1. You cite your childhood experiences in Northern Ireland as an important influence on your work as an artist and your understandings of the challenges of identity politics. You are now based in London, where you teach art to children in a secondary school. How would you compare the social and political environment in Northern Ireland when you were growing up with that of the students you teach now?

Northern Ireland during the 1980's and 1990's was a socially and politically volatile place to grow up. Of course, when you're born there, you don't necessarily know any different. It is only relatively recently that I have begun to investigate this experience in relation to my current context as an artist and a teacher based in London. Growing up during the later stages of 'the troubles', issues of identity were of huge significance. Where you were located, physically and politically, was clearly demarcated by the colours, flags, murals and insignia that both defined and divided the community. A sense of belonging in a place of such segregation can be highly emotive and the affective bonds holding it all together are strong.

I recognise the same affective bonds in the students I now teach in a typical inner London secondary school. Although much less visible – at least to a white, middle-class teacher - there are very definite boundaries, both geographically and culturally for teenagers in London. Over three quarters of my students have English as an additional language and there are a high number of refugees, many of whom coming from areas of conflict. With such a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, the politics surrounding identity in such complex terrain is precarious and requires constant negotiation. Although the sectarianism I experienced in Northern Ireland was dependent on its dualistic nature, the frontiers established by divisions within community groups by way of different cultural, religious or ethnic identities are similar and there are lessons to be learnt.

I see a major difference between my students' school experience and my own as perhaps the biggest opportunity for approaching issues of cultural identity today. Despite decades of reconciliation attempts, the schooling system in Northern Ireland remains largely segregated. By and large, Catholic children go to Catholic schools and Protestant children go to Protestant schools. This very physical division at such a formative age makes any attempt at integration much more difficult. Parochialism and essentialist myths of the other are free to propagate unchecked. There were lots of initiatives encouraged at the time and I become involved with numerous 'cross-community' art projects that attempted to bring young people from divergent communities together. My memories of such projects are largely superficial and done little more than reinforce essentialist motifs; at no time do I remember critically engaging with actual issues surrounding community division. I just remember painting a lot of 'peace doves' holding both the Unionist flag and the Nationalist flag – a lot of missed opportunities.

My own childhood experiences have highlighted the importance of engaging meaningfully with the inherent challenges involved in identity politics. This is

not only possible in the culturally diverse environment my students now occupy but it is becoming increasingly important at the present time as recent research suggests that prejudice towards ethnic minorities in Britain is on the rise. There is also a growing fear of extremism and radicalisation which has prompted the government to stress that ‘fundamental British values’ must be taught and encouraged in schools.

2. Many of your students are first or second generation migrants. What sort of role does cultural diversity play in the pedagogy you practise with them? Which authors, artists or educational theories do you think helped to inform your approach to teaching art?

My current approach to teaching is largely in reaction to the multicultural model I found to be predominant in a lot of secondary school art education. I think it would be difficult to find an art department today that does not deliver a project dealing with some aspect of identity or culture as part of its’ curriculum. This is particularly prevalent in an inner London school where the perception of the celebration of cultural diversity must be maintained. The subject of art can often be seen as a safe and very visible space in which to undertake these explorations. All too often what we see is a very superficial expression of traditional cultural forms, which, in its most harmless form lacks any real substance or context and at its most damaging can reinforce essentialised cultural notions of identity. This type of inquiry was all too familiar, reminiscent of the many cross-community arts projects I had experienced in the past. Asking my Congolese students to draw a traditional African mask did not seem to me a worthwhile or particularly relevant inquiry into contemporary African culture, particularly when they are currently negotiating their current context as young African students in London. I am interested in contemporary notions of culture and identity and initially looked to British cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy and was later informed by writers tackling with issues of performed and hybridized identities. I now try to employ more of a critical or engaged pedagogy and take an issue-based approach to inquiry. I am also much more mindful of the artists I expose my students to. I found the lack of engagement with contemporary art and contemporary art practices in school worrying and while there seems to be attempts at providing students with a more diverse canon of practitioners, there are still a lot of missed opportunities in this area. Located in the centre of London, my students have access to a huge range of museums and galleries, a few of which specialise in inter and trans-cultural contemporary art. Taking full advantage of these resources ensures my students are exposed to contemporary and relevant debates and practices.

I am also interested in the growing popularity of 'Visual Culture Art Education' and its attempts at using students own cultural experiences as a means of inquiry. This suggests to me a level of engagement that goes beyond the re-production of established cultural motifs and institutionalised art practices. Taking this approach not only de-stabilises the notion of a fixed identity for my students but also ensures a degree of agency by legitimising 'their story' and placing it at the centre of their own inquiry. This, in turn, creates a more

discursive space, something I try to achieve in my classroom. To this end, I am influenced by the political theorist Chantal Mouffe and her work on 'Agonism'. Agonistic pluralism acknowledges difference as legitimate and creates a space where potential conflicts can be confronted and played out with the acceptance that any rational solution may not be possible. Accommodating this discursive space in the classroom is not without its challenges and things can get messy. But then, an art room should by messy.

3. In your view, what are the main political, cultural and economic forces that are shaping art education in the UK today? What is the curricular status of the arts? How does this affect your daily work as an art teacher?

Ever since I qualified as a teacher, the subject of art seems to have had to defend itself. Although I have been fortunate to work in a school that does, for now, value the arts, increasingly its position within the curriculum appears under threat.

Among the many forces currently shaping art education in the UK, the most profound at the moment is undoubtedly political. With the new coalition government came a flood of educational reforms, few of which having much sympathy for art and the lasting damage of the changes are yet to be felt. A huge increase in University fees has had a great influence my students' decisions to continue their education in the arts. Funding cuts for PGCE training has resulted in fewer qualified art teachers while the introduction of academies and free schools who are not bound by the National Curriculum mean that some students are not offered an art education at all.

Where I teach, a former arts specialist school, taking a subject in one of the arts at GCSE was compulsory and extra curricular arts activities were both encouraged and well funded. Until recently, we even had a dedicated 'arts college manager' who established partnerships with outside agencies, institutions and practitioners. These resources continue to dry up and the opportunities I was once able to offer my students are no longer there. More worrying, however, is how art continues to be perceived as a 'soft' subject in relation to the more academic or 'hard' subjects.

The introduction of the EBacc has done little to help that image. To achieve this 'performance measure', students who would undoubtedly succeed in art, are under pressure to choose the more 'academic' subjects outlined in the English Baccalaureate, in which art and design doesn't feature. This is supposed to encourage more rigour, giving students more of a chance in an increasingly competitive job market. This seems to be a reputation that art finds difficult to shake. Although Art and Design is compulsory for the first three years of secondary school, the decision for students to choose it at GCSE level is becoming more difficult. Every year I encounter the ubiquitous question, one which I remember my own parents asking 'but what can my son or daughter do with art?' a view also shared by the current education secretary who believes that such a choice would restrict their career options. Amongst such marketing, convincing a parent otherwise is a difficult task. I

find this particular denigration of the arts baffling. I am reluctant to have to defend the arts in terms of its economic utility when it has so much more to offer in education but the creative industries just happens to be both a huge employer and contributor to the UK economy. And yet, with the current government's relentless focus and promotion of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects in schools, the arts will continue to be marginalised.

Working in a diverse city like London has its own influences on teaching art. With such a high number of immigrants, refugees and students with English as an additional language, the art department can be an accessible space for students to develop their meaning making and an opportunity to engage in learning which might otherwise not be available to them. However, this perception of art as a purely visual subject can often result in students being 'placed' in art lessons who might not necessarily choose to be there. This can lead to dynamic opportunities but is not without its challenges, particularly due to the fact that to achieve a qualification in art, a level of written literacy is required. This leads me to what I feel has one of the biggest impacts on my day-to-day teaching of art. Grades; my students are obsessed with them. The artistic inquiry almost always plays second fiddle to the promise of a good grade with both parents and students asking what they need to do to get a C. It's not their fault, it is simply the culture. Unfortunately many art teachers are under the same pressure. In the market-driven environment, schools need to perform well on the league tables to ensure a healthy number of students on role. This means that teachers also need to perform, the number of their students achieving a C or above at GCSE is normally the measure and can decide whether a teacher is awarded pay progression. This is a real shame as it can lead to art teachers delivering 'tried and tested' formulas to ensure a safe number of C grades and stifle more potentially innovative lines of inquiry.

Another debilitating factor is that teaching in the UK is predicated on continuous surveillance. The relentless inspection and judgement of your teaching practice can become over-bearing and depending on the criteria with which you are being judged can be highly problematic. What is deemed a successful lesson in another subject area may not quite feel the same in an art lesson, and why should it? Collaboration, risk taking and critical discourse are seldom quite or contained and I am sure that many of my lessons would raise a few eyebrows.

4. You consider yourself to be an artist who teaches. Can you remember an earlier stage in your life when you thought of yourself simply as an 'artist'?

Not really, but I did find it difficult at times to reconcile both. When I was young, I was involved with lots of youth and community art projects and so a lot of the practice I was exposed to was hinged on some level of pedagogy. During my Fine Art degree, I worked in several nursing homes delivering arts and crafts classes to the elderly, not the most pedagogically radical of

beginnings but there’s nothing like helping a group of 80 year old women make a Christmas cards for their grandchildren to show highlight the value of participating in a community of practice.

I have always maintained a studio practice, consisting mainly of drawing and installation and although produced some work for shows I have always been more engaged and generated more interesting work when working with other people. After my degree I pursued more commissions working on integration arts projects with various different community groups, so qualifying as an art teacher and working in a school in inner London seemed like the perfect next step.

It was not until this point that I felt a tension between the two. The perception may be changing but there is still certainly a palpable divide between the two identities with a lot of chips on shoulders. When I made the decision to become a teacher, it was seen by many as ‘selling out’. Although I had been teaching for years, doing it in a school is apparently much worse. I found the same disregard in my students who would refer to visiting artists-in-residence as ‘real’ artists as opposed to their imposter teacher.

The difficulty in maintaining a meaningful practice is one of time and energy. Teaching in UK state education is not an easy job, a heavy workload and a stressful environment leaves little in the tank for the studio. Also, in a target driven secondary school, having an art practice of your own is of little consequence and rarely encouraged. I have met many art teachers who lament an abandoned practice and vow to ‘get back into it’. I have also worked with many art teachers over the years who still maintain successful art practices outside the classroom without ever exposing their students to the particular expertise or methodology their work entails. This is a real shame and a missed opportunity.

Although I kept up a studio practice of sorts and spent a lot my holidays on residencies, I often found this jarring. It was difficult to get any traction with my work until I was introduced to practice based research during my MA in Art and Education. I learnt how to regard pedagogy as an artistic practice and reconceptualised my approach to teaching. Although I never had any real hang ups over the artist/teacher identity crisis my work as an ‘artist’ really came alive when it became part of my teaching.

5. You are interested in storytelling, memory and myth and your own work as an artist involves various pedagogical and researched processes pertaining to a variety of disciplines. How do you combine all these themes and methodologies? Do you consider your artistic practice to be a form of research, a pedagogical method, or a hybrid practice?

The culture I grew up in is steeped in myth and storytelling. However, the notion of truth during the troubles of Northern Ireland holds important

significance and is heavily contested ground. Conflict resolution through a truth and reconciliation commission is still being debated. There is a fear that, without a meaningful ‘truth’ recovery process, myths will take precedence over memory. My artistic interest comes from the deeply rooted mess of tangled histories, stories and marginalised voices that construct the narrative of the place and my practice is an inquiry into some of this contested ground. Through investigating archive material, personal memory and collected narratives I search for the grey areas that sit between the facts and fictions associated with the place. It is an inter-disciplinary practice that draws on the idea of the parafictional by exploring inconsistencies and presenting new narratives. The open-ended nature of my practice and its research is generative of knowledge. It continuously instigates questions, which requires a meaning-making process. In this sense, it is also a pedagogical method.

My investigations seek to destabilise any essentialist notions of identity and interrogate cultural givens. This is a process that is just as pertinent to the diasporic students I now teach as it is to me. As first and second-generation migrants, much of my students’ cultural identity and access to heritage is constructed and communicated through stories. The challenge is to grant access to this heritage in a contemporary and contextually meaningful way. So I apply the same narrative approach to identity in the classroom. This approach to identity construction is not only fruitful, but a theoretically accessible way of addressing ideas of the self with young people. It keeps the idea of identity fluid, opening the possibility of critical exploration into one’s heritage. It helps steer any projects tackling identity away from essentialised cultural motifs.

An integral part of my work involves the use of more orthodox data collection borrowed from narrative-based research methods associated with social sciences. Using personal narrative techniques and interviews to illicit stories generates an enormous amount of data that can be developed through an art practice. I can use this pedagogical method as a model in school to ensure my students take an inquiry based approach and become directly implicated by their investigation. The narrative inquiry, which is both an artistic and pedagogical practice in itself, opens up a space that necessitates discourse.

This discursive space is further facilitated with my research into political theory. By applying the principles of *agonistic pluralism*, I try to encourage my students to think politically and engage with the inevitability of conflict. The teaching and learning this produces has a formlessness that is similar to more contemporary practices found in relational or dialogical art.

There seems to be a growing number of terms and definitions describing the relationship between art practice and pedagogy. I really enjoy the fluidity of this kind of practice-based research and it’s reluctance to be pinned down. My art practice and my teaching have benefited enormously from their integration — the more permeable the distinction, the more exciting the possibilities. I have a studio practice that attempts to tackle the very same issues I encourage my students to engage with. This practice presents further lines of inquiry and provides a methodology I can both model and use as a

collaborative investigation. It is always generating new questions and producing new research. This is a process of triangulation that keeps things critical, relevant and dynamic, for me and my students.

6. How do you negotiate artistic decisions with others when their input becomes an integral part of your 'work'?

My studio practice is on-going investigation into my own cultural narrative situated in a specific time and place. Although it is dependent on input from a range of sources, I allow the work to develop through the accumulation of various narrative materials and so it is constantly under negotiation. I aim to keep the same open-ended approach to production in my teaching practice, where the destination is indeterminate. In this sense, negotiating artistic decisions has become the work.

While working with others, either in formal or non-formal educational settings, I try to facilitate collaborative inquiries as much as possible. Much of my work is dependent on the interrelation of collected narratives, therefore, each voice is equally legitimate and I regard this discursive process as the artwork. Much of the decision-making that follows is dependent on how the generated material, whatever form that might take, could be presented to an audience. For example, one day I shared a personal family photograph with my students, along with all the stories I associated with it. This prompted lively discussions around nationalism, conflict and migration. I asked my students to bring in a photograph of their own and we spent the next few lessons conducting interviews with each other about the photographs. One of the outcomes of the discussions lay in the ambiguity around some of the stories and so we decided that the students should interview their parents about the photographs and as the previous interviews had been recorded we could compare the two and explore any inconsistencies. This was an insightful inquiry and generated a lot of discussion. There were of course many differences in the two narrations, which led to our critical understanding of how the meanings we attach to personal objects of heritage are not fixed but are dependent on context. The material generated throughout this inquiry consisted of family photographs, recorded interviews and transcriptions. The photographs were all typical family photographs, so we decided to install a domestic space in the school by creating overlapping wallpaper constructed from the printed transcripts, onto which we hung the photographs. It was accompanied with headphones playing the recorded interviews. The installation was a great success and generated a lot of interest but for me the real work, both artistic and pedagogical was in the discourse that led the inquiry.

The challenge is convincing others that the process is the actual work. Outside of the classroom this is rarely an issue. Many contemporary art practices and socially engaged projects are comprised of such interactions. However, in the results-driven environment of the secondary school, competition is privileged over collaboration every time. Although, the pedagogical value of these collaborative and discursive practices is obvious, there remains a commodity-based view of art production in school that promotes individual enterprise over

social engagement. Both students and teachers are held to ransom over this market-style system and trying to find ways of fulfilling assessment criteria without losing critically is becoming increasingly difficult.

The approach I now take with my work in relation to my day-to-day teaching has begun to address these issues. Blurring the distinction between my artistic and teaching practice has helped disrupt the established student-teacher relationship and produced a less hierarchal environment. When my students are aware that their input is integral to my work as an artist and a researcher they become invested in the process. This fosters trust. Likewise, the development of my work becoming implicated with their own artistic inquiries gives them the confidence to critically engage. This levelling of the playing field helps suppress notions of ownership and creates a community of practice which values input and process over outcome.