Art Education in the Age of Metrics

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Can you elaborate on that?
Conversation with Eliza, 2011

Art Education in the Age of Metrics
— Emma Brasó

Grades, student-teacher ratios, employability rates, league tables, student satisfaction surveys, retention capacities, research outputs, fees and debt. We are all aware that a "data culture" dominates formal education, and that numbers define our relation to teaching institutions. Although this is a reality that permeates the entire educational system, nowhere can the tensions provoked by this model be more clearly felt than in art education. In the book *Teaching Art in the Neoliberal Realm*, Pascal Gielen & Paul De Bruyne argue that neoliberalism practices a "fundamentalism of measurability," and that, as a result, what "cannot be measured will be more difficult to legitimize or honour."[1] Art education—which values uncertainty more than certainty, failure as well as success, unproductivity rather than simply efficiency—is, therefore, finding itself under scrutiny.

Despite this problematic situation, it might also be possible to consider how the age of metrics can contribute to art education. According to a well-established narrative around the "art school," these greatly-missed environments were ideal spaces for learning and making art: students were left alone to do (or not do) their thing; conversation, disagreement, and even confrontation were encouraged; and the relation with teachers was not mediated by a service economy. From a different perspective, however, these relatively "macho" institutions were, to a great extent, unaware, unable, or unwilling to respond to the difficulties that many of their community members experienced. The age of metrics is, despite its numerous evils, also the time of student-centred learning (including its egalitarian agenda), of the student support services (raising awareness about learning difficulties like dyslexia), and of accountability.

1   Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne (eds.), *Teaching Art in the Neoliberal Realm. Realism versus Cynicism*, (Valiz, Amsterdam, 2012), 5.

This curatorial initiative tries to explore how we teach and learn art in the present day through the proposals of a series of agents with multiple identities: artists, architects, researchers, peer-groups, students, and teachers. *Art Education in the Age of Metrics* is not an exhibition about "alternative" educational models or that tries to substitute current infrastructures with new ones, but an invitation to consider the pros and cons of the current paradigm of art education. After *Despite Efficiency: Labour* (2014) and *Agency without Intention* (2015), this project constitutes the third episode in a series dedicated to investigate current aesthetic, social, and economic forms of organization in neoliberal times at the Herbert Read Gallery, UCA, Canterbury.
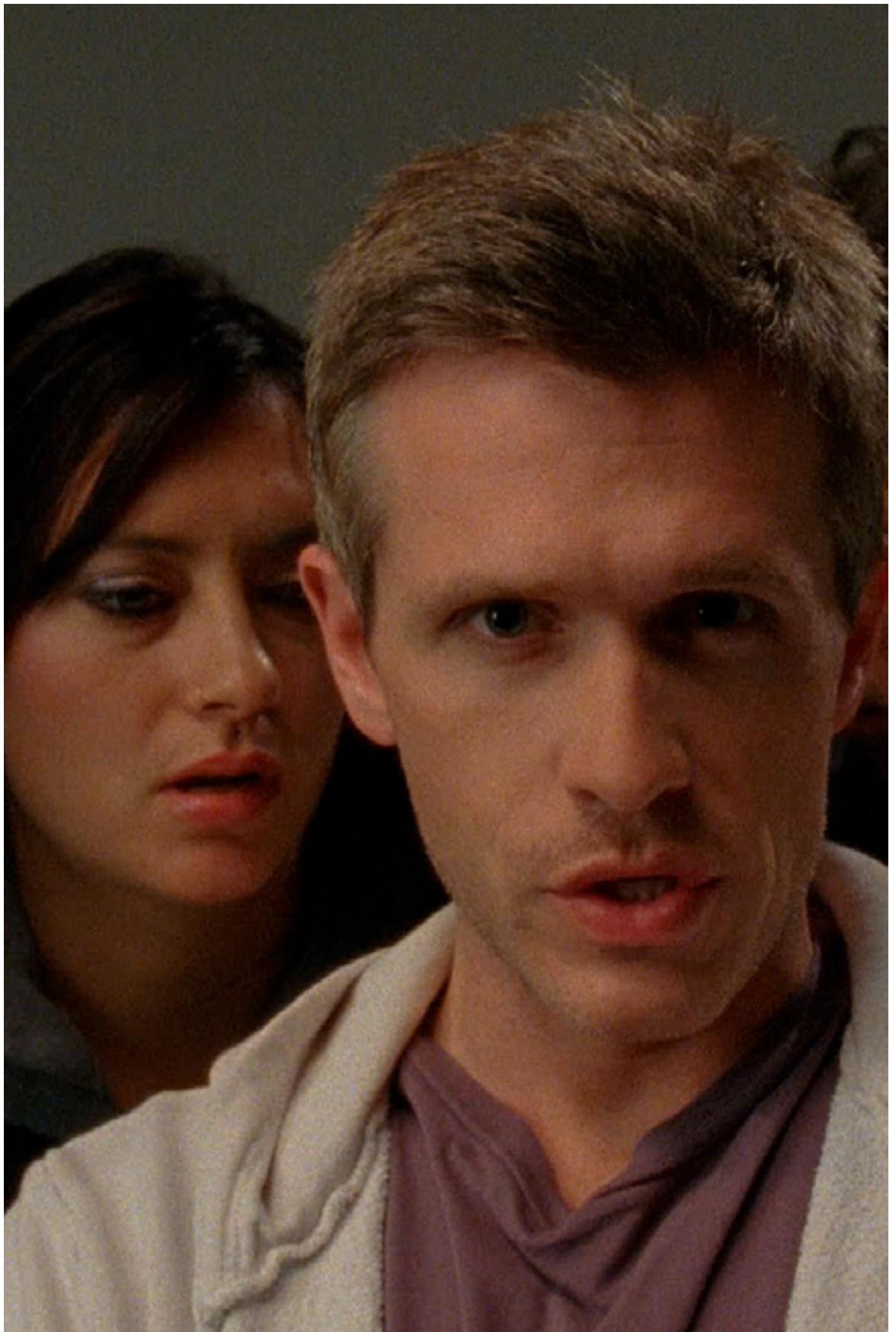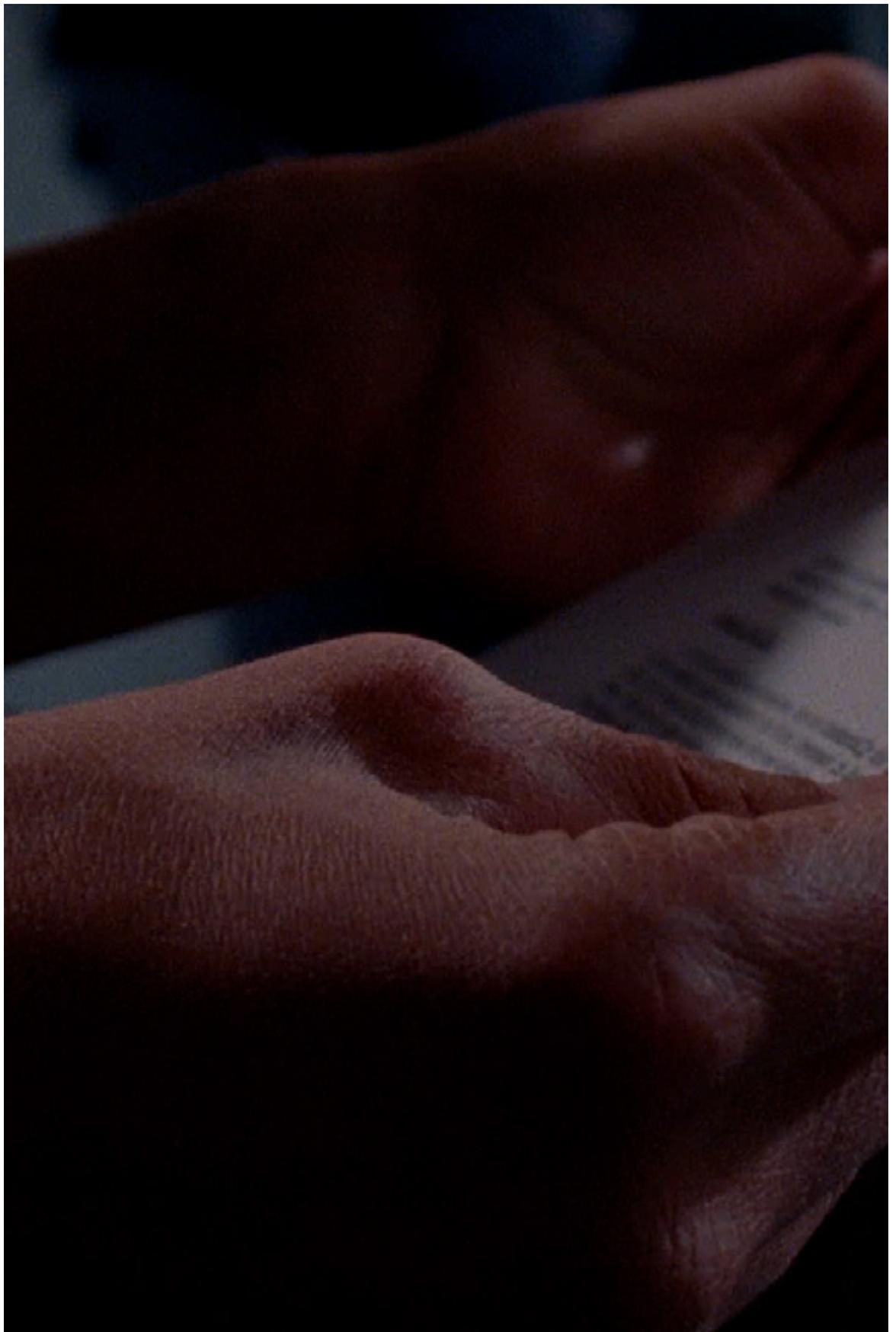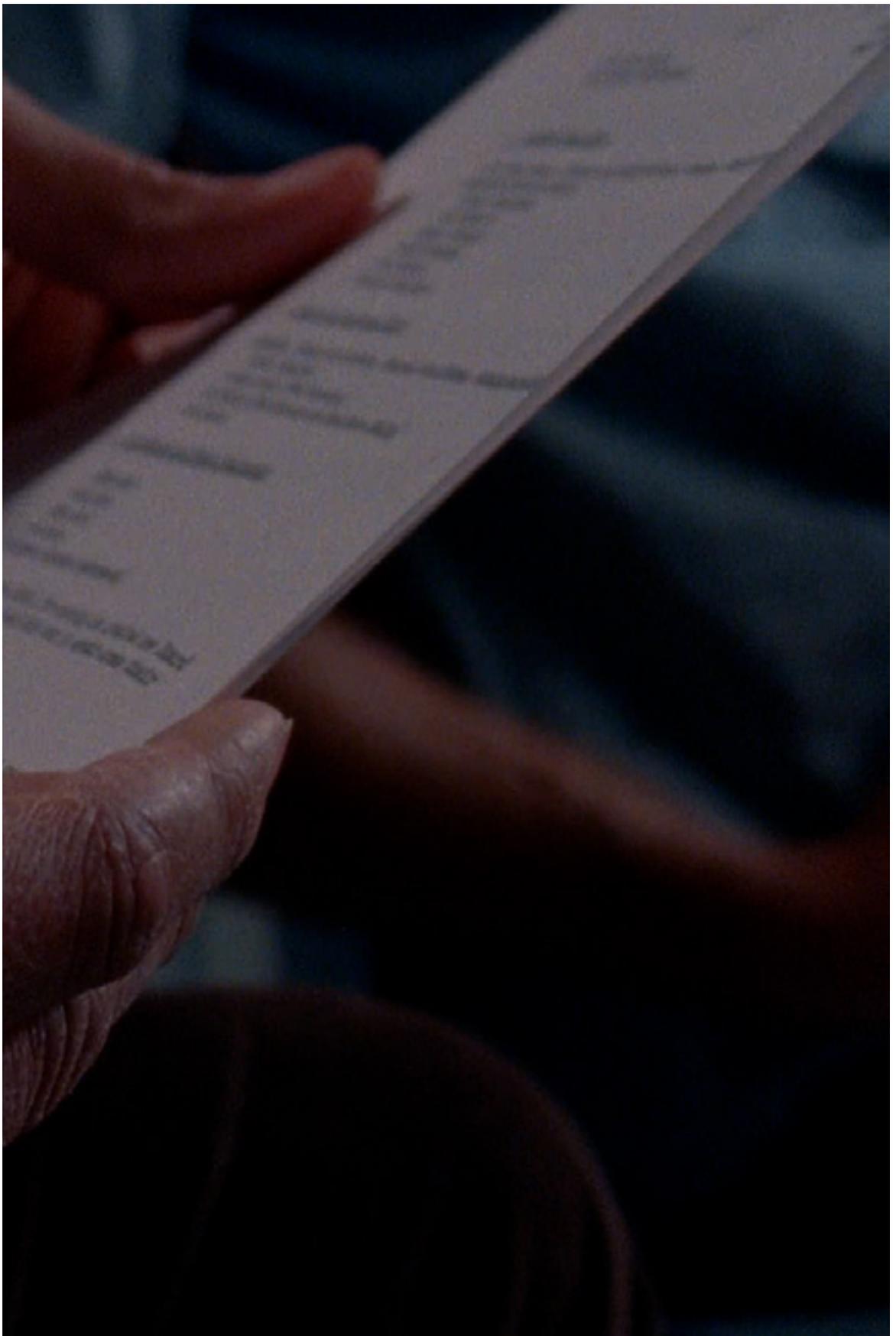
What is Fresh New Anxieties?

It's the ability to dance weirdly in other people's living rooms! We derive real comfort and security from knowing Fresh New Anxieties is there and from knowing everyone. Phrasing it as a political therapy group is what people understand the most.

Fresh New Anxieties is a group focusing on collective methodologies of self-help, structural critique and mobilisation. Positively united by our common experience of feeling inferior, ill-equipped and subordinate under the conditions of late capitalism we are, collectively, a radical negation of dominant discourses: a space of potential.

We seek affirmation after lifetimes of internalised worthlessness, tired of continually having to justify (to ourselves and others) the value of our existence. We are living syntheses of contradictory discursive contexts in a space where exhaustion with the outside can be communicated. Through these situated dialogues, we revise the definition of health in higher education.

Together, we make a space for care in a world which sees vulnerability as liability. Based in Goldsmiths, University of London… Well, in Anna and Beth's flat.

Fresh New Anxieties:
Dialogues with spring lambs (25-05-17)

What is Dragon and why are we using it?

Dragon is a program given to our members through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), which primarily helps disabled students produce work more easily through dictating into a microphone. It's supposed to recognise your voice and input what you're saying into a word processing program. But what we've found is that it's not always accurate, it's supposed to get better the more you use it, but as you can see, it doesn't always do its job properly.

Why are we using it for this interview? – It's labour-saving, but also symbolic, because it's a tool that has been provided under the guise of making people's lives easier, but with the hidden intention of increasing productivity for students. Dragon capturing our speech is kind of like metrics capturing the student experience. It attempts to bring the disabled student's productivity up to the expected level of an able student. Productivity is a standard or idea that they believe people should just be assisted to achieve. Technology can be repurposed by you, though – through a sort of metaphorical and literal hacking of a system using technology that has been provided by the institution against the institution.

The text is going to be imperfect. You have to train the software to have nuance, to understand your voice and the type of words you're going to use. Especially in a humanities degree where you have people making up words as part of the work and you see its inability to capture that nuance. It mirrors our discussion; it's not solving our problem of labour, it's just trying to represent it.

Thinking of the cyborg and the disabled cyborg, there is a shift away from just using technology as a way to enhance your already existing skills, or to bring you up to the ableist ideal. It is a way to claim autonomy, express your own ideas, create communities and connect to other people, to allow accessibility and minimise labour. This uses the cyborg in different anti-capitalist ways.

Dragon is an unauthored mode of speaking and writing. With Fresh New Anxieties we reject the pretence of being polished, being an expert in something and the idea of authority that comes with publishing. You can allow dissenting voices within the group and still be part of the group through accepting that this is how this kind of organisation plays out. You're in a worse situation if you try to null the dissenting voices, if you have this notion of consensus at all times, because it just doesn't happen. There's a false notion of how people think communities, collaborations and collectives are. Collectivity involves problem-solving, clashes and dissonance. If it's just one person, you're solving problems within yourself, but you can only have one viewpoint.

Care and consensus are often conflated. Caring can sometimes be doing something that the other does not agree with and engaging with that. In a politically conscious environment, it's important not to strive for a consensus if we're trying to be supportive and personal with each other. In group therapy there was this idea of a psychological norm to which one should strive. Therapists may impose a consensus regarding what is functional behaviour and thought, striving for this conformed and neutral political state.

There's this institutionally approved idea of what's healthy. The thing to avoid is having a mirror image of that which is just the anti-institutional way of being healthy. We've managed to avoid that to some degree. However we recognise we're completely intertwined with the institution as well.

How do we feel about the audit culture that seems to have gripped academia?

We are the ones generating the data of audit culture, being asked about it and, en masse, as students all responding to it; so there is complicity there. It has instrumentalised our opinions and expressions of needs into targets that the institution can choose whether to go for or set aside. We're powerless yet complicit, because we can all complain about our mental health, and they as an institution can say 'we're not interested in dealing with that' or they help in a way that enables people to just about keep going in an utterly apolitical, even de-politicised way of engaging with our own mental health. Not looking at the causes or the role of the institution.

There are audit culture structures we go through, not just in Wellbeing but in feedback mechanisms like the National Student Survey (NSS). In the last 2 weeks alone, 3 opportunities for student feedback. In contrast to what we're saying about collectivity and space for disagreement, every time they ask for feedback it's from an individual. That destabilises you because you lack the mechanisms to respond properly to that question as an individual on behalf of the institution.

They have ways in which they can sterilise or diffuse your complaint. For the complaints process with the Students' Union you have to give different evidence, complete the right form, fill in these boxes. This procedure allows them to completely take apart the affective and emotional impact, by saying 'ok, these boxes have or haven't been ticked, we have this evidence.' They're trying to cope with discontent within the university through dispassion.

With anxiety, if you enjoyed a module then the individual feedback forms are a space for you to say that, instead of having to approach the tutor. However, the forms can be stressful because if you say something negative about this tutor, is that going to somehow impact their job security? Audit culture not only affects students but also lecturers. We supposedly have all this power as students over the way the university is run, but only when it comes to how they can make money off of us. So they say 'we want you to be satisfied by your education' but only when it comes to 'we can fire this individual tutor.'

A recent example is the NSS boycott. [Name] sent an email where he basically said 'if you do not fill out the NSS you might lose your studios, some staff may lose their jobs.' The Students' Union is trying to negate the NSS vote at the moment, and they're using this email as evidence because apparently you're allowed to bribe students with food and vouchers to fill out the NSS, but you're not allowed to threaten them – because you're holding students directly accountable for something they shouldn't.

They give you the responsibility, but take away the strength that you get from collectivity because they approach you individually, giving you anonymous forms. You know what you write down, not telling other people because it's like this secret. Why should our complaints or our positive experiences have to be anonymous? There is a place for anonymity, but partly that may just be a kind of ploy to isolate people from their own and others experiences.

Giving people a chance to get together, talk about something and then collectively form an opinion, that's so much stronger. If a group speaks together, that's much harder to ignore. Their mechanisms are so individualising. They put pop-ups on the computers in the library telling people to fill the NSS, had people canvassing where students hand in their essays. It's harassment, the way they collect feedback. If you're harassing people for feedback what's that feedback going to be like? Also, what are they using these stats for? There's a complete lack of transparency when it comes to use of the information that they're gathering.

We've been turned into these deeply compromised darlings of the university through metrification. We are now customers in a 'customer is always right' discourse.

Rather than addressing some of the problems they respond by doing a lot of PR work. It's not just that our opinion counts and we are supreme as the customer, now we are also being threatened and there's suddenly negative consequences *to the data that we provide*. There's something really underexplored about this new direction things are taking where our data isn't just used to make products supposedly better, but has consequences for us – directly, according to these veiled threats, but also indirectly in the form of our uni being possibly downgraded and therefore losing funding for instance.

If our data was formerly taken and used to selectively improve the student experience according to some ideologically opaque cost-benefit analysis, how might it work out for us once it can be used to worsen our positions? If the data comes from this kind of situation, what's its use? The best results may come from the uni that makes itself best at harassing, badgering or bribing their students. Or one that has the best inwardly directed PR campaigns, like we're already seeing here at Goldsmiths.

What do we think of the institutional interest in student support services?

Firstly, we're dealing with a chicken and egg situation, it's arguable that what came first was the metrification and the turn to targets. Using figures as justification, decisions were made to shorten undergraduate and masters courses. This allowed for resources to be shrunk with the market logic of efficiency – getting the desired result with the least possible investment meant higher financial returns. Raising tuition fees and reducing teaching hours (amongst other things) becomes being cost effective. This results in a reduced quality of education and increased levels of stress and mental health issues. Surprise, surprise! As a result, the PR prominence of student services has expanded, they used to exist but in a very different form to today. Now we supposedly have this big wellbeing team and all of these little offshoots, including activities and cutesy 'be well do well' key rings.

The only way they know how to connect with people is through this commercialised wellness: do some yoga, learn how to breathe, drink a smoothie… For student services to be more self-reflexive about why people are increasingly stressed, they'd have to think about the fact that they themselves are part of the problem. Instead, they continue sterilising and depoliticising their activities to relax you enough just to get you through the exams and that's it.

For us to assume that the wellbeing centre, or the people within it, are inherently critical and analytical is unrealistic. If we acknowledge the culture they're trained in and enter into alongside the targets they have to meet as professionals, it's not in their remit to be critical. This is of course a problem but to them they're just doing their job and doing it *well*. Political consciousness doesn't really come into it and the problems are seen as 'it's

just the way things are, we can't change it.' Even local circumstances within the university are seen as totalising and unchangeable, something you cannot have power over. The frontline staff perpetuate this but I don't think they are intentionally forcing that agenda. It's something much wider culturally.

The mode for us is how to engage with that aspect of things and believe that we hold the power to change it. As citizens in an oppressive society how can we recognise, like Paulo Freire says, our own oppression and how can we recognise the oppressor that is contained within us. The gatekeepers within these frontline services house the oppressor, intentionally or not. Even as we enter processes of liberation, our fear of freedom is where we house the oppressor. The oppressor ideology does not want us to be free; they want us to stay in our fixed positions so we don't fuck up the status quo because it's in their interest for that not to happen. It's dangerous for them and liberating for us to question that and work through modes of political and therapeutic engagement.

Understanding that, I think of [name] who is frontline student services staff. I confronted him and the manager of the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) programme, pointing out that it helps those who already do well and geared towards engaging with extracurricular activities to improve their work. PAL does nothing for those from backgrounds where there is less or no encouragement to do better, people with lower grades where there is less inclination to do something like PAL. It simply reproduces existing inequalities regarding opportunity. [Name]'s response was unequivocal: it was not the remit of the programme, that it is each individual student's own responsibility to come and take part and there was no chance that things were going to be done differently. This firm, ready-to-go rebuttal made it clear he was aware of other ways of thinking but he was against them and would not brook further discussion on the matter.

It's similar to what [name] did when I asked him about offering part-time programmes in Fine Art. It's a 'reasonable adjustment', but he kept just saying, 'No, we don't offer a part-time course.' There is an element of fear that has been instilled into staff, which is: we can get rid of you anytime and replace you with someone who is going to follow the rules. So if you question these rules as a student and say something is a problem and that their responsibility is to me and my wellbeing, they respond that their responsibility is to save the college money and keep students happy but only if that makes money. They don't want to hear proposals that don't benefit the college statistically. Not only have they had to desensitise themselves to the needs of students, they also fear for themselves.

Students might similarly not want to boycott the National Student Survey (NSS) or participate in rent strikes because they know it makes them vulnerable to the institution and its power when they've got enough stress in their lives already. Whereas we've chosen to engage.

Them keeping us separate and fixed as students and staff is also interesting. It's exciting feeling something different glimmer. For instance, at times [name] feels like a co-conspirator. That's how I want it to feel, that you're collaborating and in that way you can protect each other. There was an article (Guardian: Sarah Marsh) that said problems with mental health being given as a reason for quitting your course in UK universities had gone up by 210% in 2014-15 compared with 2009-10.

How are we complicit in and/or resistant to socially reinforcing and reproducing the metric system at work?

Growing up, kids with dyslexia and similar learning difficulties were split into those who were motivated and confident, because they knew all that was required was for learning to be tailored to them and did extremely well with this confidence. The others who were unfocused did not socially have access to the resources like the previous group. I learnt dyslexia can come into play at different stages. You think you're fine and getting away with it, until you're in undergrad and you can't anymore. Speaking with peers from primary and secondary school about having a dyslexia screening at 24, someone said they wouldn't want to be tested for dyslexia because then 'I don't feel I will try as hard.' These are people who come from cultural backgrounds and communities where different learning requirements can be viewed negatively in a system where people already don't get the attention they need.

A role requiring a PhD has been advertised for a lecturer in our department, which is fine. However, as you ascend through higher education, certain demographics become less visible. If this is the standard requirement, the question is: what can we as students demand outside the existing metric system in regards to how we are taught, what kinds of valuable practices are being kept out? Institutional obstacles make me less likely to be able to combine my experiences of disability and academia in a PhD, yet I still have that experiential knowledge, and so the assigned value is still primarily about metrics.

I don't know if this is along similar lines, but I have low self-esteem, however because of my background I've been granted a high sense of entitlement. Compared to others it seems easier for me to say it's my right to have this and this support. My background has definitely facilitated the fact I have gotten support. I'm highly aware of this, complicating my relation to support services because I feel like a fraud. It undermines my sense that I am really someone with a problem because I know it's not a level playing field. There's people with worse problems than me but because of their personal psychology they, informed by their background, are less likely to ask for it and be judged worthy or deserving. It makes me feel I'm just playing the system even though I need to because of real mental health issues that pile on huge amounts of stress and anxiety.

Getting an extension on a deadline isn't taking away an extension from someone who needs it more though. It reminds me of something Theresa May said [laughter]: 'we want to ensure that support is going to people who need it the most.' But who does deserve it and where does that line get drawn? There is this toxic idea in society which always claims you're not trying hard enough and you're lazy, which is applied to everyone no matter how privileged you are. Everyone should get an extension if they want, no matter how great their lives are. This question is part of the metrification of valuing work by how fast you can do it and how able you are. If you feel you need an extra 2 weeks to write something, it's probably going to make your work better - or maybe you've got stuff to do and don't have the headspace to write. It's like, gosh I'm paying for this degree, just let me take my time.

Or autonomy to even know what you need. Isn't this kind of self evaluation a key skill we should leave with? To be honest, we should all be playing the system because the system is playing all of us. Exactly, play it.

It's a wholly positive thing to have the critical knowledge and methodologies available to realise both sides. The flipside of this is what Mark Fisher writes about in 'The End of Emo-Politics' regarding negative solidarity. For example, when Daily Mail readers demonise people on benefits because 'we're working hard and they're just fucking scroungers.' Wanting to drag everyone else down with them is engaging in a negative solidarity. It's solidarity with people who are suffering, saying how dare you not suffer as much as I've suffered. The other mode of it is never having been offered the imaginary of an alternative future in which there is plenty.

There's *this* ideal that's drilled into everyone from the moment we're born which is that struggle is necessary. We must question this 'necessity.' People say it because they want you to internalise your complaint and say this is making me stronger. I hate that. It fixes your position in a society, claiming that struggling validates your position in this society which is this and you cannot move outside of this. Moving outside means the whole weight of the world is going to come down on you.

Rarely do people, who tell others to accept their struggle, come from the same or even parallel experiences. It tends to grade down. They speak to someone even just one grade down, someone struggling more and tell them the quality of life they're entitled to. It's similar to when rich people say you don't need money to be happy – just go out and enjoy life, travel the world, you don't need a job. They've romanticised the idea of struggle. When you experience struggle it's never romantic. Even with inherited wealth there is this perception that they have earnt it, when this is a very classed privilege as well. This then feeds into negative solidarity because it trickles down into the lower classes.

Thinking of the conversations we had before now, let's move on to questions around debt that we have because it's still very much tied into this notion of class, privilege and wellbeing. And of labour of course. For UK students, Student Finance is this behemoth horrible entity yet we've spoken of its liberating qualities. Personally, student finance offered me a quality of life that I'd never imagined or had before, or will have again.

When you first come to university, you need the ability to name the issues you're facing in order to access the support services. My anxiety was never named until the end of my first year. I just knew I was anxious, couldn't do things and felt like useless failure but because it hadn't been named as anxiety I missed out on support like DSA. In my second year I found out through PAL training that DSA existed, and I could've got assistance, could've got financial assistance, especially in my first year. It pissed me off because there was a missed opportunity to suffer less.

Coming from a lower-class background, student finance was incredible because the amount of money it gave me allowed me to live comfortably. I didn't know anywhere in London, I didn't know anywhere else to go. There were still grants, but at that point we were sold student finance and university education on the idea that we will never have to pay it back. It was really pushed and sold to us as that: 'Just don't think about it, just do what you want and go with it!' That's exactly what so many of us did. Although you're burdened with this huge debt it feels abstract and unreal. It gives you this opportunity to escape, become fugitive.

It immediately started to flip in the aftermath of that situation. The idea of go and do a degree because everyone does remained, along with you have to get a degree so you can get a well-paid job afterwards. However this time people were saying they were not going to university because they didn't want the debt. There has been this real turnaround of how younger people think in terms of austerity and the constant spectre of debt. There's a huge fear of the future.

Becoming fugitive

Following on from debt and to summarise to some extent, Vik Loveday takes the notion of the fugitive from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's book *The Undercommons*. From her 2015 text 'Working-class participation, middle-class aspiration? Value, upward mobility and symbolic indebtedness in higher education,' participation is "a fugitive evasion of devaluation, as well as discriminatory and oppressive positionings rather than an escape from working class backgrounds." We do not cooly accept the symbolic legitimacy garnered through metric systems that filter out the nuances of our experiences. Our discussions may be a methodology for escape.

Can you elaborate on that?

(...)

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the more user there probably see from this audience the
wages of being a housewife away consistently receiving
names and we feel… Symbolic of something yet to actually
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but also like hoaxes do something different as well.
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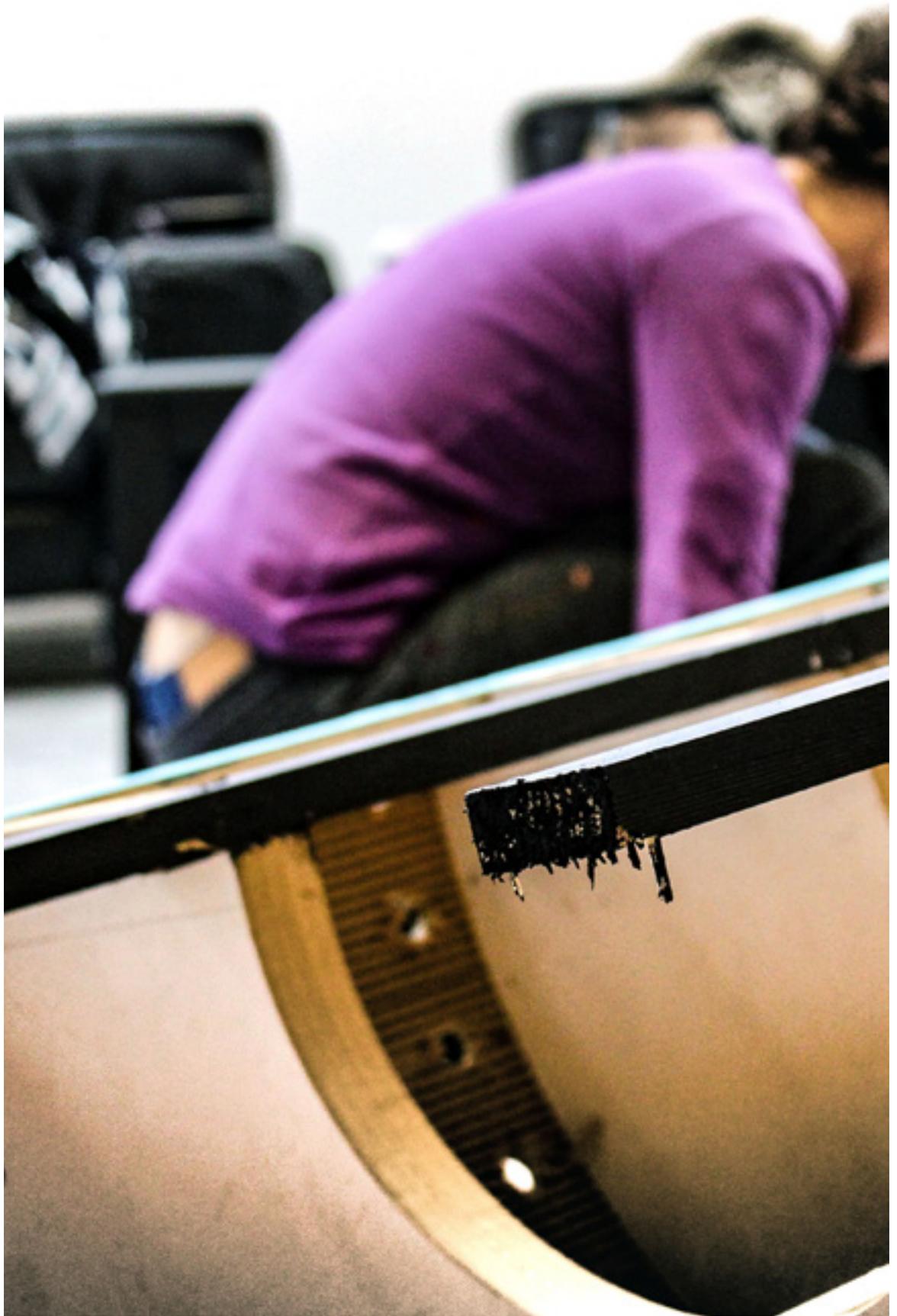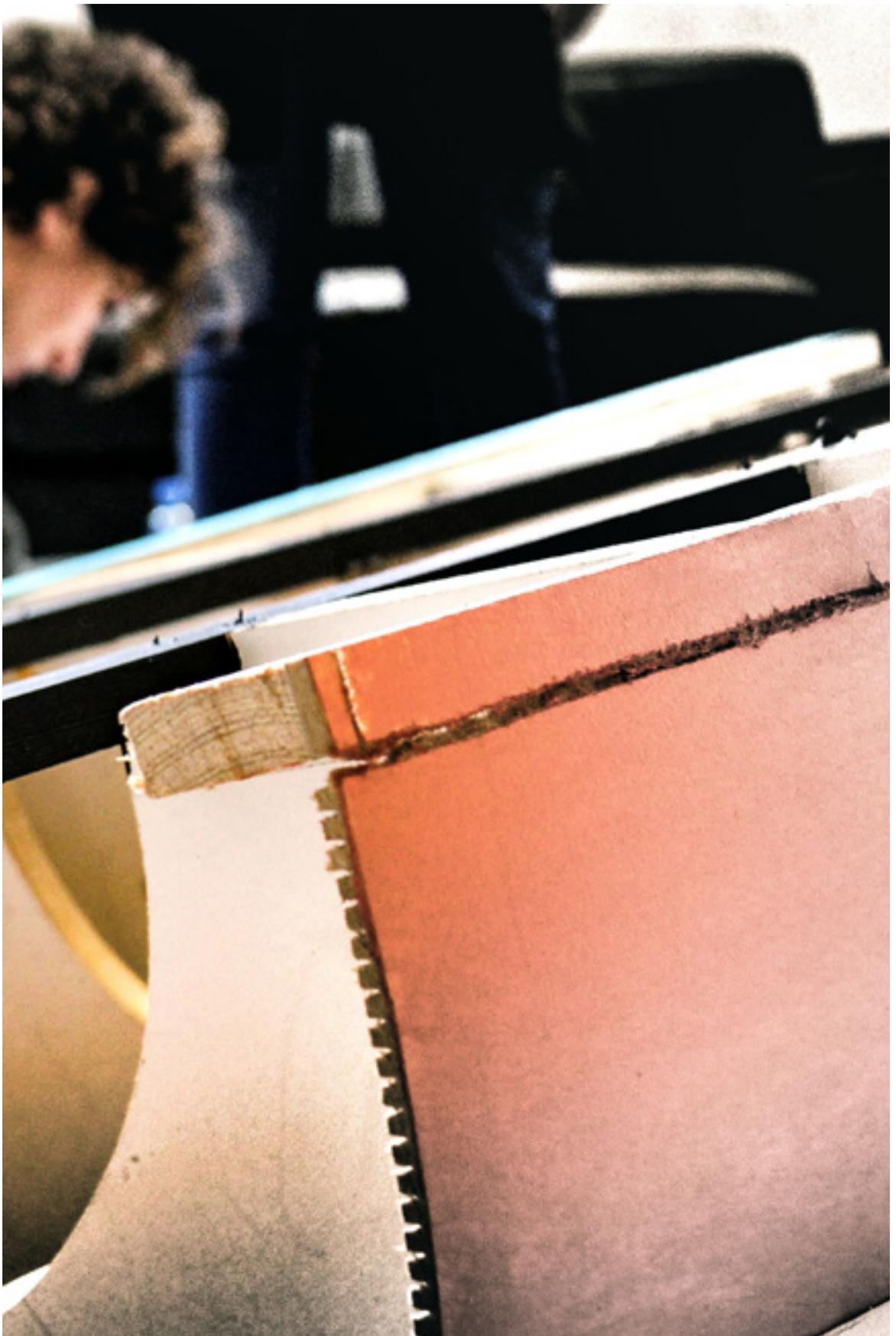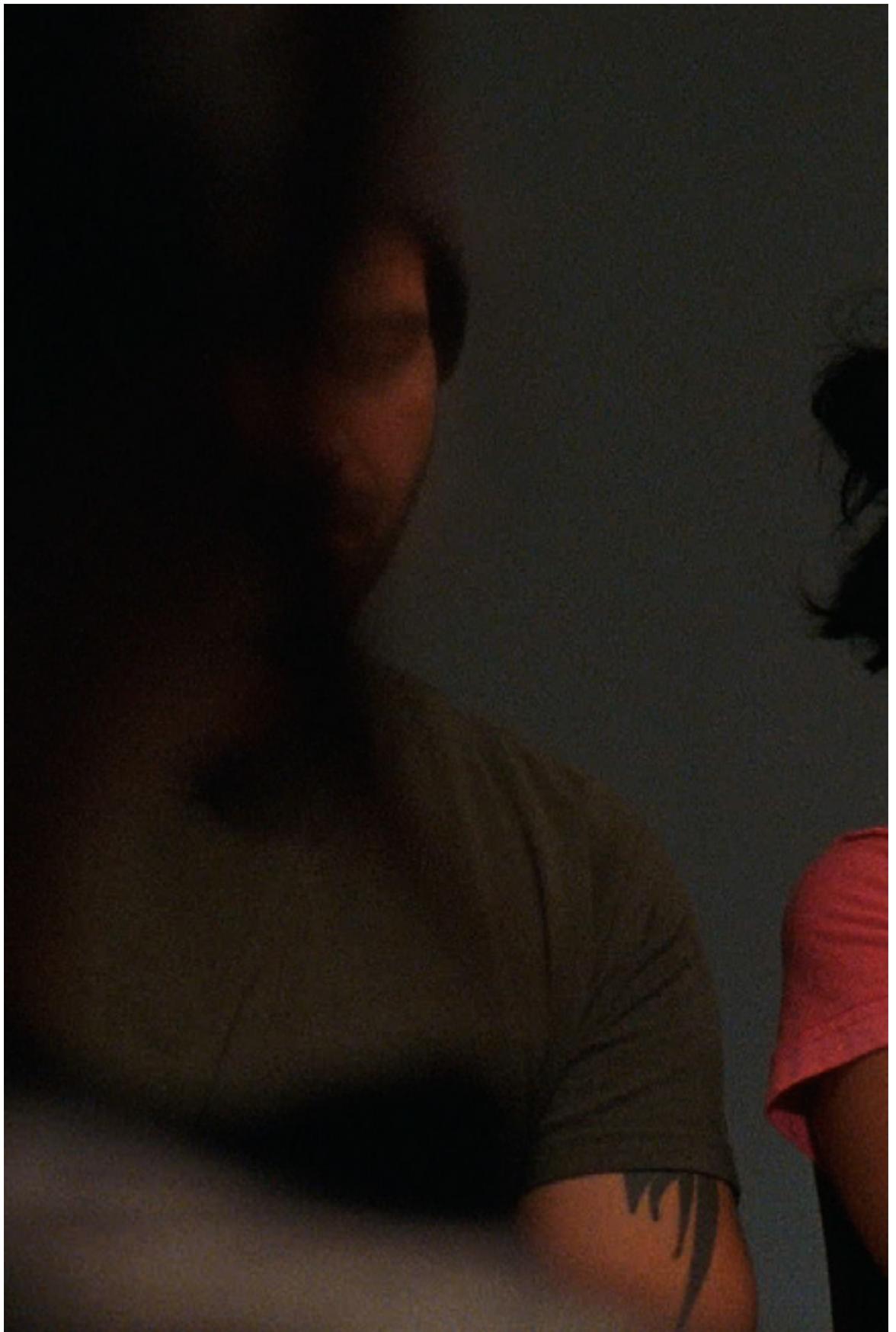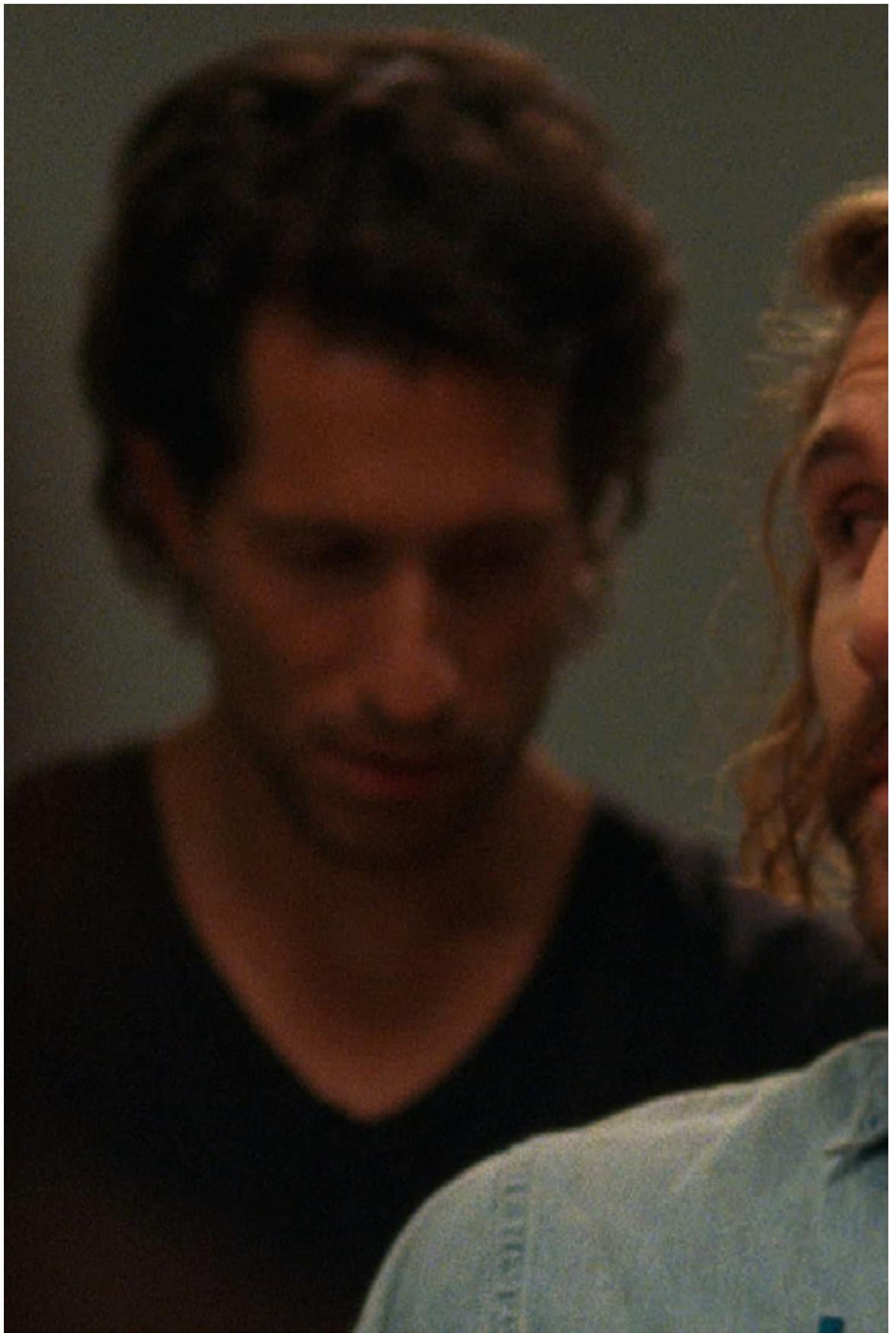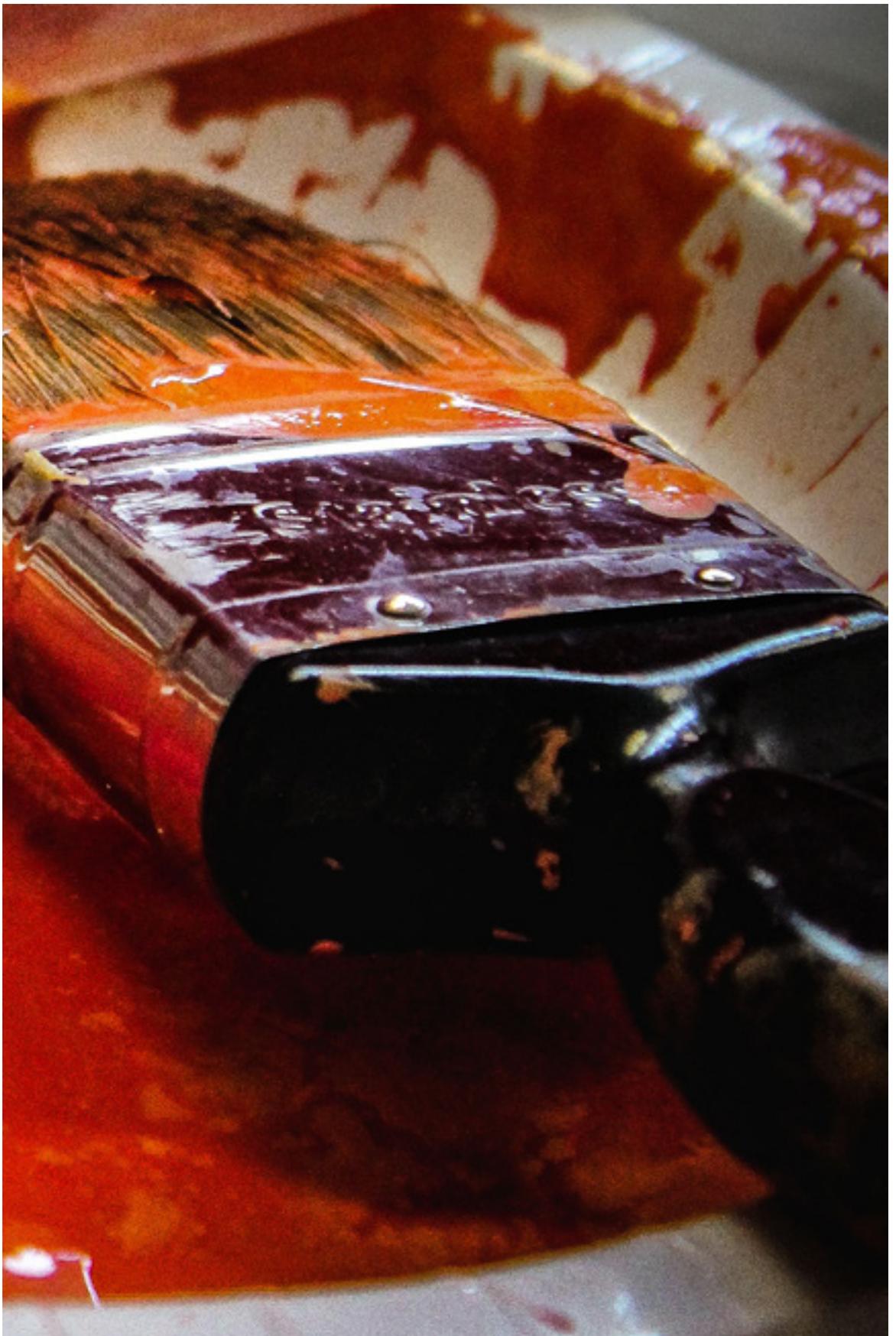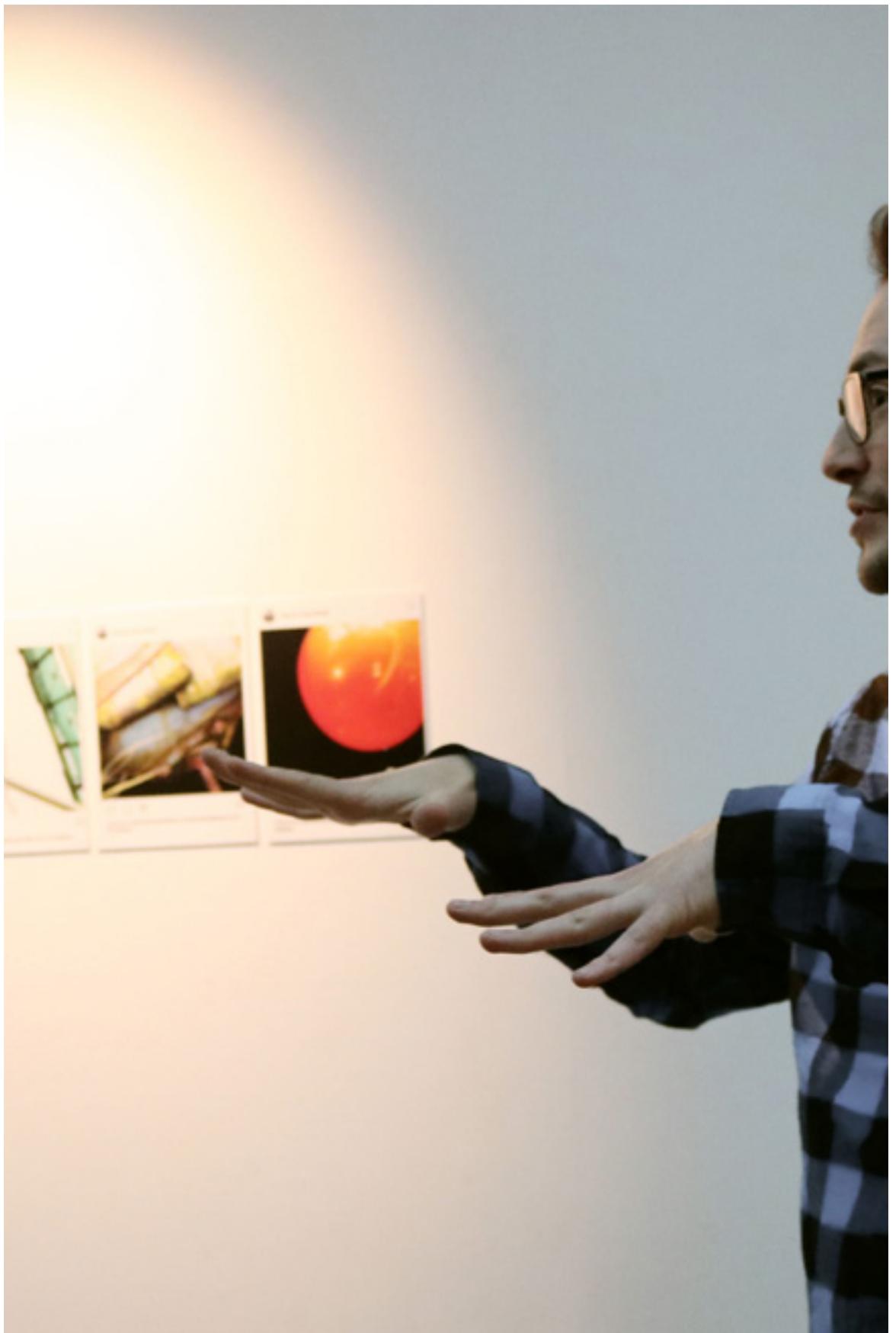
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I think I want an absolute truth

California Institute of the Arts
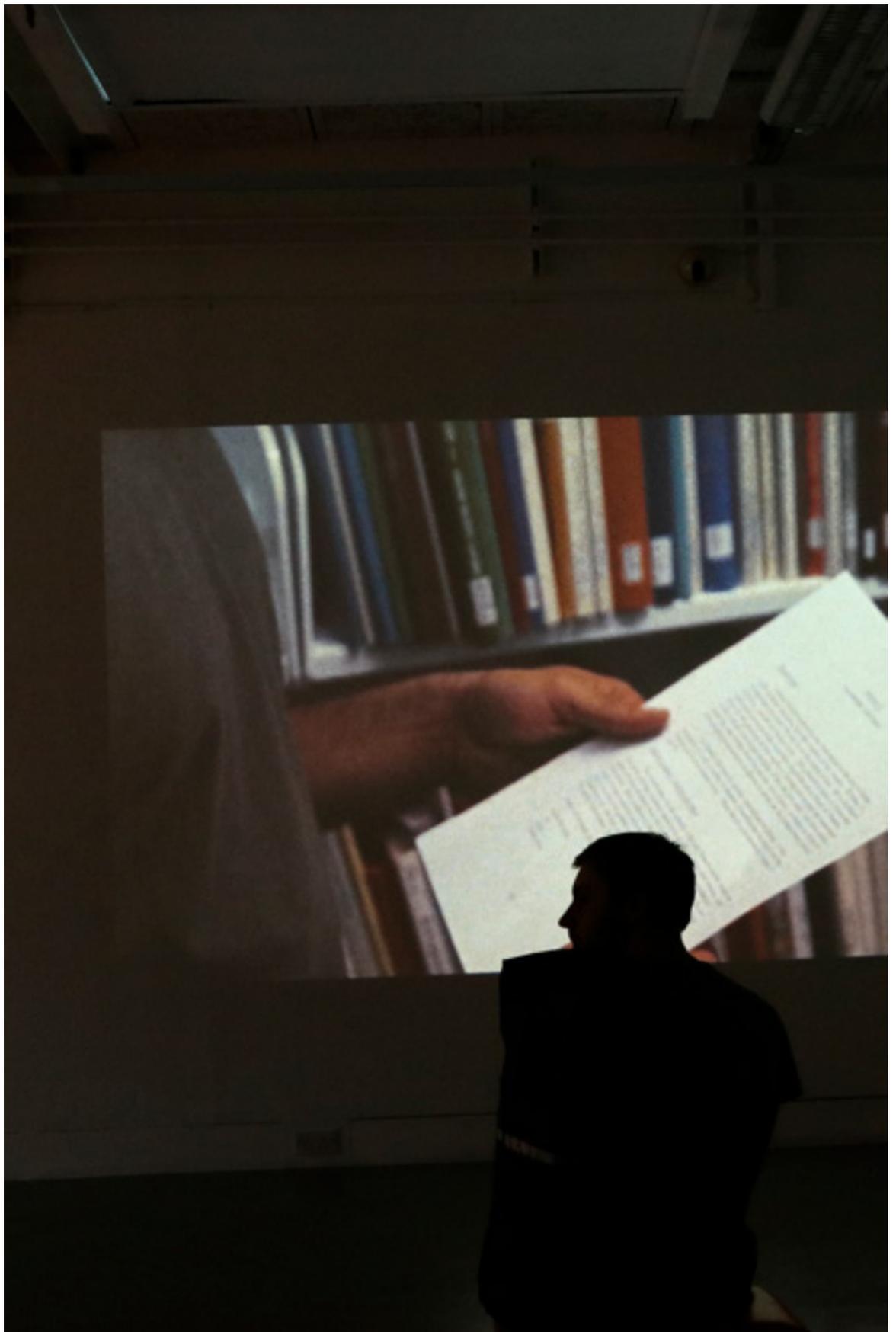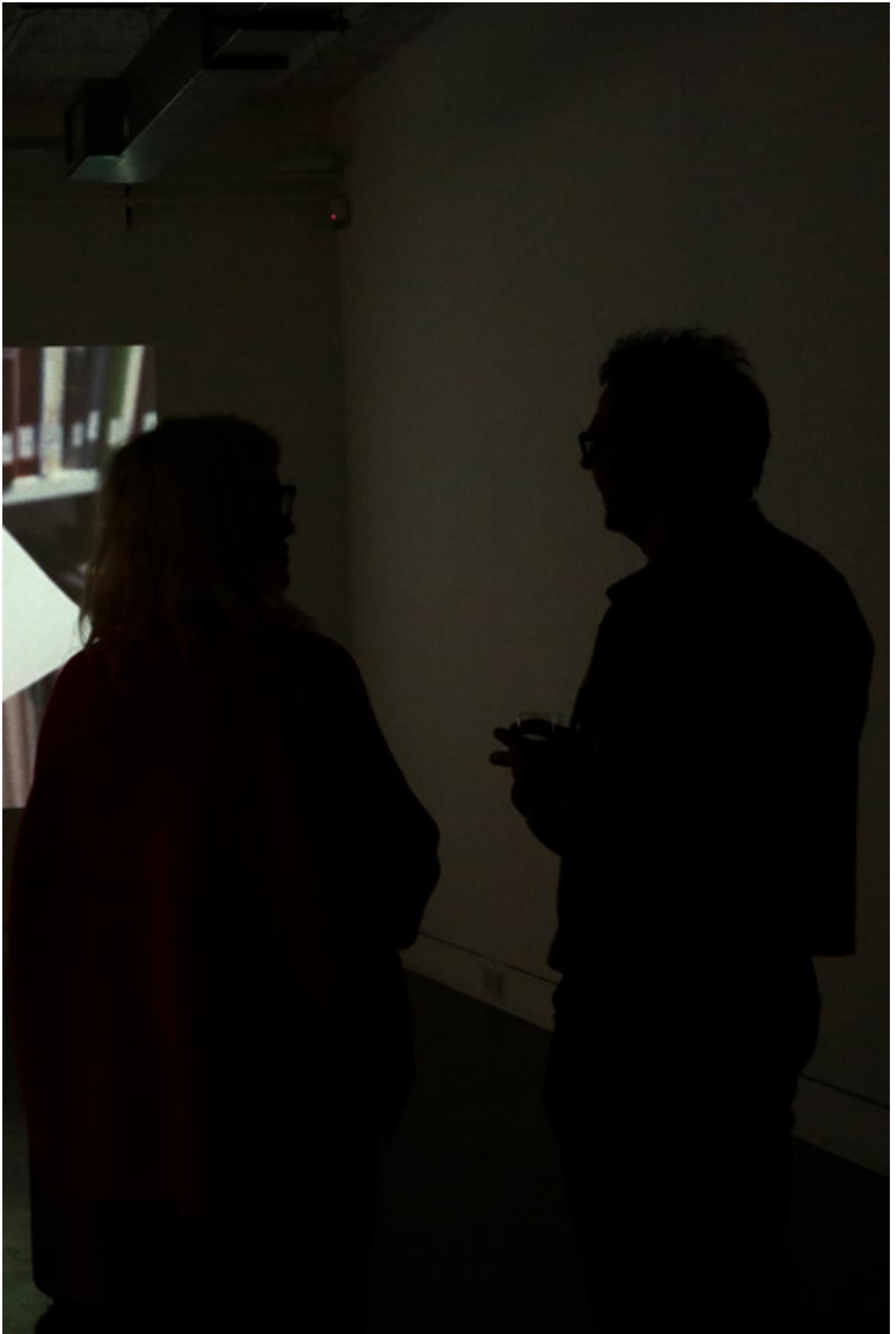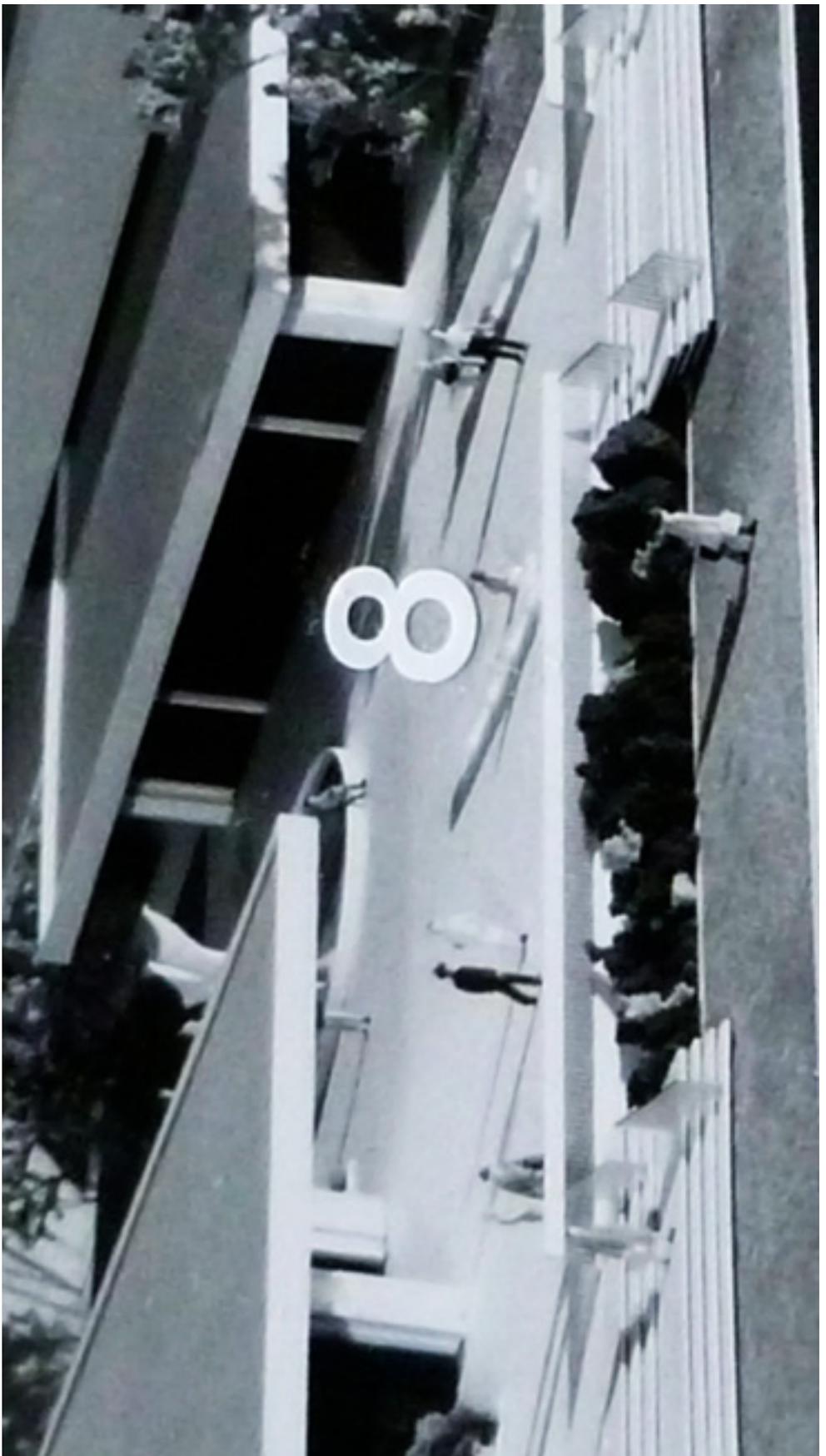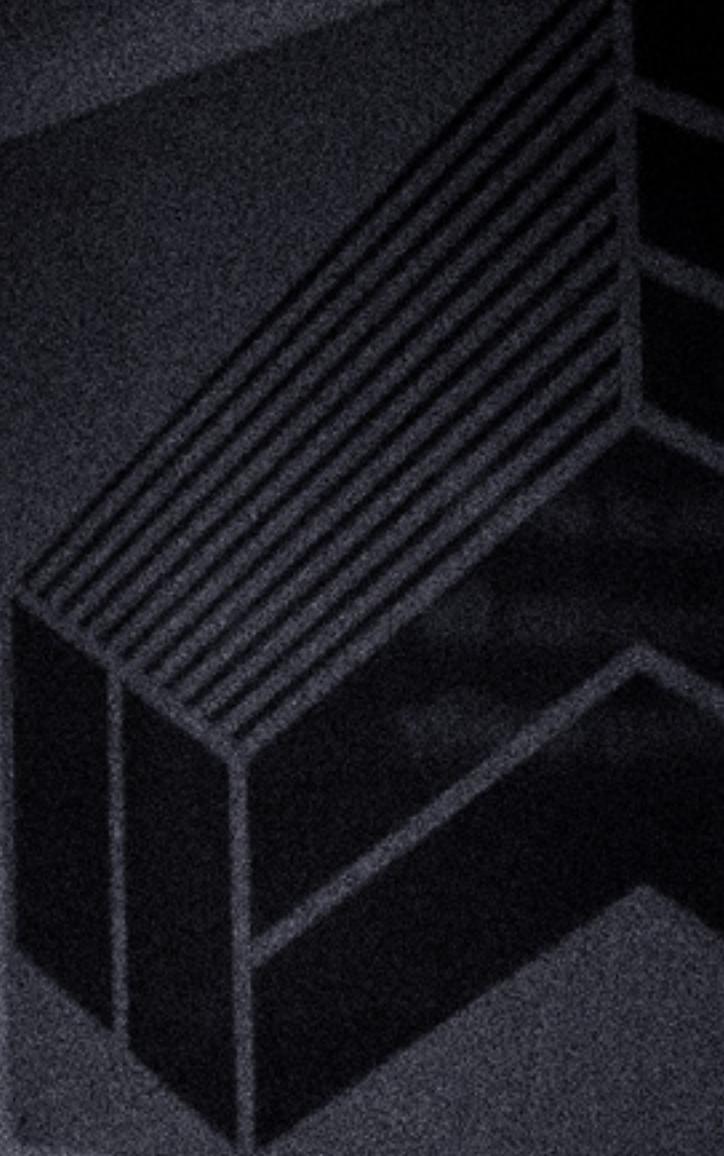
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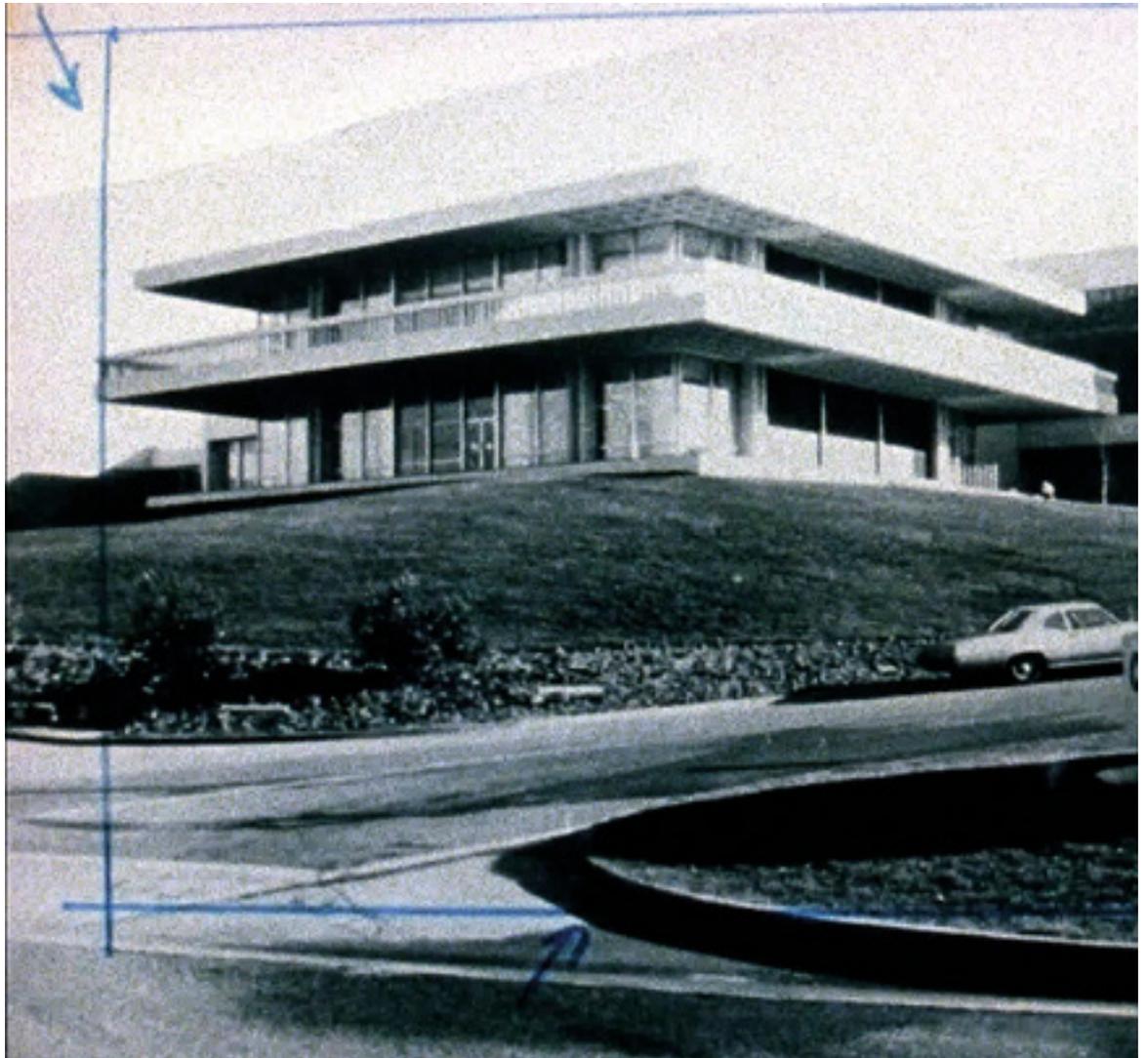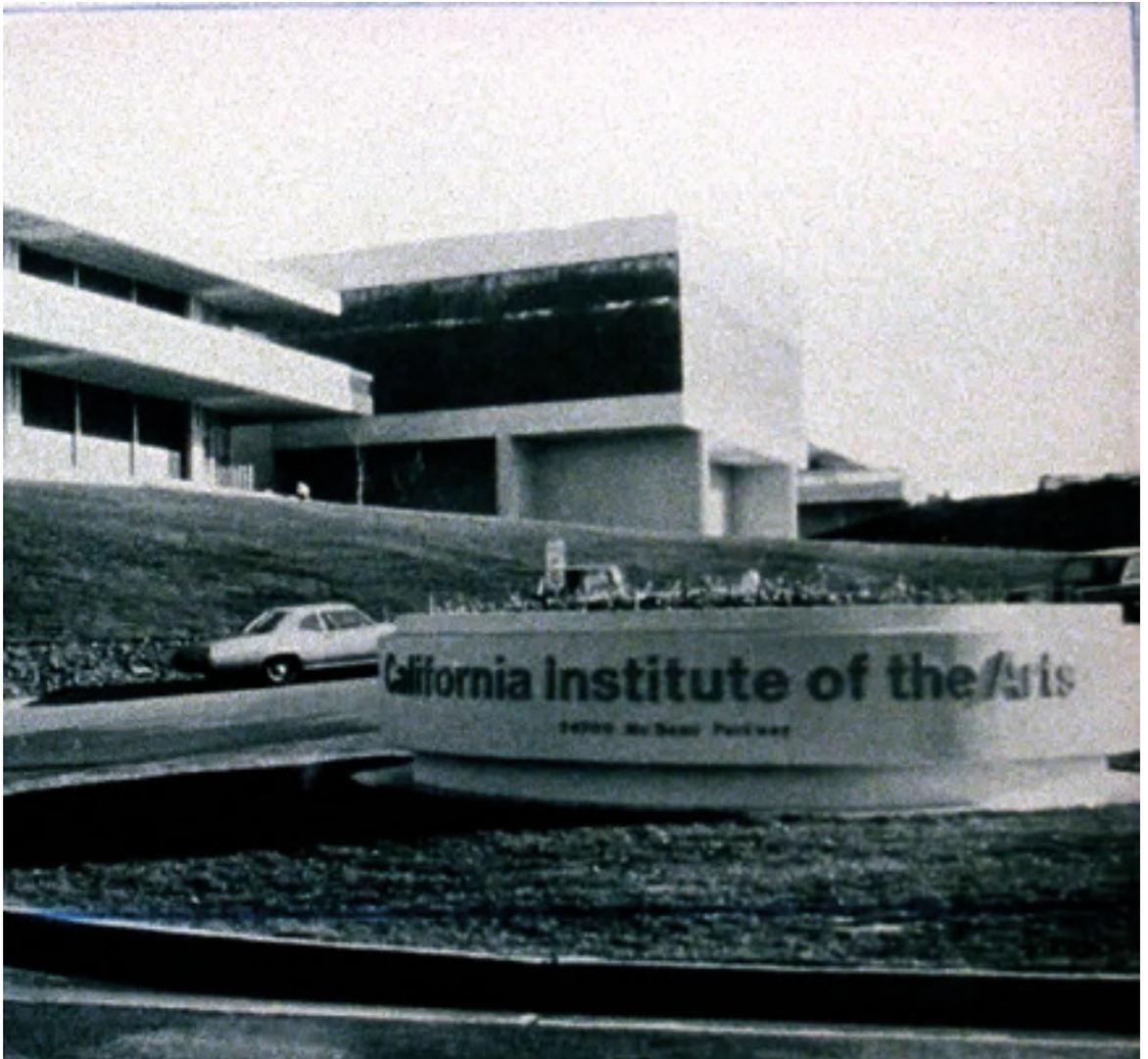
GLASGOW

SCHOOL OF

HTON 55.4

ART 56.6

FALMOUTH

Why do you think that you can't stand not knowing?

14th of all UK universities for teaching quality

94.5% graduate employment within six months.

Destination of Leavers
from Higher Education 2014)

1	UCL	100	100	97	91	11	10	454
2	Oxford 84.8	96	99	73.3	10.3	-	577	7
3	Newcastle	79	98	95.5	89.2	15.7	6	497
4	Oxford Brookes	68.3	92.1	96.5	91.7	14	10	364
5	Goldsmiths	67.8	86	88	70.9	13.7	5	474
6	Edinburgh	66.1	80	83.8	75.8	17.3	8	477
7	Kent	63.2	80.2	77.6	69.1	9.4	8	413
8	Southampton	63.1	93	97.7	81.7	13.9	7	387
9	Dundee 62.4	90.4	94.4	80.4	16.5	7	424	5
10	Leeds College of Art	62.2	87.1	90.1	80.5	11.3	3	368
11	Loughborough	61.3	80	83.0	74.6	16.2	8	506
12	Glyndwr	61.1	80	91.2	88	15	5	311
13	Robert Gordon	60.8	88	87.8	88.2	17.6	4	364
14	Chichester	60.2	96	93.8	89.2	19.3	8	295
15	Falmouth	58.7	89	87.5	82.2	19	4	355
16	Lancaster	58.2	85.4	89.0	73.1	13.1	6	415
16	Sheffield Hallam	58.2	84	92.4	88.8	19.2	4	319
18	Ulster	57.2	89	92.3	91.3	21.9	2	332
19	Glasgow School of Art	56.6	72	84.0	69.1	18.1	10	472
20	Brighton	55.4	79	83.4	77.4	14.3	5	330
21	Derby	55.2	90	85	77	11.9	9	380
22	University of the Arts London	55	73	79.8	73.8	18.8	10	409
23	Hertfordshire	54.8	95	90.8	81.8	17.5	9	295
24	University for the Creative Arts	54.7	85	90.8	80.7	11.3	9	362
25	Sunderland	53.7	83	89.6	79.6	13.7	9	279

26	Nottingham Trent	52.6	88	89.8	80.1	14.7	4	387	4
27	De Montfort	52.5	95.0	95.2	90.4	16.3	4	299	3
28	Middlesex	52	81	81.7	80.6	14.8	8	337	4
29	Kingston	51.9	92.9	85.2	80.6	19.7	7	398	7
30	Manchester Met	51.5	84.8	84.5	82.8	15.8	3	452	3
31	Norwich University of the Arts	51.3	87.1	87.1	85.6	18.5	2	393	5
32	London Met	50.8	78	86.5	82.2	19.9	4	332	8
33	Plymouth	50.4	85	90.2	86.3	15.2	7	330	8
34	Leeds	50.3	72.3	85.3	76.3	17.6	4	473	6
35	UWE Bristol	50.2	86	86.3	83.0	24.3	6	350	8
36	York St John	49.8	75	86.8	70.5	11.1	5	343	2
37	Worcester	49.4	92	86	85.5	14.2	2	298	5
38	Southampton Solent	49.3	85	90.1	83.5	16.1	4	294	7
38	Cumbria	49.3	97	98.5	98.8	26	4	343	2
40	Staffordshire	47.3	89.4	88.6	88.9	16.9	-	319	3
41	Chester	46.5	88.1	84.8	76.1	9.6	6	338	3
42	Birmingham City	46.1	87	91.7	93.4	19.1	5	370	2
43	Arts University Bournemouth	45.6	67	82.5	77.0	13.2	4	328	6
44	Reading	45.4	67.7	76.6	68	16.3	7	345	8
45	Central Lancashire	43.8	85	91.8	82.1	18.4	5	360	7
46	Northampton	42.8	81	88	84.4	17	7	286	3
47	Northumbria	42.1	85.9	80.1	87.8	13.8	5	438	3
48	Gloucestershire	41.1	80.2	86.2	76.0	18.4	5	359	6
48	Liverpool John Moores	41.1	66.7	79.4	73.3	15.7	3	375	9
50	Liverpool Hope	40.9	93	94.8	87.6	13.1	2	337	2

How do you do?

Art Education in the Age of Metrics

Simon Merrifield presented a specially commissioned performance, *Out of the Bubble*, concerning the notion of employment after graduation. Simon also produced a digital work using Instagram updates, plus a live feed from other social media about his job life beyond academia, throughout the duration of the show.

Miren Doiz created a new work in collaboration with UCA students. For this site-specific installation they used recycled objects and materials, as well as words and numbers that reflect the employment of metrics to rank art courses around the country.

Redmond Entwistle's film *Walk-Through* (2012), set in the California Institute of the Arts (Los Angeles), focuses on the post-studio classes conducted by Michael Asher. The film juxtaposes archive material with the reflections of the students who took part in those conversation-led courses.

Steven Cottingham can be heard talking to a computer program that emulates a Rogerian psychotherapist (person-centered talk therapy) restructuring answers into questions and thus stimulating lines of conversation in his video *Conversations with Eliza* (2011). In the context of the exhibition, Eliza represents a threatening future for art education: a computer able to take on the role of the art teacher?

Fresh New Anxieties is a group focusing on collective methodologies of self-help, structural critique and mobilisation, based in Goldsmiths, University of London.

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