

RCA Podcast: Transcript

RCA2024 Dean's Download with Kerry Curtis, Dean of the School of Communication

Recorded on Thursday 13 June 2024

Kerry Curtis

We feel very strongly that we're in some very uncertain times. So actually, how do we communicate new narratives? How do we make those narratives really meaningful in a really positive way? And so that's something that we feel very strongly about.

Etan Kinsella McLennan

Hello and welcome to the final episode and our mini series for RCA2024. It's called Dean's Downloads, and we're chatting with the Deans of the four schools of the Royal College of Art about what we should expect from their School for our RCA 2024, which is the postgraduate exhibitions and events and activities that our students are doing. They're taking place across this summer in London.

Etan

Today, we're catching up with Kerry Curtis. She is the Dean of the School of Communication. That's a school that's made up of really talented and a really vibrant community. And they're studying on programmes, including the MA in Information Experience Design, Digital Direction, Visual Communication, Animation, and also on our MFA in Communication, which is a new programme for the college this year, so we're excited to see what they have in store for us.

They're a cohort who responds to very current global challenges, and they're really skilled storytellers. They bring together these stories - they really bring them alive through a broad and varied range of mediums. And so these are things like animation, data visualisation, game design, graphic design, illustration, photography, moving image.

Etan

Also through things like X are AI generative systems, these kinds of technologies that are rapidly changing and developing all the time. They really immerse their audiences in their creations and the worlds. So with all of that in mind, let's get on with the chat and speak to Kerry about what they have planned for RCA2024.

So, hi Kerry, thank you so much for joining me today and it's really great to be able to catch up.

Etan

It's great to be able to catch up in what I know is a very busy and hectic time within the whole college for everybody - staff and students. And so the countdown is now on for the Festival of Communication. How are things feeling in the school?

Kerry

Yeah, it's very, very exciting at the moment. The students are busy, the academic team are running around, the administrators look slightly stressed, but that's fine.

Kerry

You know, this is a really exciting and exhilarating time that has so much to do to kind of get this launch off the ground. But it's so exciting. We're really looking forward to it.

Etan

The school this year has a little bit of a different set up for RCA2024, so I wonder if you could tell us a bit about what to expect from the school.

Kerry

Yeah, absolutely. So we are exhibiting and holding events and holding presentations and a wide range of activities within the Garden House building, which is on the White City campus. But in addition to using the Garden house space, we're also using surrounding areas of White City. So we've developed some great partnerships and collaborations with White City Place.

Kerry

We've got work showing at the Television Centre just down the road, and we also have an RCA partnership with Outernet, which is on Tottenham Court Road. So some of the work could be there as well for the Digital Direction programme.

Etan

So some of those elements are like kind of new for this year. What does that give the students, these kind of partnerships and with the local community?

Kerry

Yeah, absolutely. So as students and School of Communication don't always make work, that is around exhibiting in a kind of art gallery style setting. Some do and some do. Lots of the work that's made is around really communicating the student's practice, which opens a dialogue, a conversation for others, or creates experiences. So by working not just in a kind of white gallery space, i.e. some of the spaces in Garden House, but externally means we can kind of showcase work and moving image in some of the big screens around the area.

Kerry

Or students might put installations into spaces that you might not expect. So there's a range and like working outside of a building means that we can connect much more, not just to the audience. We invite the audience that stumble across the work as they move through those spaces and surrounding areas.

Etan

Yeah, it's a really exciting way for kind of new audiences to be introduced to like work they might never come across them before, I suppose. And the students in the school, I know that they're really good at looking at global issues and finding kind of interesting ways to to present or talk about those issues. I wonder if you could tell us about any of the themes or concepts that students have been working with for this year's exhibition?

Kerry

Yeah. So lately, I mean, our students are generally incredible storytellers. They build these amazing narratives to to get people to kind of be challenged in their thinking to support people's views and to expose kind of diverse, unheard voices and all those kind of things. And so throughout all of the programmes in the School of Communication there's a kind of sense of sharing and communicating open conversation and dialogues, but there's themes in different programmes in different ways as well.

Kerry

So in animation, the ideas are really eclectic and they reflect the sense that there's incredible diversity in all of our programmes. But but definitely in animation. And they look at those kind of experiences, the cultures, the backgrounds, and through that there are themes that are common across most of the students in that group, and they're about this kind of virtual, being present in actual spaces, being theatrical, looking at the cosmic and how space permeates work as well. So animation has got this really eclectic kind of feel to that.

On our Digital Direction programme, the students work collaboratively very often, and they have centred a title to work to and it's around 'Now, gather and change'. And each of the pieces raises an urgent question, and they're exploring four different areas in four major contexts. So earth, humans, techno spheres and legacies. And they're looking to celebrate immersive art and storytelling that welcomes everyone.

Kerry

That's really key, how we welcome everyone together to realise and rethink and define issues of what it is now, this moment, and to collectively imagine a more radiant and respectful future. It's got a really nice kind of feel about, you know, being in the now, but also kind of moving forward. On our Information Experience Design programme, which people might hear referred to as IED,

Kerry

they're looking to demonstrate how you recenter communication and interaction for experimental practice. So they're looking to connect interpersonally, but also intermachine and interspecies through universal and intimate paradigms. And these processes, the progressive and you get performative behaviours of humans - matter, AI, virtual entities - and they have an influence on the perception of reality, identity and memory and also looks at the state of marginalised communities.

Kerry

So those students quite often make these kind of installations, sculptural pieces, pieces that you really kind of delve into and explore. And on our Visual Communication programme, there's definitely a huge amount of conversational practice. The students invite the audience to speak to them and they want to share their journey. That journey as a student, their

journey as a communication practitioner, they would be talking to them and showing work that talks about learning and unlearning and relearning.

Kerry

It challenges how we contaminate and cross-pollinate, and they would take some journeys to discover who they are and let us kind of work together like themselves and the audiences to fill the blank spaces, to uncover kind of the next realities, I suppose. And then finally, we've got a new programme for this year, which is the new MFA communication, and it's interdisciplinary and it challenges our students expand the boundaries of communication and every student's taken a really unique journey towards that independent research project they're informed my questions, ideas, conversations across the discipline boundaries.

Kerry

So their work shares common themes around storytelling, worldbuilding and sustainability.

Etan

Great is there -I know that some of the students are also kind of hosting events. Are there any of those that you could share with us?

Kerry

Yeah. So our students have a wide range of events and the schedule is still kind of building. So I can't reveal anything too much yet.

Kerry

But for example, if I kind of think back to last year, there'll be moments where students will host workshops or a student might do a performance, or students might get the audience that really sit down and engage in a piece of practice with them. So they might be around during our storytelling. So there's a variety of different activities in addition to that kind of physical activation like performance and events, etc..

Kerry

Lots of students also work in immersive and XR spaces, so there'll be moments to use augmented reality and delve into someone's story using VR. So there'll be a whole load of different activities that take you kind of in and out of virtual and present spaces.

Etan

So this is your fourth of the end of year showcases at the RCA.

Etan

Is there anything that really excites you about these moments?

Kerry

They're always exciting. They're always new and different, but it's really when you actually go to the events and you spend time at them, you feel the work come through. You get to hear the stories. You get to hear about the journey. As students taken before they came to the RCA and how they have transformed during their time at the RCA.

Kerry

And so it's really exciting because you get this sense of 'what next'. You know, the students have been asking, what if, you know, how am I? And now you get to that point of, so what next? Where's it going? Where do you take this? And it's just so exciting. I always have this very kind of proud moment.

Kerry

There's this sense of being in this very exciting space and with the students as they're progressing to graduation.

Etan

What kind of things do you hope that visitors might take away from the experience of going to see the show? I think I think with especially in the School of Communication, there are practices that are kind of new and maybe slightly unknown to others.

Kerry

So it's kind of...it's kind of...the bits that people take away is actually that kind of, I could I can have a creative practice and understand in, I don't know, working with local communities. My practice could be about actually working in collaboration with a range of different kinds of people and being there not to deliver a project to other people, but to actually work with people and learn from each other.

Kerry

And I think sometimes when people come, the audience comes to the show and the exhibitions, the events, they, they, they get taken on that kind of sense of learning themselves about different kinds of practices that you can undertake for communication. You know, sometimes it might be, you know, a typography or it could be, you know, by viewing an animation, but it could be much more about being part of a workshop and seeing how people react and work with each other in a way that could be very positive for society, that could be very positive

Unknown

in the way we think about our contribution to climate change issues, etc., etc.. So so I think I'd like people to take away, I want them to enjoy it, like visually and, and through audio, you can have these amazing, amazing experiences. So I hope they enjoy. But also that kind of moment of learning something new or being inspired, wanted to take something away, wanted to take something forward.

Etan

You know, actually, I often think as well with these kind of programs and people might and might hear the title of a programme but might not really know what that means or it's quite hard to like at a lot of the ideas are quite conceptual and things like that. And then kind of experiencing the show is such an incredible way to - I don't, you just discover so much. Looking at the students' side, what is it that you would want students to take away from being involved in the RCA2024 show?

Kerry

Yeah, that's a really good question. It's, it's still an incredible learning space - putting on any kind of event, exhibition, showcase, performance - however you approach it, it's a significant amount of learning.

Kerry

And even if you've done it before, you know, even if you've been a curator, even if you've already practised as an artist or designer coming together in that kind of space where you are working within parameters and boundaries, you are working collaboratively, respectfully, with others, it's a really incredible professional skill to take away. So you've got that kind of learning moment going on, but also you have additional opportunities and learning moments from being with an audience.

Kerry

And as I said earlier, you know, the audience might be from industry, they might be from people that already are very connected to art and design practices, to different ways of communicating. But they actually might be an audience that have just, you know, kind of thought, ohh I'll go see this, this is in my local area. So for our students, there is such a huge amount of value in seeing these young people, old people and lots of different kinds of people coming into their spaces from industry or non specialist people coming in and seeing their work and having that conversation because it takes you forward in your own practice.

Kerry

Having a conversation with someone that you didn't expect to have a conversation with can change what you do in the future and I think that's the key thing, is being in those spaces, learning from how you've put the work on, how you've worked with your peers, how have you worked with academics, etc. across the RCA. But then what you learn when you're in those spaces with other people.

Etan

And have you seen with any of your graduates that they've kind of had these experiences where they've gone on to really use the work that they presented at their exhibition and kind of brought that into their careers and it's ended up in something amazing. Yeah, I mean, that happens all the time. And I think there's, that's, that's as students go on to have really, really incredible careers.

Kerry

And I was thinking about this earlier and I think about, okay, you know what can I give with some concrete? You know, what would the concrete examples be? You know, to answer a question like that and thinking through this, loads of examples. But last year after RCA 2023, three of our Digital Direction graduates were awarded a collaborative of immersive experience residency at Frameless.

Kerry

And Frameless is a large and permanent multisensory experience in the UK. So it's in London. It's this incredible immersive space and the Digital Direction programme has a huge focus on collaborative student work. So this is really interesting. You know, there's collaborations and then the students go and collaborate again through it, through an opportunity that came out of their exhibition last year, 2023.

Kerry

So at Frameless, Olesea (Bortniac), Shahwali (Shayan) and Tao (Xie), they created a thought provoking three part audio visual experience at Frameless, and they explore the concept of transformation, change and evolution in a fragile world, and that came from their show, for example, and their learning as students. Thinking back a year before that, one of our animation graduates, Mary Martins, was awarded the Cultural Institute of Radical Contemporary Arts winner, and it was a CIRCA by DAZED Award, and it was the class of 2022.

Kerry

And her animation, her animated documentary called Something More explored the impact of youth knife crime in London. So that work that she produced, that she exhibited during her show was then actually shown right in the middle of central London, Piccadilly Circus, on a massive screen. And she won this incredible award. So so from the exhibitions and events, you do get these opportunities to take the work outside and kind of, you know, become part of those awards or be featured in press articles, magazines, you know, etcetera, etcetera.

Kerry

And actually from that time of presenting your work.

Etan

Are there any unique opportunities that the school provides that set it apart from kind of other similar style of, you know, and digital or communications schools?

Kerry

Yeah, thank you for that question. It's a really interesting one and one we explore in depth and we - we've approached it like this. We really engage in conversational creative practices and research, and we make sure always that the work is culturally informed and historically aware,

Kerry

so you come from this really strong base, that the work should encourage dialogue, which I have a practice we do in the school should encourage dialogue, but also equitable and sustainable ways of being. And I've already mentioned this but our students create work that contributes to social, environmental and cultural concerns. And we feel very strongly that we're in some very uncertain times.

Kerry

So actually how do we communicate new narratives? How do we make those narratives really meaningful in a really positive way? And so that's something that we feel very strongly about. We have another aspect to our work as well is that a significant proportion of the students work positions itself at a technological forefront, and it asks lots of questions around how recent advances, for example, conversion technologies, multiple platform technologies, and paired that with the traditions of being immersive like performance engagement in lots of different ways.

Kerry

How can those technologies that immersion form ethical connections between individuals, communities and organisations so that we have this really intersectional approach, really, really strongly kind of grounded in ethics and being equitable?

Etan

I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how the college supports and nurtures the creative talents of the students. I know you spoke about how, you know, the students go on to do these incredible collaborations and things and the college plays a part in that, I suppose in some cases. And I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about that.

Kerry

Yeah, absolutely. So our programme teams really deeply care for the students. They're really committed to art and design, education and the value of that and the programme teams which include the academics but also the administrators. And then other professional services like the technicians, for example, have a real deep commitment to being there to support the students in their journey. The academics, the practitioners or researchers and or researchers.

Kerry

And they are always looking to deliver something that's very rigorous, that the teaching is underpinned by research or practice, and that the projects that they write and the curriculum that develop is built on knowledge and opportunities that comes through understanding the industry and working with industry partners as well. So we have lots of different opportunities to work with partners and we're always bringing in these kind of key keynote speakers and guest lecturers and developing new partnerships, especially at the moment with different technology companies.

Kerry

And it's that kind of sense of building a framework, a network that's bigger than just the school or the RCA, that really supports those creative talents. It gives our students the opportunities to connect, like internally across the RCA, and then also externally into the creative industries or local communities and in different ways.

Etan

Thank you so much, Kerry, and thanks for the chat and I'm looking forward to seeing the show.

Kerry

Thank you so much.

Etan

You've been listening to the RCA 2024 for Deans Downloads - a mini series as part of the Royal College of Art podcast for RCA2024.

It runs from the 20th of June to the 4th of August across a selection of London locations. Find other episodes in the series as well as details of RCA 2024 in the show notes. Learn more about our programmes at rca.ac.uk, as well as finding news and events relating to the college and our application portal if you're interested in studying at the RCA.

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