

**Maeve Connolly**

**‘Our Time of Teaching’**

***Olivia Plender: Rise Early, Be Industrious*, edited by Remco de Blaaij, Gerrie van Noord and Olivia Plender, Arnolfini, Bristol, CCA Glasgow, MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, Walter Phillips Gallery, the Banff Centre, and Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2015: 58-73. ISBN: 9783956791741**

In the opening scenes of *Whatever Will Be*, broadcast by the Open University in 1977, smoke-belching industrial machines illuminate a dark, almost nocturnal landscape. These images are both ominous and familiar, calling to mind dystopian pictorial representations of industrial Britain in the nineteenth century. At one point, the camera takes flight over fields, factories and metal foundries, hinting at a more celebratory vision of industrial modernity. Suddenly, however, this aerial vantage point is replaced by a much more mundane shot of scaffolding at a ground level. A long-haired man, wearing tinted glasses, appears from within the construction site, striding confidently towards the camera. An onscreen title identifies him as Professor James Dator from the University of Hawaii, but his accent, manner and appearance already mark him as an alien figure in the bleak landscape of late-1970s Britain.

Dator takes command of the broadcast from this point on, specifically dissociating his position from that suggested by the soundtrack music – an instrumental version of the Doris Day hit *Que Sera Sera*.<sup>1</sup> Rejecting the notion that this industrialised environment is somehow predestined and inescapable, he calls for a transformation of the relationship between industry, economy, environment and society, exclaiming; ‘it is absolutely *not* the case that whatever will be, will be’. Instead, Dator advocates a new model of progress in which western industrialised societies must begin to ‘learn from others’, because ‘our own time of teaching has come to an end’. As the episode unfolds, he proceeds to identify and investigate a range of learning situations and environments, from children’s playgrounds to projects for collective living, and even hypothetical encounters with extra-terrestrial life forms. The clear implication is that children, alternative communities and (imaginary) aliens can function as guides to a future that extends beyond the exhausted narrative of industrialised modernity.

*Whatever Will Be* is one of three episodes of the Open University’s celebrated ‘Art and Environment’ course, selected by Olivia Plender for presentation as part of her 2012 exhibition

‘Rise Early, Be Industrious’ at MK Gallery in Milton Keynes.<sup>1</sup> It figures in two OU-themed components of Plender’s show; one is an archival display of materials relating to the ‘Art and Environment’ course, officially coded as TAD 292. The other is *Open Forum* (2008–), an installation that takes its title from a different OU initiative, a 1970s magazine-style programme produced to enable student input. ‘Rise Early, Be Industrious’ toured to the CCA, Glasgow and the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, but MK Gallery is a singularly appropriate setting for Plender’s project. This is because Milton Keynes is home to the Open University and emblematic of the social-engineering aspirations shared by many early proponents of public broadcasting and modernist architecture and urban planning; this new town was conceived in the 1960s as social experiment in its own right and built upon a grid structure that celebrated new modes of telecommunications over traditional models of neighborhood-based social connectivity.

Functioning within the exhibition as a quasi-theatrical setting in which to explore histories and memories of television, Plender’s *Open Forum* resembles a colourful 1970s TV studio set, complete with sunken carpeted seating, plants, decorative panels, beanbags and a large map of the world. At the Arnolfini, visitors could walk around the set, ascending a small ramp before descending into the ‘conversation pit’ to view the videos, or attend the various discussion events organised by Plender to explore the history and legacy of the ‘Art and Environment’ programme. The installation also included a small backstage area, divided into a desk space bearing several old-fashioned telephones, and a technical store with antiquated lights and CRT monitors, as though in anticipation of a shooting schedule. The design of the set, particularly the inclusion of the wall map, seems devised to communicate a universalist vision of social and formal harmony, consistent with the aspirations of post-war public broadcasters and modernist urban planners. But this worldview is by no means articulated in the OU productions selected by Plender. *Whatever Will Be*, in particular, continually emphasises the importance of that which is unknown and resistant to processes of mapping or planning. The episode culminates, for example, in a sequence filmed from a moving playground swing, pointedly destabilising any sense of a fixed position from which to view the world or predict its development.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Open University (established in 1969) is regarded as the world’s first successful distance-learning university. It was founded on the belief that new communications technology could bring high quality degree-level programmes to people who with limited opportunities to attend conventional campus-based universities. From its inception, the Open University partnered with the BBC, which facilitated delivery of course material through broadcasts. The OU initially offered only a few foundation courses, in the humanities, sciences, social sciences and mathematics. But by the end of the 1970s, the number of courses offered had expanded to 120, and in 1977 the ‘Art and Environment’ course was presented for the first time.

James Dator is absent from the other two ‘Art and Environment’ episodes – *Play and Place* and *Children and Video* (both 1975) – selected by Plender for inclusion in *Open Forum*. Yet all three programmes share a notable concern with modes of social, temporal, narrative and spatial organisation specific to childhood. Produced without a voiceover, and offering only minimal onscreen textual information, *Children and Video* documents an indoor workshop scenario in which children were introduced to ostensibly portable video cameras (powered by enormous battery packs, too heavy for any small child to carry) and encouraged to experiment with performing, story-telling and shooting. The opening section demonstrates the fairly predictable appeal of the monitor as mirror. But by the end of the session, the children have turned their attention towards the much larger rostrum cameras staffed by the BBC’s Open University crew, with the result that the operators end up filming each other.

*Play and Place* is formally somewhat closer to a lecture, in which documentary evidence is assembled to support a central thesis. The notes distributed with this work (forming part of the TAD 292 archival display) tend, however, to dissociate it from documentary practices since they frame the action as a stage-play, organised into three distinct acts. *Play and Place* argues for the importance of unstructured environments – as distinct from planned playgrounds – that can be used by children to experiment with processes of social and physical construction. It includes several lengthy observational sequences, shot in the US, featuring a group of children and young teenagers busily transforming a woodland area into a furnished outdoor space. At another point, two young children are shown engaging in processes of story-telling and role-play, framed and interpreted by the presenter (another university academic). Although this material is intended to serve a sociological function, the sunlit forest setting lends a poetic quality to the sequences shot in the US, recalling fragments of experimental film – particularly the work of Jonas Mekas.<sup>2</sup>

With hindsight, it is also possible to identify other points of formal and political connection between the ‘Art and Environment’ series and contemporary practices of artists’ film and video. Although *Children and Video* was the product of a prominent educational initiative resourced by the British state, intended to serve the needs of those excluded from traditional modes of university education, it captures something of the do-it-yourself ethos evident in the work of guerrilla television collectives such as TVTV, Videofreex and Broadside TV.<sup>3</sup> Embracing the new and more flexible modes of production offered by portable video technology, these collectives sought to contest and circumvent the dominance of commercial TV networks. During the early 1970s, many of them benefitted from the (relatively short-lived) introduction of regulatory

and funding structures requiring cable television providers to carry locally-produced public access programming.<sup>4</sup> Very quickly, however, the strategies deployed in low-budget guerrilla video documentaries – often privileging the voices of ‘ordinary people’ – were reabsorbed into commercial production practices, helping to shape the aesthetic of a new wave of drama and (eventually) reality-themed programming.

Plender is attuned to such patterns of opposition, innovation and re-absorption, as evidenced by her earlier video work *Monitor* (2006). Its title is derived from the very first series of arts programmes to be broadcast on the BBC (1958-65), which promised viewers an insight into current, and future, developments in the art scene. Produced by Huw Wheldon, the series consisted primarily of documentaries about cultural subjects and, according to Plender, it ‘set the mould for cultural programming in the (then) new field of television.’<sup>6</sup> Plender’s work is based upon an episode titled *Private View*, directed by John Schlesinger in 1960 and narrated by Wheldon, which focused on four young (and now relatively unknown) artists, selected for interview because they were working towards their first solo exhibition in London. In Plender’s version, the original audio track is re-recorded, with actors taking the roles of narrator and artists, and the moving image track is replaced with still photographs (preserving the original 4:3 aspect ratio) documenting present-day London art events and environments, ranging from an opening at Tate Britain to interior shots of studio spaces.

As the narrative unfolds, scenes of social and professional interaction are interspersed with exterior shots of neighbourhoods, including Notting Hill, favoured by the four artists featured in *Private View*. These elegant and serene streets, now transformed into prime real estate, are difficult to reconcile with the dynamic and ethnically diverse urban environments described in 1960. Through these strategies of juxtaposition, Plender draws attention to processes of gentrification already underway decades ago, in which artists and television producers are clearly implicated. Significantly, she removes all visible evidence of the artists interviewed in 1960 – their bodies and works (like their voices) now seem entirely absent from the contemporary cityscape, even though their presence in the city at an earlier moment contributed to its transformation.

The detached vantage point of Wheldon’s *Monitor*, addressing an audience of curious observers, is largely abandoned in the ‘Art and Environment’ series. Programmes such as *Whatever Will Be* and *Play and Place* instead address viewers as learners engaged in an ongoing process of

exploration and investigation, which requires the reassessment of familiar discourses, behaviours and environments. There is a stark contrast between this radical vision of art education, realised through public broadcasting in the 1970s and more recent televisual mediations of artistic enquiry. Here I am referring to art school-themed reality TV shows developed in Britain and the US, such as *School of Saatchi* (Channel 4, 2009) and *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist* (Bravo, 2010–). Both reassert highly conservative value systems through the involvement of art collectors as judges (Saatchi) and art critics as mentors (such as Jerry Saltz in *Work of Art*).

Although it now exists in the form of a video work, Plender's *Monitor* originated as a slide show, presented as part of a live performance in a specific institutional context: the Tate Triennial 2006 at Tate Britain. When invited to participate in the Triennial, Plender notes that she consciously 'looked for an equivalent to the Tate, in terms of its role within British society as a voice of authority defining British culture at home and abroad'.<sup>7</sup> She identifies various parallels between BBC, Tate and Arts Council England, noting that all three initially functioned as highly didactic public cultural institutions. She is drawn toward Wheldon's approach and ideological position since, like John Reith (first director general of the BBC) he specifically sought to make 'the popular good and the good popular'.<sup>8</sup> Plender is not, however, simply interested in historical parallels between the museum and public service broadcaster. Her work also addresses alterations in the form, operation and cultural status of both institutions.

If broadcasters such as the BBC now struggle with the Reithian obligation to inform and educate<sup>2</sup>, as well entertain the same can also be said of many art museums. As Plender points out, didactic modes of communication are no longer favoured by art institutions, in part because they are justifiably regarded as paternalistic.<sup>9</sup> She is sensitive to the limitations and occlusions of a Reithian public sphere that was premised upon the dissemination of approved, often highly normative, modes of cultural production and reception. At the same time, however, her work poses important questions about the privatisation of education and culture, and she is especially critical of neo-liberal attacks on Big Government as paternalistic, a position routinely used to justify the dissolution of the welfare state.<sup>10</sup> These concerns are explored and extended in 'Rise

---

<sup>2</sup> The current BBC's Charter currently lists the following six public purposes it must deliver on:

1. Sustaining citizenship and civil society
2. Promoting education and learning
3. Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence
4. Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities
5. Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK

The BBC has also emphasised the importance of emerging communications technologies and services to its public, playing a central role in the switchover to digital television.

Early, Be Industrious' through the conjunction of learning and working environments drawn from very disparate historical, cultural and institutional contexts.

In addition to the 1970s-style television studio *Open Forum*, Plender's exhibition also included an environment, titled *Entrepreneurial Garden* (2010–ongoing), designed to resemble a Google or Facebook-style workspace, in which distinctions between labour and play were purposefully obscured. In its incarnation at MK Gallery, it featured green-painted walls, perhaps intended to invite relaxation, along with more obvious signifiers of leisure culture, such as hammocks, lava lamps, plants, table football, a basketball hoop and a seating area, decorated with posters depicting sunlight breaking through trees. Although exaggerated in its evocation of youth- and technology-oriented workplaces, *Entrepreneurial Garden* is perhaps less exotic than the retro-styled *Open Forum*, which figured much more prominently in publicity for 'Rise Early, Be Industrious'.

These installations are not intended necessarily as critiques – or endorsements – of specific modes of working or learning. Instead, as with her earlier work *Monitor*, Plender's exhibition at MK Gallery seeks to bring different historical moments into dialogue with each other, so that it becomes possible to trace interconnections – such as the importance of the idea of play and experimentation – between ostensibly distinct cultures and economies. Responding to the side-by-side staging of these environments from different moments, Laura Alsop notes that 'one can almost sense the internet lurking in the wings of Plender's reproduction studio from the glory days of public television, which was underpinned by the Reithian objective of accessible, if also curated and licence-fee funded educational programming'.<sup>11</sup> This notion of the internet as actor – or perhaps stage-hand – positioned just out of view, is compelling and sensitive to the stage-like qualities of Plender's installations. Yet I think *Open Forum* actually eludes straightforward categorisation as a 'reproduction studio', primarily because its design is not directly modelled on a specific original. Instead, Plender seems to combine elements (such as the world map and plants) from disparate genres, including news and entertainment programming, as though in defiance of the classifications that have frequently determined the content and form of broadcasting.

*Open Forum* and *Entrepreneurial Garden* are also both vaguely reminiscent of the instructive dioramas sometimes found in anthropological museums, which typically use costumed mannequins to evoke particular practices of labour, habitation and social interaction. Plender's 'dioramas' are, however, designed to be entered and utilised by the exhibition visitor, with *Open*

*Forum* functioning as an environment for the consumption of video and live discussion.

*Entrepreneurial Garden*, in contrast, seems to prioritise production over consumption; visitors are invited to engage with this environment as knowledge workers, but they are also warned, through an information notice, that any intellectual property resulting from their interaction belongs to MK Gallery. By placing these stage-like environments in proximity to each other, Plender seems to question (if not collapse) distinctions between practices of consumption and production, and between institutions of education, entertainment and information. In this way, 'Rise Early, Be Industrious' makes it possible to observe parallels between the forms of experimentation advocated by the makers of the 'Art and Environment' broadcasts (realised entirely within the context of public service broadcasting) and the creative labour prized by technology companies.

Plender's work also seems to illuminate other aspects of television's role in mediating modes of work, leisure and learning. Somewhat larger in scale than *Open Forum*, her earlier installation *Newsroom* (2008) was realised as part of the exhibition *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* curated by Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl at CCA Bard and devised as the setting for a programme of talks. Much like *Open Forum*, *Newsroom* incorporates a wall-sized map of the world, establishing an implicit connection to the realm of current affairs. Yet Plender's *Newsroom* does not directly resemble the news production environments frequently encountered within film and television drama,<sup>12</sup> typically furnished with desks and partition walls and inhabited by frenzied reporters. In fact, Plender's installation seems closer to a television news studio (devised as a space for on-camera media performance and populated by presenters and crew) than a newsroom (occupied by journalists and researchers and traditionally located off-camera). While *Newsroom* was conceived as a gathering space and used for a series of talks, live audiences are actually relatively rare in TV news studios; the only viewers to be found in most news studio environments are likely to be the technicians and producers.

Plender's staging of televisual discourse, in *Newsroom* and *Open Forum*, seems then to be at odds with actual television production practice. But a closer look at changing modes of performance and production design in TV news demonstrates that traditional distinctions between on- and off-camera performance are no longer fixed in place. Since at least the late 1980s, an era of intensified industrial change and competition,<sup>13</sup> news broadcasters have aimed to communicate an enhanced sense of energy, dynamism and technological currency, through the use of on-screen graphics or the redesign of studio sets to enable more active and mobile modes of news

presentation.<sup>14</sup> Views of busy, screen-dominated production environments, apparently populated by researchers and journalists, are now commonplace in television news, making previously hidden modes of labour visible *as performance*.

'Rise Early, Be Industrious' is integrally concerned with these changing modes of labour, and Plender is consistently attentive to neo-liberal rhetorics and practices of work as learning and play. Here I am thinking not just of the Google-style office environment intended to stimulate and support high performance and self-consciously 'creative' labour, but also of the Open University's own transformation of academics into on-screen television presenters. Programmes such as *Play and Place* and *Whatever Will Be* are the material traces of an ongoing process, theorised by Paulo Virno, whereby workers produce themselves as products, and both the actor and the academic professor are exemplary figures in Virno's theorisation of the virtuoso performer.<sup>15</sup> When viewed from this perspective, the socially progressive OU – committed to the expansion of educational opportunity through broadcasting – seems (like artistic practice) wholly embedded in the post-Fordist economy, premised upon the versatility and adaptability of a new labour force whose work-time, and learning-time, is never-ending.

Plender's work has been described as revealing a 'cultural underground [...] hiding in plain sight among the detritus of popular culture and once vast, now forgotten social movements'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, however, it might be more useful to avoid the terminology of the underground, since it seems overly bound to the 1960s and 70s, and obscures the profound and complex interconnections between ostensibly distinct cultures of public service broadcasting and global technology corporations, brought to light in exhibitions such as 'Rise Early, Be Industrious'. By drawing such disparate historical moments and facets of popular culture together, Plender's work makes it possible to recognise the 'underground' now as an imagined realm of playful experimentation and invention, modelled upon the environments favoured by children, artists or other learners, valued precisely because it continues to energise and renew ideals of progress. As evidenced by the Open University's 'Art and Environment', these ideals have for several decades been disarticulated from older Western narratives of industrialisation, modernisation and standardisation. The 'time of teaching' has now ended, and the very notion of progress is now more likely to suggest a different narrative, structured around an ongoing process of learning and self-improvement.



1 This song was first performed by Doris Day on the soundtrack of the Hitchcock film *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), subsequently becoming theme tune for the TV situation comedy *The Doris Day Show* (1968-73).

2 For example, Mekas's 'diary film' *Walden* (1969).

3 For a critical history of activist video practices during this period, see Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1997.

4 See Thomas Streeter, 'Blue Skies and Strange Bedfellows: The Discourse of Cable Television,' in Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, eds., *The Revolution wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997, pp. 221-42.

5 See the conclusion to Boyle, op. cit.

6 Olivia Plender, interviewed by Kim Einarsson, 'Information, Education, Entertainment', *Marabou Park Annex*, 12 October-2 December 2007, pp. 4-5.

7 Ibid.

8 Olivia Plender, interviewed by Robert Stasinski, 'I'll Give You Television', *Flash Art*, July-September 2009, p. 53.

9 Einarsson, op. cit., p. 6.

10 Ibid.

11 Laura Alsop, 'Olivia Plender: Rise Early, Be Industrious', *Art Monthly*. No. 359, September 2012, p. 28.

12 Such as HBO television series *The Newsroom* (2012-)

13 John Thornton Caldwell examines these and other changes in television news in *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1995.

14 This development is parodied in the Hollywood comedy *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* (2013).

15 Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, translated by Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2004.

16 Brian Dillon, 'Openings: Olivia Plender', *Artforum*, September 2011, p. 333.