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James A. Craig and Matthew Ozga-Lawn (STASUS)

The itinerant educator / practitioner: interview with Liam Young



Liam Young is an architect who co-leads the nomadic design studio 'Unknown Fields' at the Architectural Association alongside Kate Davies, as well as a futurist and researcher. His think tank 'Tomorrow's Thoughts Today' has produced projects such as Drone Orchestra with John Cale, performed at the Barbican in 2014. More recently, Young has taught studios at Princeton University School of Architecture and has just launched a new Master of Arts in 'Fiction and Entertainment' at Sci-Arc in Los Angeles. James A. Craig & Matt Ozga-Lawn (STASUS) interviewed Liam to discuss the itinerant, wide-reaching, and transient nature of his practice.

STASUS J: Maybe it's worth beginning with the agenda of 'Unknown Fields' – what the first ideas were behind it when you set it up and what your long-term ambitions were for the studio.

Liam Young: We were interested in setting up this studio that at its core could escape the walls of the institution and go out into the world and explore landscapes and territories that our contemporary technologies in cities set in motion.

That was essentially an urban studio, but was a way of thinking about the city that doesn't locate itself in the singular site of where that city finds itself on the map but understands the city as a network condition. To really understand a city that occurs on multiple sites, scattered around the planet, you have to go out and explore these territories that the city sets in motion. And so there's no such thing any more as a single site. Everything's a multiple condition and we wanted to develop a studio that would really reimagine the idea of site and place within the constructs of the architectural / urban profession. What's critical about that is taking a group of students and travelling around the world to explore these territories that are totally urban but may also be at the same time desolate or existing far beyond the contemporary imaginary; existing out-of-sight or out-of-mind or only presented through traditional media narratives.

So that's what we do, we travel on two or three expeditions a year to go out into the world and explore these spaces.

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STASUS J: I'm curious how closely this agenda is tied to your practice – particularly when you talk about the idea of the site no longer being one location. Is there something related to that in the way that you approach your work and method of travelling or locating yourself as a practitioner around the world?

LY: I talk about the work that I do in my own studio as being an exploration of the visionary present, or an exaggeration of the present into speculative scenarios and narratives such as films, and so what *Unknown Fields* does is form this core level of research – this intense interrogation of the ground condition or conditions of the present – and from there in the studio projects we exaggerate those conditions and present them through fictions that are about reframing our relationship to the existing context and to the present moment. And through the aestheticisation of these conditions, through the narration through the exaggeration of them it makes them explicit or reveals them in a way that otherwise would not be possible.

So there's a great power in storytelling to make manifest, make visceral, or demystify a present condition that is wrapped up in extraordinary complexity, which is smeared and spread across the planet. That's the nature of my work, like you, with every project, whether it's a wild speculative fiction or something more familiar and critical, always beginning with an intense interrogation of some kind of ground condition, some kind of present condition or moment. So, critical to every project, is an expedition of some form, and that evolves into a project.

STASUS M: You've been running the *Unknown Fields* studio for a number of years now and have gone to the edges of the Earth in some ways – which obviously are known in the straightforward sense that most people would not go there, not know about them other than in often distant reports. What do you think has changed as the studio has gone on? As you address and discover these territories, how do you think the studio's focus has shifted or changed?

LY: What we end up doing across the years is to stitch together a whole series of these inter-linked supply chains. So we're finding that, more and more, these sites are in dialogue with one another. Essentially the studio is really, in its coming incarnation, about London, but we go to China because that's where all the contemporary devices that we use in London are manufactured. But then China's manufacturing economy has evolved to a point where it's now outsourcing to other territories again. So when we go to Africa, we see Chinese special economic zones playing out and we see the consequence of the boom in Chinese manufacturing, we see in Bolivia in the Atacama Desert the lithium mines that power the batteries that then go into these devices; we see the port where the lithium is shipped off to Asia where it's turned into the batteries that then get assembled into the objects that turn up on UK high streets. So actually what you see are the sites that are complicit in an extraordinary planet-scale machine, and every expedition we go on seems to uncover and unravel one more piece of that giant machine. And it really is a conveyor belt that stretches across the planet.

STASUS M: It's fascinating that, although the studio appears as if it's a journey into distant worlds, you're always coming back to the underlying structure of the present, the contemporary. I guess that's a different attitude to site to a more conventional architecture studio where the site is an imagined construct.

LY: It's a reimagining of what site is. I studied in a traditional school in Australia where *Genius Loci* was – and still is – the only narrative. Partly that's because the context in Australia is so extraordinary, it's very hard to move on from that. But really *Unknown Fields*, in a much more radical way, is really exploring this relationship to context, and dealing with site as a complicated contemporary condition.

Sometimes that site is very physical, a landscape, a series of factories. Other times that site is a landscape that may play a critical role in the formation of a cultural understanding, of nature for instance, so we might travel to the Galapagos Islands, or the Amazon jungle, because that is a landscape that is fundamental to the cultural construction of what we think of as nature. So it's a site that is in the imaginary. Obviously what we find is that the Amazon jungle isn't a jungle at all, it's a large cultivated garden that once was home to urban communities, five times larger than Los Angeles, and we see that there is no such thing as nature or at least not in the way that we culturally define it – it's a pure construction. But you really have to get out into those territories to explore the landscapes that are critical in shaping these contemporary imaginaries.

I mean another contemporary landscape is our technologies. We talk about the rhetoric of the cloud as being very light, ephemeral, but the reality [...].

STASUS J: The infrastructure is nothing like that.

LY: Yes, the aesthetic of our devices is all about seamlessness and the thin, crisp aluminium edge, whereas that's a marketing condition and in reality our devices are geological artefacts pulled out of the earth.

STASUS M: At great expense and cost.

LY: But that's not the media narrative that we buy into. So these sites are both literal and physical. In one sense they really do construct – physically – the modern world that we occupy but they also play a role in shaping our cultural understanding of that world.

STASUS J: There's no question – you're an extremely active guy, teaching in two continents and have been for the last couple of years?

LY: Yes [...] three years.

STASUS J: We're really interested in what motivates you to do this, and to try and work in quite extreme conditions, both in the way you work and the places you work in?

LY: It really is just trying to maintain a form of practice that is generally relevant. I started out in the early days working in a fairly traditional architectural office but quickly realised the forces that were shaping the city were no

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longer in the domain or remit of traditional architecture. Networks, systems, these distant landscapes that we visit now play a more fundamental role in shaping our urban experiences than the physicality of public space, buildings or streetscapes. In order to maintain a practice that was in some way meaningful or relevant we had to evolve the work to gauge these types of territories, to set up these types of studios, to also play a role in educating a generation of architects that no longer have the traditional career path laid out in front of them: this model of graduating, going off to be an intern in an office, working your way up, becoming an associate, director, wife, three kids, three cars [...] wife or husband obviously [...] is no longer there necessarily.

It's our responsibility as educators and our responsibility as practitioners to talk about alternative forms of the architect. So these studios are about disseminating this model of the architect as provocateur, the architect as journalist, the architect as politician, the architect as strategist, the architect as researcher, the architect as storyteller, the architect as filmmaker. And that's not about a weakening of the profession through disillusion, that's about a strengthening of what we do through *infiltration*. Like siting an architectural model of thinking within a whole series of aligned disciplines. Because there are still going to be spaces for the traditional architect, just like the Louis Vuitton handbag, it's going to become increasingly luxurious and boutique and exclusive – and I'm sick of designing Louis Vuitton handbags.

STASUS M: It's interesting to hear you explain how *Unknown Fields* operates and one of the constants between the expeditions is of course London and in particular the Architectural Association. We're curious how the situation changes when you take it to a different school. You've experienced this with Princeton and presumably very different studios. How much is London and the AA central to what 'Unknown Fields' is studying?

LY: The AA is fundamental to *Unknown Fields* just in the fact that it's an institution which isn't bound by the typical constraints of other universities, so we can take students to these kinds of places without the typical bureaucracy that you'd expect. Although the AA is RIBA-accredited, there is a certain luxury in being able to help students develop projects that are quite radical in the context of an architectural school, that aren't about buildings as singular objects but are about narrated systems and stories and networks. I think that in other institutions we'd have to tip our hat to the profession much more than we do here.

In my own teaching practice where I take studios to the States – first Princeton and now Sci-Arc – it's a slightly different model in that the US semesters are much shorter. It's much more focused, much less about a larger body of research and much more about condensing pre-existing research that we've done into narrated scenarios. The studios I run in the States are more oriented towards short films, scenes from films that don't exist. They're much more about visual storytelling than they are about intense expeditions and research on the ground. They're all based in real contexts, they're all exaggerated presents, but they're much more nimble. They operate much more quickly and they focus on storytelling as an outcome.

STASUS J: Do you find that is positive? A condensing of some of the things you've explored here, now outside of the institution of the AA and in these new places?

LY: Yes. It would be a different thing if there weren't what are now thirteen expeditions of 'Unknown Fields' behind us. So it certainly gives the shorter semesters a bit more critical weight. The problem with a lot of the US studios in this model that they don't have the year-long investigation that we're privileged to have within the AA or other UK schools. You end up with studios that are more like sketches of projects than actual projects. In one semester you have to develop a body of research, you have to develop a polemical argument or thesis, you have to translate a skillset more oriented to a final output – it's a tough ask.

STASUS M: Presumably the students in these schools will be much less familiar with some of the pedagogical approaches that you and other schools in the UK especially, are involved with?

LY: What I found was a relatively unexpected level of traditionalism, and it has been much more of a battle to get these projects up. For the most part the students are up for it, but they've done traditional studios before they encountered mine and, in a year-long studio, we have the luxury of spending a term just dealing with filmmaking and animation techniques, or looking at site and context, researching place. You need to do all of those things in a US school in a matter of weeks. My strategy for dealing with that is to focus on narrative outputs, condensing existing research.

STASUS J: By doing this in other institutions, do you feel there's a real opportunity for reflection on the work that's happened at the AA, and how does this manifest itself for you? Is there something else you can take from the studio?

LY: I have my own studio practice but then *Unknown Fields* with Kate Davies is now also producing project work separate from work in education. We recently finished Rare Earthenware, a project that came out of the *Unknown Fields* China expedition where we made a series of Ming vases from the radioactive mine-tailings that are produced from the world's largest rare earth mineral refinery. It was a project that Kate and I did as *Unknown Fields*, but we did it as *Unknown Fields* as a studio, as opposed to 'Unknown Fields' as an education/research entity. As part of that, we had a series of articles on the BBC and a film documenting the unmaking of an object along the worldwide supply chain.

STASUS M: Is that a direction in which you would like to see *Unknown Fields* move – out of education and more towards these kinds of projects?

LY: Yes, core to 'Unknown Fields' is a model of collaborative practice. But what we're doing with our summer expeditions, which are distinct from the diploma studio expeditions that we do across a year here at the AA, is that we open them up to members of the public and other disciplines and we also invite a series of collaborators with

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us to make work. It's like a nomadic studio that is making projects and the people that travel with us are part of the collective that makes that work. I think that is the direction that we're going to be taking, much more oriented around these nomadic collaborative projects, less around the traditions of the Diploma studio.

STASUS M: It's great to be running both. You can compare – presumably – all sorts of things between the two approaches that are notionally based in the same places. It seems you might sometimes get things out of a two-week studio that are more exciting than what comes out of the Diploma, just because of the people who are involved and the intensity of the work.

LY: Yes, the thing is that we still spend a long time gestating and working on these projects and the expeditions are more like location shoots for a film. There's a huge amount of scriptwriting and production work and backstory that happens on either side of the film shoot, and the expedition: you parachute in and you collect the material, meet people, do the interviews, and then you come back and develop it. You don't try to produce work from beginning to end on these expeditions.

STASUS M: Given this cinematic approach, how do you address the 'people on the ground' and what is their role?

LY: The realities of our practice are that we spend most of our time sitting in front of a laptop sending emails to set up meetings with people on the ground. We're very careful not to pretend that our short time in these places gives us some kind of privileged view or allows us to solve or understand these contexts in a way that people who've been spending their whole lives there can't. We're not going to these places to try to address the issues that appear there. We go to these places to look at how they relate to the place that we've come from. So we don't go to China to look at the particularities of industrial complexes, we go there because it has a particular relationship with cities that we know, cities like London. So the real site for the work is actually London. This is different from the traditional models of the architectural field trip where you go out to a place and you look for a site to put a building and you research the specifics around that particular plot, and then you make a project. We go to a place to understand the place we come from differently. There's a great Proust quote – 'the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes'.

We're very cautious about the rhetoric of problem-solving. We meet people on the ground to gain an understanding of what their conditions are like, but really that's an understanding that helps us rethink the context in which we're based.

STASUS M: As you said earlier, London is central to all the studies. To continue the thread about how the studio has evolved or changed, it seems there's a big difference between going to say Chernobyl in the earlier studios to going to the South China Sea in the later studios, where the latter seems so much more directly implicated in our day-to-day existence. It seems almost as if you've gone to the really unusual and 'unknown' places and found out that it's the territories that are sort-of-but-not-really known which hold the most interest and relevance.

LY: Yes. I think that's true.

STASUS J: Just to go back to the academic institution, and the work building and gaining momentum outside of the institution, how do you feel about the future if the institution wants you to produce *for* them, in teaching or research? The AA or the American universities?

LY: What we're looking at now is what it would mean to shift the funding model of the studio. At the moment it's essentially based around student fees, whereas we think there's a value in the work that we're doing that may connect it to other forms of research funding, which would free us up as practitioners to invite specific collaborators and to make work which doesn't need to be squeezed through an educational model. It's something we're dealing with right now. Other funding opportunities and research models have their own hoops to jump through. I think there's a way of parasitically occupying those kinds of research structures and still do the work we think is important to do.

We've been doing 'Unknown Fields' in its current incarnation for six or seven years. We think that it's nearing the completion of a cycle. A reimagining of what it would be, a 'phase two' is much more oriented around research outputs and collaborative projects, which inherently suggest alternative funding models. Still embedding students within the research, because we do think there's a critical role we play in talking about alternative forms of practice and helping students to realise what they might be. But it'd be something that we do as one of the many things 'Unknown Fields' is, as opposed to students being the core funding model.

STASUS M: One of issues we've put emphasis on in this Special Issue of *arq* is the relationship between research undertaken in the 'academy' and research undertaken outside of it. We're interested in discussing or broadening recognised views of research, and especially design research, and what it is or could be.

LY: I'm not a career academic. I don't plan on being one. I'm a practitioner. I don't want to squeeze my practice into the traditions of the profession, and neither do I want to squeeze my practice into the traditions of the institution, having to write articles and turn up at conferences which I find tremendously uninteresting – just to get a certain amount of points each semester to justify my position – I think that's a pretty straight road to ineffectual obscurity.

STASUS J: Progression within the institution requires this kind of thing, though. Do you feel that it's okay to remain at a certain point in your career?

LY: In my academic career certainly. I've been fortunate enough to maintain a pretty intense and vibrant practice outside of the institution. That's one of the other things about the AA. It doesn't have the traditional paths through academia that other universities have. So it's critical that I'm doing work outside and bringing things into it, as opposed to constantly remaining outside. The business model of my own practice is such that I have project work which isn't a little office

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doing house extensions for people but is doing large-scale performances, cinema-scale filming projects, installation work that generates its own economy without having to apply for funding from the institution that I'm a part of. So as long as that work keeps continuing to progress in scale and ambition, the research unit which is 'Unknown Fields' can kind of exist in the form that it does. So crawling my way up the academic ladder, schmoozing, being political, making sure I hit the points and the articles isn't something I need to worry about at this point.

STASUS J: Just on that, you're talking a lot about the future. In ten years time, what would you like to be doing?

LY: I think the work, my work, is moving towards storytelling, fiction, and filmmaking. I've got two large-scale film projects in the works at the moment. The Sci-Arc studio which I'm setting up is about keying into the LA film industry that acts almost like a 'world-building' think tank which is in some form a consultancy to larger scale studio projects, and that will develop its own projects. I really think that fiction is this extraordinary shared medium. It's how our culture shares and disseminates ideas, and it's a really powerful medium through which to disseminate architectural and urban ideas that are critical and fundamental to how we all exist in the world, but which so often sit within the rarefied discourses of academia or the darkened lecture halls of an architect's public lectures. So – like a Trojan horse – you can seed critical architectural ideas into much more publicly accessible film projects, and I think that's something that increasingly architects and urbanists need to be thinking about. It is how we can find larger audiences for the work that we do.

STASUS M: Do you consider the future of academia and architectural education to be bleak, one that necessitates a move outside its traditional boundaries?

LY: I think that architectural education is totally vibrant and exciting. That's why we're all still in it. That's why I still write 'architect' on my customs form when I come to the country. I think it's one of the last disciplines that allows a type of education that is still broad enough to be engaged with the complexities of the world as it exists now. An architect can sit in a bar and have a conversation with an artist, an engineer or a filmmaker and still be engaged across those different disciplines. It's still a discipline that sits across culture and technology, unlike a lot of others, and I think a great tragedy of architectural education is that it has self-censored, it has defined itself so narrowly. I'm much more interested in this breadth – although there certainly should be units [studios] that are oriented around traditional building – but I'd love if there were more 'Unknown Fields' type studios. I'd love if there was a studio about writing policy and regulations, no drawings at all but massive tomes of guidelines. I'd love there to be a studio that's more openly filmmaking, or a studio that's about curatorial practice, or editorial practice, and the output is a studio publication every year, or a studio exhibition of curated artists.

STASUS J: That's interesting, I guess you're describing how a School Director might think, in talking about your ideal situation. Is that a role you'd be interested in at all in the future?

LY: Um, possibly. I have been approached several times by different schools. It certainly would be of interest but I don't think it's right at this stage in my career. The reason I've said no to those jobs previously is because they haven't seemed like projects, they've seemed like administrative positions. And I'm a practitioner not an administrator; I'm a practitioner not an academic or a bureaucrat. I'm here at the AA because all the shit – all the complexities – that normally come with traditional universities here are kept away from you. The greatest strength of the AA as an institution is that it's built in such a way that protects its creative staff from the pragmatics of running an educational institution of this size. I would only move into more of a directorial position if I were able to treat it like a project, and not have to be fundraiser, politician, or bureaucrat, but was able to create a project, the way that I do in my own practice.

STASUS M: On a related note, if it's a film school – or film business – that you're setting up in Sci-Arc in LA, what aspects of architectural education are important to that? The AA has obviously been a big part of how your studio has progressed. We've seen schools such as the London School of Architecture [...].

LY: Which is a total regression [...].

STASUS M: Yes, but there are also practice based educators, people like Ordinary Studio who do smaller, one-off sessions with students. Do you see a potential in this non-academic or non-institutional model?

LY: What 'Unknown Fields' has become is a nomadic design studio where we incubate projects. But these projects are done with disparate practitioners in different disciplines and the students who play a role in keeping these disciplines together. It's kept quite small-scale to keep it manageable by myself and Kate but it could be a model that is scaled up. Equally I would say that this model isn't *the* model either. It's one of many, and I think what really is the issue in architectural education at the moment is providing platforms for people to develop a whole range of alternative forms of practice, from politics to software engineering, because each one of these things requires a deep-seated spatial intelligence.

STASUS J: On a different note, perhaps you could talk about how you organise yourself – because you're doing so much? What does your lifestyle entail at the moment? Do you find you can manage – are you able to do – all the things you want?

LY: I'm spread pretty thin! The greatest art of the itinerant educator is the strategic use of the word 'no'. So you have to be clever about what it is you agree to.

STASUS M: Are you finding yourself employing this more and more – the word 'no'?

LY: No! I'm terrible at it. It's my greatest failure! What might be interesting for the discussion is what I always force myself to do, which is only self-initiated project work. If a gallery or a curator comes to me with an idea or request, they're the ones that I normally say no to. If someone says

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would you come and run a studio like *this* I'd say no to it. The way that I work is I develop an idea for a project, something I think is exciting, relevant and of the moment, and I'll look for funding to make it happen, or I'll look for project partners who are able to help me realise it. It's really a practice which is generated around self-initiated projects. So I want to do a film now; I start pitching, and see who connects with me. See what emails have come through the inbox in the last couple of months that might actually be receptive to something I want to do. Organisationally I'm trying to only do the work that I want to do. I've been lucky enough not to have to make certain project choices which are about doing things to maintain a level of work, or to cover overheads, or to feed an office and keep things ticking over. The model of the think tank – my own independent practice – is that it grows and shrinks depending on the project, so that when we did the drone orchestra for the Barbican, we had thirty people, but the day it finished I got on a plane to New York to run the Princeton studio, and it shrunk back to one. So I didn't have to then chase more projects that would keep thirty people on a monthly paycheque, that would keep a roboticist on a £700 day rate.

STASUS M: Again, this is facilitated by the network you've established.

LY: Yes, to be honest a big benefit of travelling and teaching in all these different places is that you have a pretty extraordinary and expanded network. So the projects I do are always pretty complex. Even the film project requires sound guys, DOPs [Directors of Photography], lighting guys, you can connect to the network of people you meet in your travels.

STASUS M: This suggests the possibility of a potentially endlessly nomadic existence and practice. As a viable option.

LY: Yes, certainly. I mean I don't know how my girlfriend would feel about that! But yeah that's been the model thus far. I can appear and disappear in different places, and the network does its own thing. It's a network of freelancers that can, at a month's notice when I ask them, come together, make a project and dissipate again. So it is a fairly nimble model for a studio and, when I started it, to be a post-GMC model of what an architectural practice could be, it doesn't have overheads.

STASUS M: As one of only a handful of people in education at the moment who can regularly experience all these different places and modes of teaching and practicing architecture, you must gain a real insight into pedagogical approaches. One of the things that striking about the relationship between some of the London schools and broader UK architectural education is how ideas and approaches move between them as people come and go. It seems that the mode of practice that you embody, of a practitioner always in motion, and not fixed to anywhere, is almost a pedagogical approach that could be taught: the itinerant practitioner as a new model for the architect.

LY: Inevitably what happens is that I bring in to the 'Unknown Fields' studio these networks of people, so we had a sound designer I worked with on one of my projects in the studio, who ending up working quite closely with several students on their projects, to take their soundscape work up to the level of their visual work, that wouldn't have been possible [in a less flexible model]. We have a scriptwriter that comes in that I work with, a sound designer [...] the students then become connected to the network as well. To a certain extent the work is about rethinking London, but in a personal sense it really is about constructing a large-scale network that is enabling us to produce multidisciplinary, complex, collaborative projects. Although on an architectural budget!

STASUS M: It's interesting to consider how the institution might play a role in this model of practice – is that naively optimistic? A lot of work is obviously collaborating with institutions as well as individuals. It seems like if this were something universities were more open to, this model of practice could be a lot more prevalent.

LY: The way that it works at the moment is that I'm able to stitch together a number of different institutions. I did a project very early on when I first came to the country, I had no teaching experience in the UK at all, and I wanted to develop a reputation that could enable me to get a job somewhere like the AA or the Bartlett. So one year I did what I called the Parasitic Architecture School where I ran five studios in a single year – a first year studio, a second year studio, a third year studio, a fourth year studio, and a fifth year studio – but at five different institutions. So essentially I ran my own architecture school, but embedded in five institutions scattered around the UK. And that approach still informs to a certain extent the things Kate and I do at the AA and the nature of the outputs I'm able to do at Sci-Arc in the context of the film industry, which would be more challenging here. Various galleries have enabled outputs that come out of these research endeavours. So it's still this kind of parasitic model. Equally, *Unknown Fields* parasitically occupies the AA Visiting School infrastructure but it's totally, radically different from the typical AA Visiting School which is based on collaborations with one particular institution at a time. So there are clever ways of operating within and between institutions but you need to treat them like infrastructures.

STASUS M: It's fascinating to hear that's how you started your approach in the UK – there's obviously a link between working in five schools in the UK and between London, New York, and LA!

LY: I made a 'projects review' book of that year where I cut out and pasted together the studios from different yearbooks. It was purely to do five years' worth of teaching experience in one year so that I would have a decent folio to get jobs like this one! I stopped for a couple of years and was just based at the AA, but now I'm getting offers in the States – which obviously pays better as well. The UK generally doesn't pay contributors particularly highly.

STASUS M: What is your attitude to the schools you did this between? Did you have – let's say – a healthy amount of disregard for what they were trying to do as individual schools and instead use them to facilitate what you were trying to create instead?

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LY: To a certain extent, but equally each one of those schools had its own identity, and I had to choose what I would do there based on what was possible. So it wasn't about conflicting, abrasive relationships I was having inside the institutions. I was fairly comfortable within each place but I was building an experiment across a number of them. Essentially, I was stealthily occupying these places and benefitting from the unique identities they've set up. I think that's what institutions should be thinking about, what is it that defines them as different from other institutions, so they create a constellation of choices, as opposed to each one trying to outdo the other with the same kind of work.

STASUS M: This seems a conflict in education at the moment, the difference between the desire academic institutions have to form their own fixed identities – so we have certain schools specialising in one or two 'types' of architecture – and a model that allows people to parasitically occupy their spaces, facilities, and so on without trying to force them into a particular path.

LY: Yes, I think when we talk about the identity of the institution I don't think we're talking about the style of work. To a certain extent you want conditions that are open enough to facilitate students evolving their own language. I mean the nature of infrastructure that's accessible, facilities or workshops, or a certain type of staff, or a certain sort of studio model. It's not about 'okay this is the digital, formalist school' or 'this is the place you come to make plaster moulds and timber joinery' – it's much more about institutions defining themselves structurally and strategically, not stylistically. The London School of Architecture is a school that is trying to orientate itself around practice-based learning, for instance, and the nature of those practices at the moment are pretty traditional and totally boring, but as a model of a school it's kind of interesting that you might not learn in a studio context but an office context. But those offices could be working for United Visual Artists on large-scale music festival light installations, or working with someone doing boutique conservatoriums in Somerset, but I don't think stylistically it should be one or the other. It should be about the model. That's what I'm talking about in terms of identity. Certain types of studio and certain types of work are possible in certain types of institutions. Any institution should be open enough to a whole range of different 'styles' as part of this, that the model may be developed. That's the opportunity.

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