vermilion sands stories are inspired by these movements and feature similar artist collectives. On our project we were creating objects and images out of the fictional world - analysing and critiquing it from within rather than attempting to maintain critical distance in a more traditional literary studies fashion.

Collaborative Practice

The term collaborative practice, according to Bruffee (1984), was first coined in an educational context by a group of secondary school teachers and a biologist studying medical education in the 1950s and 1960s - note the contemporaneity of the aforementioned Independent Group and the *This is Tomorrow* (Whitechapel 1956) exhibition. Some of what Bruffee noted as radical in his 1984 survey of the field *Collaborative Practice and the "Conversation of Mankind"* has no doubt come to seem orthodox: across disciplines we routinely set group activities and provide opportunities for peer review and support.

Kenneth Bruffee also identified collaborative practice as a form of social group work and believes that knowledge is best constructed within knowledge communities. In his 1986 essay, *Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge*, he outlines the implications of a nonfoundational social constructionist understanding of knowledge and acknowledges the potential of social construction as

a fertile resource for teachers and scholars. He explains that in cognitive terms the individual is the matrix of all thought and a great idea is often the product exclusively of a single mind, whilst in contrast, social construction assumes that the matrix of thought is not the individual self but some community of knowledgeable peers and the vernacular language of that community. Social construction, much like the early artistic movements including the Soviet Constructivists, regards terms such as intellectual development and production, conceptual frameworks, idea and objectivity as social constructs. They are representative of a particular language that constitutes a particular community of knowledgeable peers.

It is important to revisit these earlier models of collaboration and the examples identified represent a new way of engaging in creativity with a collective society. The early artistic movements including the Soviet Constructivists in the 1920's and the independent Group in the 1950's provide a blueprint for teaching and learning practices today. Their connectivity as a group and their multi-layer approach to design highlight the continued importance of developing knowledge communities across a variety of disciplines.

Exquisite Corpse

The Exquisite Corpse technique has collaboration at its very core, mixing genres, approaches and disciplines. The method follows a simple algorithm that begins by folding a sheet of paper in four across the horizontal axis. Each participant taking it in turn is asked to make his or her mark on one of the quarters of folded paper. The resulting construction is an amalgamation of random marks using a series of simple asynchronous and contingent operations. This technique acts as a method of collaboration that results from the folding together of multiple ideas. The outcome is a new work independent of any singular contribution.

The Exquisite Corpse game was devised by members of the surrealist group in the 1930's and represents the infinite possibilities that emerge when creativity is opened up to a crowd. The imperfect and disconnected structures that can be created emphasize the capacity of the crowd to surprise and amuse, in contrast with the holistic aesthetic that usually stems from a single creator. Our interest in the exquisite corpse technique came at a point in the project when students were struggling to develop ideas in response to the brief and we found that the open-ended method enabled the students to broaden the potential for ideas and uphold the communal over the individual. We raided bins and skips and school clear outs for materials and such reuse and repurposing chimes with the radical intent of surrealism and the Soviet Constructivists.

The *Cadavre Exquis*' technique represents the serendipitous aspect of collaborative creativity. This technique that was designed to accommodate numerous visions, so that the final outcomes were an accumulation of a genially shared effort. The process enabled the students to broaden the potential for surprising and contrasting ideas to emerge from joint thinking. The series of collages and drawing developed by the students represents the infinite possibilities that emerge when creativity is opened up to a crowd. The imperfect and disconnected structures of sand yachts (figure 1), bejewelled insects (figure 7) and jaded filmstars (figure 3) created using this technique emphasize the capacity of the crowd to surprise and amuse, in contrast with the aesthetic that usually stems from a single creator. In an article for the Tate Etc, Anne Ellegood explains her thoughts on collaborative practice.

Collaborations - whether they incorporate an entire team of participants across the globe or revolve around a long- standing partnership - evaluate and emulate the construction of identity, recognising the numerous social factors that influence subjectivity and upholding the communal over the individual. (Ellegood 2010: 76)

This practice of building up the work using collage (figures 2, 3, 4 and 6) sketches (figures 1, 5, 7 and 8) found objects (figure 9) and the manipulation of materials draws from genealogy and the algorithms of the exquisite corpse, which is one of the few collaborative exercises to successfully transcend its original time period and If surrealism infuses the strange flora, fauna and landscapes of red beach and Vermilion sands, and if movements like the independent group and the exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art are a model for the artist collectives in the stories, the use of the surrealist techniques of word association and cut ups and exquisite corpse seems entirely appropriate to the reverse engineering objects from the text.

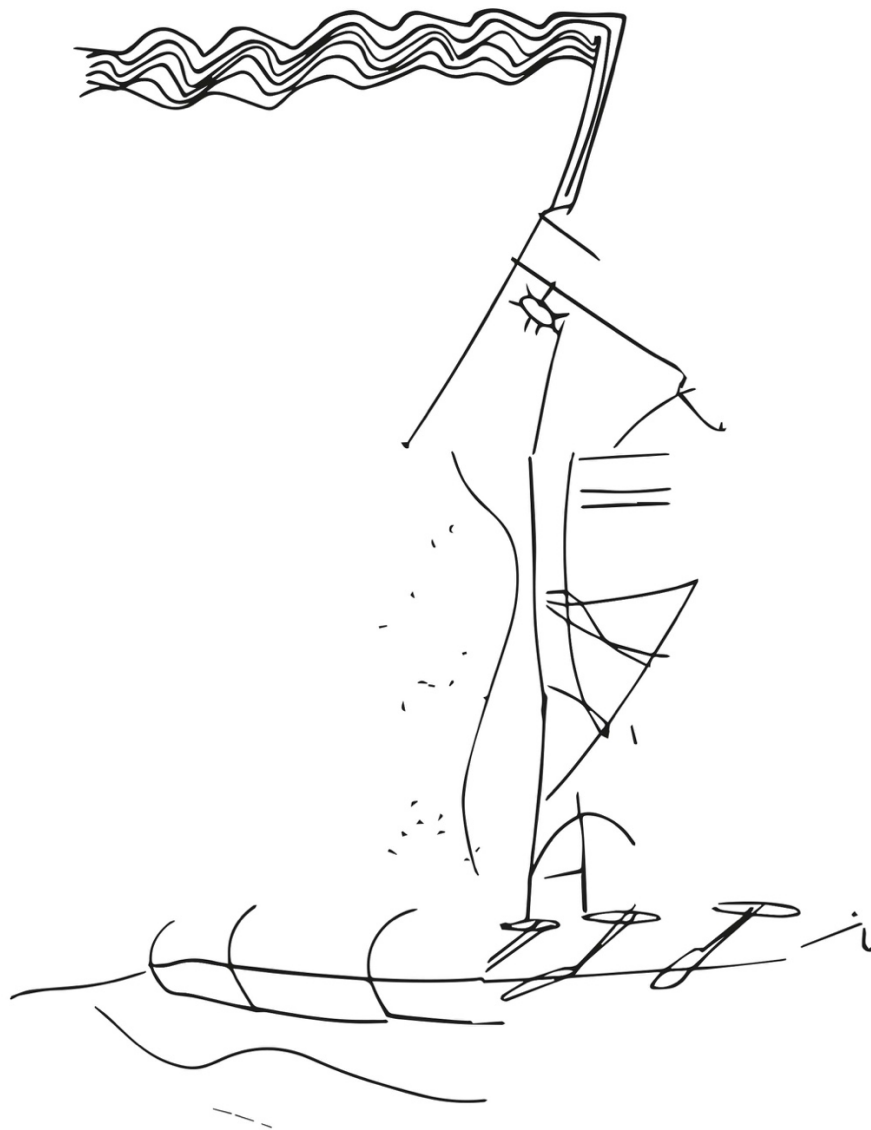


Figure 1: Sand yachts drawing and collage.

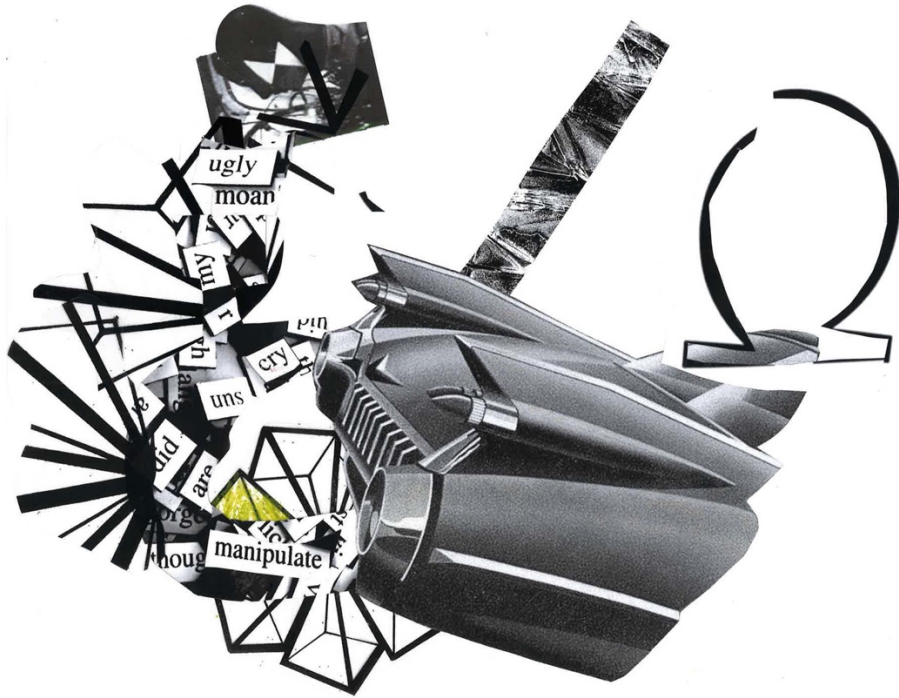


Figure 2: Cloud Sculpture collage.



Figure 3: Jade Film Star collage.

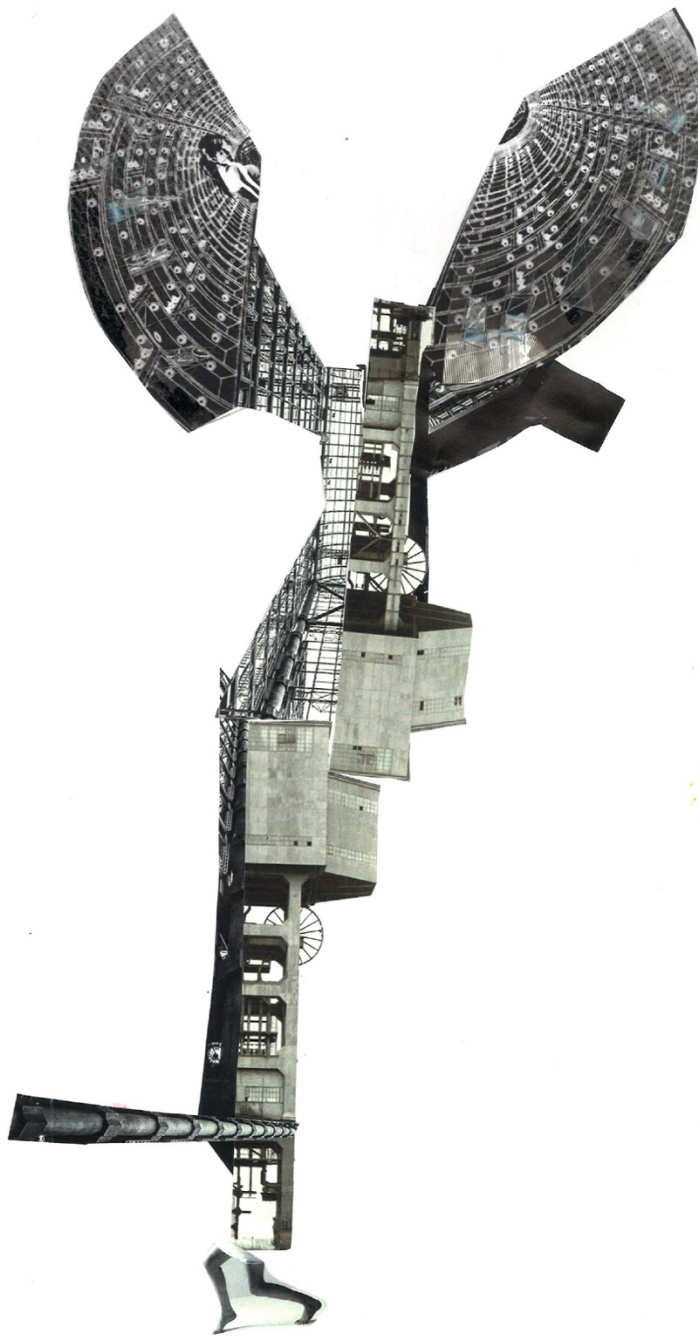


Figure 4: Singing Statues collage.



Figure 5: Belladonna drawing and collage.



Figure 6: Singing Typewriter collage.

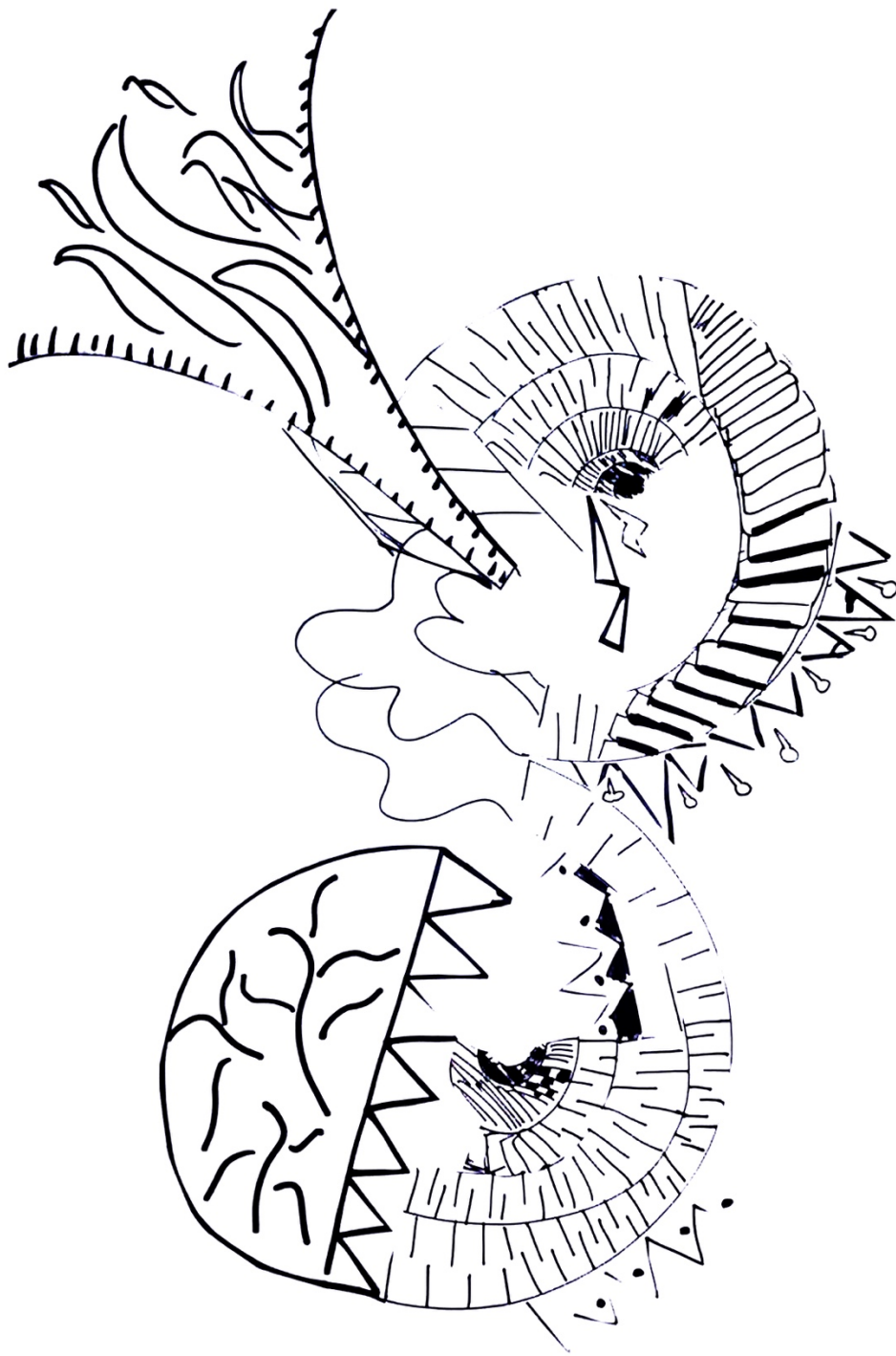


Figure 7: Bejewelled Insects drawing and collage.



Figure 8: Sand Rays drawing and collage.



Figure 9: Spiral Staircases to Nowhere Sculpture.

Conclusion

The students came to understand difficult literary and theoretical concepts through exploring them in other mediums. In the images that accompany these pages you will see, for instance spiral staircases to nowhere (figure 9); motorcars with word-cloud exhausts (figure 2); singing typewriters producing music (fig 6) and a scaffolded angel of machinery and masonry on human legs (figure 4). Students were able to understand and concretize abstract and conceptual problems through the physical manipulation and arrangement of objects. Bruffee (1984) sees collaborative practice as a way of facilitating students' entry into what he calls the 'human conversation'. As teachers, we witnessed our collaborative students enter into the conversation of academic research, and Ballard studies in particular. At the start of the project, group discussions of the Vermilion Sands stories involved a great deal of tutor prompting, and tended to elicit little more than observations of textual elements such as style or atmosphere - and these were not marshalled as concrete examples or evidence for an overarching point or argument. Through the exploration of these texts in multiple mediums and by collaboratively producing artefacts inspired by them, the students attained a level of fluency in these discourses sufficient for them to successfully present, discuss and field questions on their work at an

academic conference on Ballard - and this is not something that we would normally expect of second-year undergraduate students!

As a diverse group of individuals from multi-disciplinary backgrounds, the students began to develop a sense of community as the pilot progressed. The students started to construct ideas as a social group and it was clear that their learning began to happen amongst the individuals rather than between them. The students also learned to depend on each other rather than depending exclusively on the authority of staff as the project progressed and as Bruffee identified in his 1985 essay, the language of the community of peers was upheld over the individual self. Throughout the pilot project students worked beyond traditional boundaries and conventional disciplinary areas and through the co-construction of knowledge, the student's developed new social communities on which they could depend and new ways of engaging in creativity activity.

Students gained ability across the range of disciplines which the project involved, including: teamwork, working to deadlines, conversational and written ability in academic fields, conceptual design skills, and practical skills in working with a range of materials to realise designs. This also resulted in a new confidence in discussing diverse aspects of their collaboration points to benefits accrued in the process of conceptualizing ideas from different knowledge domains and through different practices. If collaborative practice, is about conversational proficiency, our students could be said to have improved their fluency in multiple knowledge domains, opening up an array of conversations to which they were newly empowered to contribute.

References

Ballard, J. G. (2009) *The Complete Short Stories*. London: W. W. Norton.

Ballard, J. G. (2001) [1973] *Vermilion Sands*. London: Vintage.

Goddard, J. and Pringle, D. (1976) *J. G. Ballard, the First 20 Years*. Middlesex: Bran's Head.

Bigman, A. (2017) A brief history of the utopian De Stijl movement [online]. Available from: <https://99designs.co.uk/blog/creative-inspiration-en-gb/know-your-design-history-the-utopian-de-stijl-movement/> [Accessed 20 May 2017].

Bruffee, K. (1984) Collaborative Learning and the "Conversation of Mankind". *College English* 46(7): 635-652.

Bruffee, K. (1986) Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay. *College English* 48(8): 773-790.

Robbins, D. (1990) *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and The Aesthetics of Plenty*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Ellegood, A. (2010) The Exquisite Corpse is Alive and Well. *Tate Etc. Issue 18* [online]. Available from: <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-18-spring-2010> [Accessed 5 May 2017].