

# A Tentacular Pedagogy to Lead 2050

Kai Syng Tan 24 November 2021

[New keynote lecture](#) premiering at ELIA academy bootcamp ‘the Extended Art Student’ Transcript (24 November 12:35 GMT version) of lecture, pre-performance and not identical with performed delivery, and to be consulted in conjunction with slideshow available [here](#)

## CLIP1 (1’11”)

Are you crossed at the injustices of the world? Fed-up at how normative ‘standards’ have been *sub-standard*? Stop taking things lying down. Exercise your rights to kick up a storm! Hi! I’m Kai. I’m a chimera, an Octopussy, infused by ancient wisdom to reconnect the body with mind, soul with sole, the (under-)common with the cosmic. I’m *hyper*-active. I can’t, won’t sit still. I’m restless for change. 2050 is only one generation away, so we’re running out of time. Slash your safety harnesses. Put on your tinted goggles. Join me in 8 tentacular workouts. for a tantalising future. Stretch your imagination. Re-imagine a future that re-centres: creativity, diversity and neurodiversity – celebrating our different brains, minds, beings and possibilities. We’ve got our work cut out. Let’s get our hands filthy. Are you ready?

## Are YOU ready?

What WILL YOU DO as an art teacher, student, cleaner, technician, janitor, Dean, about, 2050? What is the role of higher arts education for the future? Have you got a learning and teaching plan? Nope? Don’t worry. We’ll be dead by then. The way things are, our species will LIKELY be KILLED — like the killer whale, STRANDED, with no more fight or bite.

Sorry, is that too much? Let’s pretend that my pussycat has interrupted this call. Thanks pussycat.

Let’s flip it around.

Are we FIGHTING FIT for the future? What must the sector CHANGE in order to THRIVE IN, WITH AND FOR THE NEXT GENERATION? Can we re-position ourselves as LEADERS such that HIGHER ARTS EDUCATION NURTURES LEADERS AND LEADS CHANGE IN THE WORLD?

Well, since you asked me, I’ll recommend growing tentacles.

Welcome to my tantalising WORK-OUT.

THANK YOU Professor Susan Orr Maria Hansen Janja Ferenc and others at ELIA for your invitation and support.

Hi! I’m Kai. My pronouns are she, her AND QUITE DEFINITELY THEY because I’m a HYPER-ACTIVE CHIMERA. My teaching is INTERTWINED with my practice and research and EMBROILED with LEARNING. I’m GREEDY, and SHAMELESS, so I TEACH AND LEARN FROM EVERYWHERE. I GATECRASH different worlds and canoodle with members of OTHER species with diverse and divergent body-minds and bodies of knowledge. TOGETHER, we develop interventions prioritising higher-order learning that equip and empower learners with the TOOLS to become not just critical but CREATIVE thinkers, makers and change-makers. My collaborators in turn adapt, improve on, and apply our learnings and INSTIGATE YET OTHER INTERVENTIONS and questions. My stakeholders include like-minded people for instance on anti-racism AS WELL AS those whose positions are

antagonistic to mine! I spread my tentacles in art and design and the humanities health and fitness the third sector, and communities excluded from the ivory tower, as well as the social and psych- sciences — psychology, psychiatry. The impacts are potentially exponential, since the processes ENRICH our 'native' disciplines but also CATALYSE new liminal pathways to BREW further productive antagonisms. So essentially my JELLY-like body trespasses the boundaries of knowledge ... and social norms because I'm ill-mannered with two left feet, one of them in my mouth. Productive antagonisms is about inter-disciplinarity or, what I call 'ill-disciplinarity', to subvert the notion of illness, and to foreground playfulness. BUT MIND YOU, TO BE ILL-DISCIPLINED AND TO ANTAGONISE PRODUCTIVELY you must be HIGHLY-DISCIPLINED— as an artist!

SO MY QUESTIONS ARE:

- Can we re-imagine HIGHER ARTS EDUCATION as POROUS AND PROMISCUOUS, with its AMORPHOUS BODY-MIND not just in the art studio, theatre, or conservatoire, BUT the entire university, SECTOR AND, DARE I SAY, UNIVERSE!
- Can MAKING CHANGE be part of makers' agenda?
- Can we consider foreground *artful* processes and intelligence?
- And by applying this intelligence, can we GUIDE others to MODEL more creative and equitable ecologies?

Too ambitious? I blame the octopus...

## CLIP2 (01'02'')

*If you're looking for a mascot to bring to life what it means to thrive, look no further than the octopus. Pre-dating dinosaurs, octopuses have lived for 296 million years. The 300 species have beak-like jaws and superior eyesight, their soft bodies rapidly contorting to infiltrate small cracks. Octopuses have 3 hearts, and eight tentacles, each of which with a mind of its own, carrying half a billion neurons or 'excitable cells'! Like Homo sapiens with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD, octopuses are insatiably curious, crafty, and allergic to boredom. One octopus at an aquarium learnt to switch off lights, while another escaped from its tank, but on dry land, died – killed, literally, by boredom.*

## And when an Octopus runs into an EXCITABLE APE cum pussycat,

they become MUTANT Octopussies. Obviously. TODAY, we'll RUN THROUGH MY ACTION PLANS for 2050. DO ACTIVATE MY WORKOUTS as JUMPING BOARDS to STRATEGISE HOW YOU and YOUR INSTITUTIONS WILL CHANGE and LEAD CHANGE. DO PUNCH my provocations into shape ...BUT DO YOUR OWN WORK! And remember to ACKNOWLEDGE others' labour.

WE NEED OUR OWN VISION of how things CAN be, despite how rough, meaning ILL-defined your dream might be. MY VERSION which you can watch on BBC i-player, is INFESTED with ellipses, jump cuts ... and SOME jumping! BUT PROJECTIONS ARE KEY, BECAUSE things are ROUGH, meaning ATYPICAL SICK. We're PLAGUED with multiple global crises: Health inequality, ecocide. ZENO-PHOBIA — GREAT Britain is not in Kansas sorry, Europe anymore! — YOU NAME it, HUMANS have messed it up. BUT if everything is peachy for YOU, maybe YOU are the problem? Just a thought.

INTERESTINGLY, even before the pandemic, the World Economic Forum United Nations research councils and more have been calling for interdisciplinarity, CREATIVITY, and more, to solve wicked issues. Perversely, artists haven't been invited to this party, despite our characteristic RESOURCEFULNESS, exploiting art, artistic processes and artful agitation as mirrors AND hammers to reflect on ourselves, and inventing new forms of thinking, organising and being, that KNOCK and MOCK the status quo generating INSIGHTS into the WHAT Ifs, and WHY NOTs. Also ABSENT from the table are neurodivergent beings -- DESPITE making up 15% of the population and 30% of those in the arts. And DESPITE how research is showing how neurodivergent features like risk-taking, divergent thinking and creative problem-solving are hallmarks of effective leadership. INSTEAD, the 'Rain Man' and other white and white-washed cis-male editions of neurodivergence are fetishised as the 'next talent opportunity', 'competitive advantage' to reap 'better financial outcomes', with firms rushing to hire the next Zuckerbergs.

As an ill-disciplined octopussy, will I let that go? Nope.

As artist-teacher-historian James Elkins argues, we MUST PROACTIVELY BUTT IN INTO KEY CONVERSATIONS. This will not only 'raise the bar' of the artistic research, but, in demanding a re-thinking of 'knowledge' and 'research', can potentially INFORM AND TRANSFORM the university. And in a reality where art and art education are routinely penalised and scapegoated, we MUST raise our game to claim reclaim and DRIVE OUR OWN future. AND unless we POWER towards danger, PUSH away the PUSHBACK, SHOVE our BUTTS AT the table, we're ENABLING OTHERS to CONTROL our story.

## Speaking of stories,

I'll share one about someone who CANNOT count, but who wrote his own story which has shaped mine. While sharing the story, I'll share some data from the UK. Don't worry, unlike my BBC film or my 'unlawful' documentary 20 years prior, I'll handle racy 'adult themes' -- like racism, colonialism, power -- with poetry and panache.

## Back to my story:

Born in 1937, my protagonist was sold to a family in Malaysia. Given the Japanese Occupation, he couldn't go to school. When the war ended, he tried, but couldn't count, and walked out of his mathematics examinations. When both his foster parents died, he dropped out, with no qualifications, aged 14. He washed clothes for a living, and taught himself to read and write properly. When Singapore freed from British rule, he moved back, and became an arts and political journalist AND sports commentator for the national newspapers and television. He flourished, and readers even assumed that he was a highly-educated intellectual slash communist as you would be, in the a1950's. He had an inexpensive hobby: He would browse books in a small bookshop — and chat up the young lady working there. Like him, she left school prematurely, but enjoyed writing. After they got married, he held 3 jobs, had 3 kids in a one-bedroom flat. This was the common corridor. These kids are also neurodivergent. But unlike my dad, I HATE reading. That's why I looked agitated in the photo. My parents considered selling the flat to finance my studies at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. Fortunately, the kids went on to win 9 scholarships between them for their degrees. My father still CANNOT read numbers, but jokes that studying and studying aboard, is TOO POSH for 'people like us'

## But what will universities become,

when we EXCLUDE species of the wrong class wrong colour, wrong accents, wrong brains? What kind of artists and leaders will we cultivate when we're HOMOGENOUS, when we SHUT OUT alien species? What stories do numbers tell? What do they NOT tell, and only HINT at, of what lies beneath, what isn't recorded? What if my dad DID go to University? Would he have become a poet, professor, or a communist? Would he have met my mum? What if I didn't go to art school? Would I have become a lawyer, as my mum strongly recommended, because I loved arguing with her? 100%!

## Right.

So what COULD we pack in our TENTACULAR curriculum so that we THRIVE?

- Will it be as ill-disciplined as our forerunners TRANSGRESSING the boundaries of knowledge?
- But beards are NOT compulsory! Will we AMPLIFY HIDDEN STORIES? Will we STOP asking 'Why is my professor STILL not black'?
- Will we REALISE AND EXTEND the mission of the study of art and design as an ethical, socially-engaged and future-facing endeavour?
- And if YOUTUBE can teach us ANYTHING, FOR FREE, HOW can WE ADD VALUE so that our precocious leaders do NOT boycott our classes?
- What can the art studio, art school, and fugitive models offer, to ALSO TEACH others about creativity and intelligence?
- Can we teach GEOGRAPHERS for instance, about the ART of getting lost? As liminal, ambiguous and HENCE POWERFUL spaces, can we also learn numbers, data, data manipulation, quantitative skills, and GAIN ACCESS TO NON-ARTS grants, PhDs jobs, the same way geographers and social scientists have been OCCUPYING ARTS spaces and colonising arts funding
- Will we CELEBRATE NOT punish those who cannot sit still?
- Can we teach accountability, accounting, AND CREATIVE accounting to MONETISE our labour, EMOTIONAL labour, thinking time, crying time, and time for care and self-care time?
- Can we PLAY WITH LAW as CREATIVE MATERIAL, so that dancers can change policy, and filmmakers can become lawmakers?
- Can MUSICIANS learn the instruments of the system?
- Can we MAKE VOLUNTEERING A CORE MODULE? Can we leave our armchair, ROCK HIGH-VIS JACKETS, and engage in EMBODIED LEARNING with retired nurses and, clothes washers, recycling factory workers road cleaners, and learn how to clean up our own mess?

- And can what we do become microcosms of how Curiosity, Compassion, Collaboration, Communities are metrics to measure 'success', and NOT league tables, or national surveys that commodify knowledge, and not GDP?
- And if you work in unpoetic, adult themes like racism and other 'niche' interests, don't feel alone, join forces and conjoin with others and show how you are a critical mass.
- And just as we re-imagine running as art, can we re-claim LEADERSHIP creatively?
- And please don't instrumentalise my art as OUTREACH, public engagement, IMPACT CASE STUDIES, or, god forbid, art therapy – which part of my art practice looks therapeutic to you?? – have you seen how my work induces headaches??

But don't worry, there is STILL hope.

## CLIP3 (2'20")

*Octopussy: Hello Bob, how are you?*

*Bob: I'm very well! Is that a placard there?*

*Octopussy: Yeah!*

*Bob: That's pretty good.*

*Octopussy: I'm keen to talk about being artful because people have been talking about the virus as being quite crafty, because it hijacks your body to jump off to other bodies.*

*Bob: I love the idea of artfulness and people having to think in different ways and come up with solutions and plans. Making art is a way of keeping that human instinct for individual thought alive. Also we are promoting that idea that we've got to exercise our sense of free speech just as much as we've got to exercise our bodies. Because when you are making art you are sort of in this space. It's like before Christmas or before Diwali or Eid. You're kind of preparing for tomorrow. You're thinking about ...*

*Octopussy: ... This sense of anticipation ... and something coming into being?*

*Bob: Exactly. You're kind of making these things, which you hope to show when you're making films. It forces us into a world of optimism. I think the idea that you come up with your own ideas is very important for democracy and human rights. This whole Covid thing, it made me revisit the very first art book that I bought, which was On Modern Art by Paul Klee. He does talk about this idea of the life force. He has a metaphor of a tree. You've got the octopus (\*laughs\*) but he has a tree. The body of the tree is in a way that of the artist. It has roots which research things and see things. And then the artworks are the tentacles, the branches*

*Octopussy: That's quite a powerful imagery.*

*Bob: Great idea, this idea of the life force. And actually there's something...*

*Octopussy: ... life giving about it*

*Bob: I might catch this idea that art or experimental music will crush the virus. It's not a total joke.*

*Octopussy: No.*

*Bob: It's about driving forward with new ideas. And if you are coming up with stuff in your studio, you are thinking about the future. It does force you to be optimistic.*

## **Bob and Roberta Smith is the tentacular visionary**

who also teaches in a university, and who's long urged us to flip things around and RE-IMAGINE ART's place in the universe! RIGHT. We're running out of time. If you want to think about our collective future together, come have a speed date with me in December at the Attenborough Arts Centre in Leicester and on Instagram! I hope that our date today has been a good workout. Just as proper writing should sweat, good art and good art teaching and learning should make us sweat! Hopefully see you in Brussels in February 2022. for a sweaty run!

**Thank you.**