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Gifting an Artistic Licence: Printing, Radicalism and Pedagogy

Vega Brennan and Alys Mendus 

*Institute of Education, Arts and Society, University of Cumbria, Carlisle, UK
Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*

Abstract

Spurred by an observation that ‘student art teachers don’t want to be radical teachers’, this paper explores how the gift by a lecturer of a tongue-in-cheek hand-printed ‘Artistic Licence’ to a new cohort of pre-service teachers, gives permission to imagine new futures. Through a dialogic image-exchange two educators bring their radical manifesto for art teachers/teaching as a performative autoethnography where they imagine new forms of teaching through small acts: printing, walking and talking, and being parents and artists. Similar to performative autoethnography, the act of giving projects materiality into the future and is transformative both for the giver and the gifted. The object (an artistic licence, an artwork, a poem) is an autonomous vessel that has its own agency and affect as it moves from one person to another, shifts and accrues meaning. When times are hard, art teaching can run the risk of becoming too outcome-led, working backwards from a preconceived notion of what art should be, not what art could be. This paper draws on the imagination to counteract the internalised negative pull of art as part of a neoliberal system. It offers new art teachers, through the act of giving, the potential to give themselves permission to imagine their art practice and their artist identity as integral to situating themselves within the exchange of value and meaning in the human and post-human world.

Keywords

A/r/tography, gift-giving, performative autoethnography, printmaking, student teachers

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Figure 1

The image shows two versions of an 'ARTISTIC LICENCE' form. The left version is a simple template with fields for No., DATE, NAME, and REASON. The right version is a filled-out form with No. 325, a signature line, and a list of permissions.

ARTISTIC LICENCE
No. **325**
ARTISTIC LICENCE
This licence entitles me,
[print name]
to call myself an artist.
I authorize myself to create art.
I give myself permission to:
☐ observe ☐ play ☐ develop
☐ reflect ☐ explore ☐ connect
☐ discover ☐ experiment ☐ investigate
Signed _____ date _____
Permission granted to transfer, copy & / or alter this licence.

Figure 1
Artistic Licence.

Vega: Delivering the first year of specialist art and design sessions to pre-service teachers, I am nervous, I want to do a good job by giving them the confidence to be teachers *and* artists, artists *and* teachers; to have their own voice (Daichendt 2010). I start by giving them each an Artistic Licence. We talk about the ideal qualities for a teacher; I ask them to choose a few things they would like to be as teachers and what they would *not* like to be. Quite a few say they do not want to be 'radical' as, at this early stage, they consider radical to be problematic; a 'radical' teacher would be extreme in their views, confrontational, difficult, challenging.

Figure 2

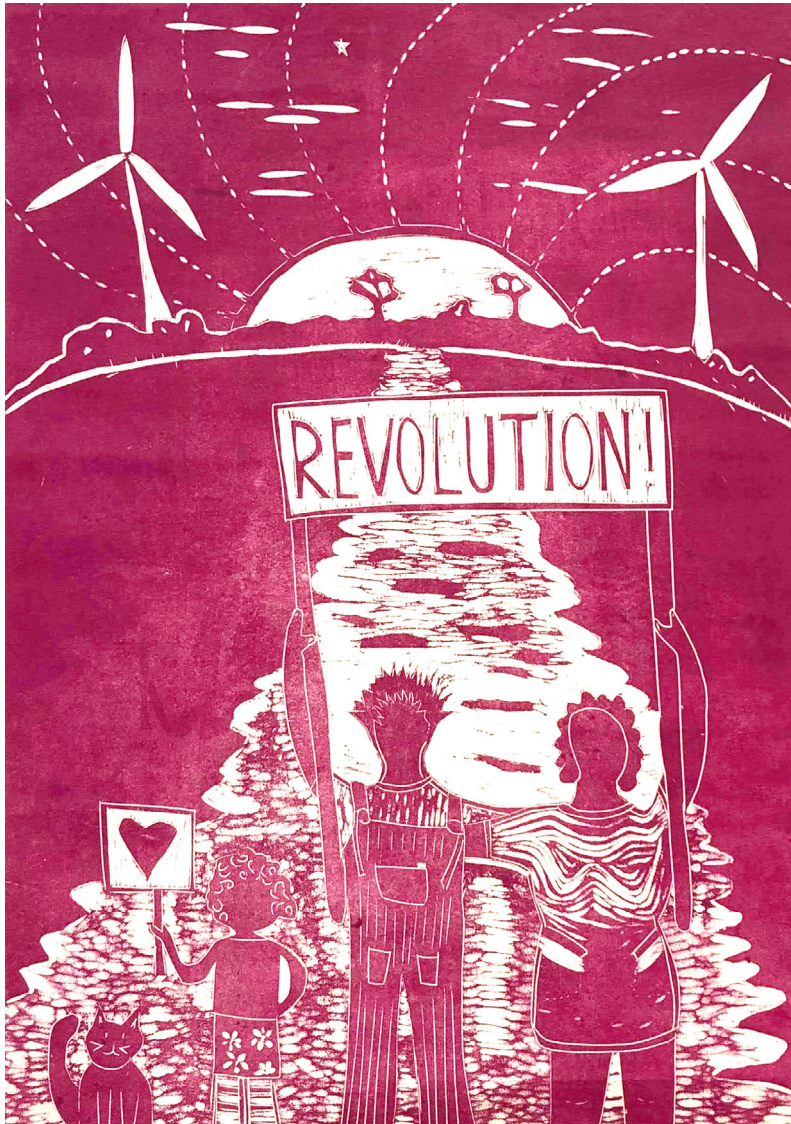


Figure 2
Revolution.

Alys: As a feminist and an educator, I am keen to remind the pre-service teachers that I work with that everything we do is political (Freire 1970) and I try to hold this in my imagination while printmaking. I created 'Revolution' to invite my audience to think differently, inspired by the landscape of my time back in Cumbria in the North of England. This print calls out for change as a piece of inclusive activist art depicting wind turbines, two adults and a child holding protest banners, and a cat in bright magenta ink. This image in poster style offers a possibility of a world that cares about the climate, animals, societal change, and inclusion.

Figure 3

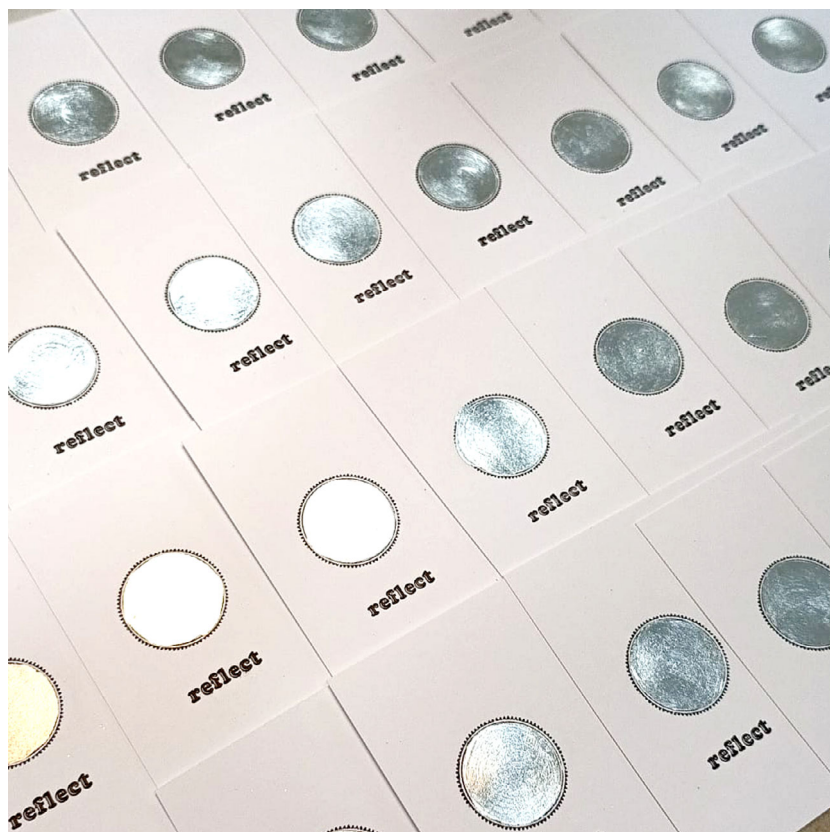


Figure 3
Reflect.

Alys: I am influenced by the work of Tami Spry on Performative Autoethnography (2016) as we share the performative story of our art making and gift giving. Performative autoethnography is a methodology that critiques the self within culture, and where the end point of the performance is beyond the original act. When we began, we did not know where this would take us, and when we gift our work, we do not know where it will go.

Figure 4



Figure 4
Print Multiplies the Joy.

Vega: My artistic practice is based around printmaking (image) and printing (text) and the combination of both. I make prints to explore the theory and effects of multiplicity on value, image/object exchange, sharing and gift-giving (Hyde, 2007; Roberts, 2021). Learning from Hyde (2007) who argues that 'The commerce of art draws each of its participants into a wider self. The creative spirit moves in a body or ego larger than that of a single person' (p. 154). So we are conceiving of the making of art with generosity in mind, a new way of imagining how value can accumulate through that outward flow.

Figure 5



Figure 5
Alys Printing on Adana Letterpress Machine.

Vega: The 'slippery-ness' of print has the ability to counteract 'thin' or outcome-led artistic practice (Pelzer-Montada 2020). Small, quickly produced objects transcend the gallery wall and circumvent the value systems, expectations and aesthetics of commercial art markets. The prints slide through the world and slip into the gaps: tucked in a book, stuck on a fridge, shared with friends, collected in a carrier bag to knock against other objects (Le Guin 2019). They invite interaction; they have a value beyond and outside the fixed transactions of 'I make: you consume, I sell: you buy.' We treasure our time—this is where the value lives.

Figure 6



Figure 6
Observe.

Alys: We take a walk with my 4-year-old and her scooter. We bring a stack of cards with the words from the artistic licence taped on. Similar to Lee *et al.*'s concept of 'living deeply' (2019), we chat, walk, get blown by the Spring breeze, watch the wind turbines while looking out to the Lakeland fells and wonder, 'Could we capture these words as images printed onto a set of cards to share with preservice teachers?'

Figure 7



Figure 7
Vega Printing Boxes.

Figure 8

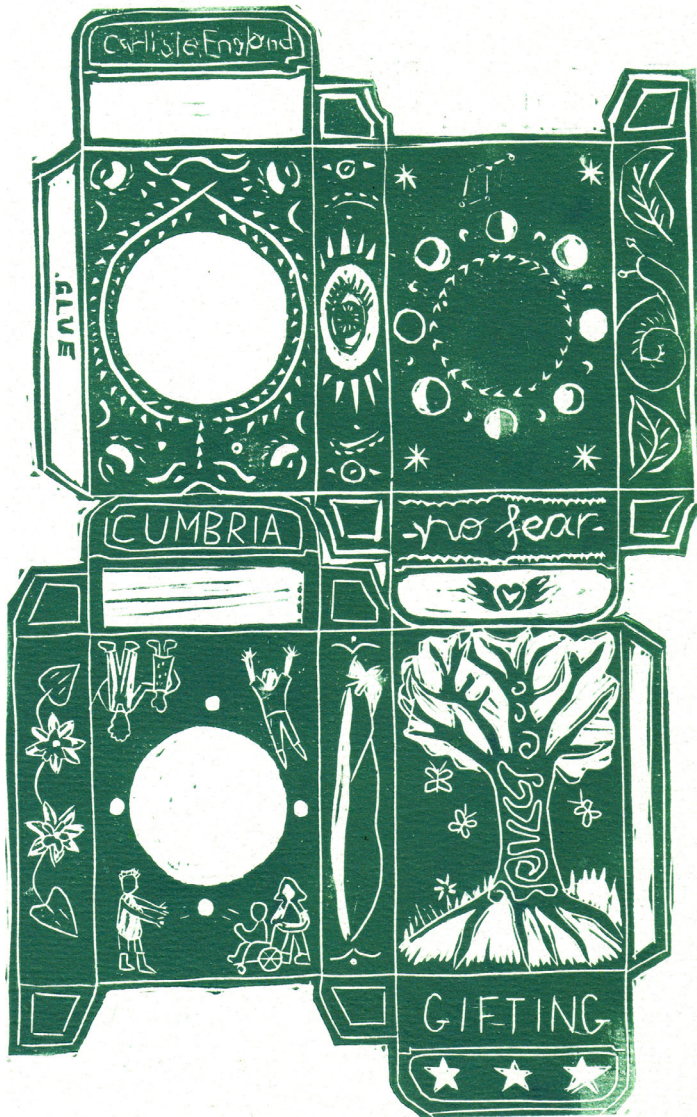


Figure 8
Box Nets.

Vega: The cards are designed to fit in boxes that will be dispensed using a vintage cigarette vending machine.

Alya: In my box design, I wanted to capture the concepts of the Cumbrian landscape, the ideas of gifting and diversity, including all abilities.

Vega: I chose to create a box design that could suit future unknown purposes, so I referenced tarot cards and esoteric symbols. For example, the heart with wings could stand for freedom to love; equally, it could be a gift flowing outwards. 'No fear' reminds the recipient that risk-taking is part of play. Place-making is important for both of us, so we referenced the fells and Carlisle, on the edge of the Solway.

Figure 9



Figure 9
Alys' Eye.

Alys: Representing the words on the artistic licence was tricky. We chose images to inspire curiosity from Vega's collection of wood blocks and linocuts, and she makes a couple of new blocks.



Figure 10
Wood Engraving 'Observe'.

Figure 11

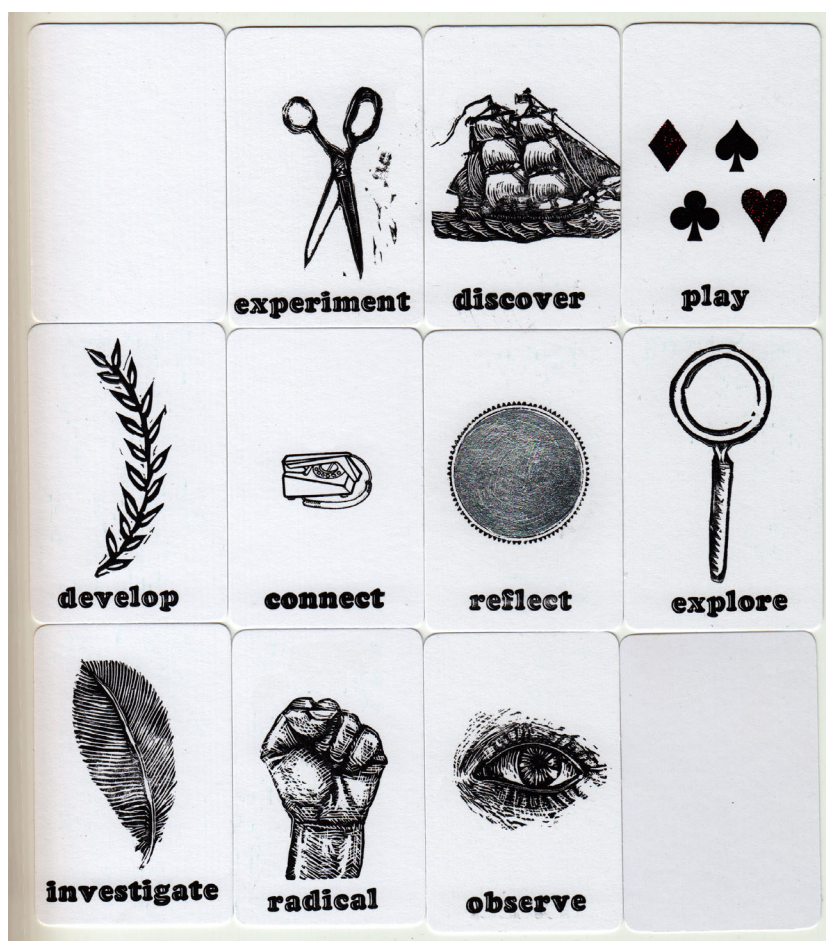


Figure 11
Playing Cards.

Vega: A fist, an eye, a branch, a ship, a mirror
Age-old shorthand

But we reclaim these and make new ones: this is Alys's eye, this is my fist, these are some scissors that I bought from a junkshop and use every day in the studio

The motifs themselves are slippery—they carry the weight of previous usage and are open to interpretation for new, radical journeys into the imagination

Figure 12



Figure 12
Badges.

Vega: Towards the end of the course with my students, I brought my badge maker and asked them to think about their artist-teacher identity. Many followed my call and made a radical teacher badge to wear in their schools. I realised that as they progressed through their teaching placements, their interpretation of 'radical' had changed. A year's worth of challenge and encouraging them to be critical and confident in their own teacher voice had led to their understanding of the need for change: to give the gift of art to the pupils in the schools was a radical act, full of risk and unknown outcomes.

Figure 13



Figure 13
Vending Machine.

Alys: I was invited to meet Vega's students. We ask each student to take a turn at operating the vending machine and pull out their box, then carefully explore each card. There was joy in the room, sheer elation at the gift-giving but also the care and time spent to create something small, thoughtful and change-making.

Vega: We included blank cards so they could add their own images and words. We invited them to use them and not to treat them as fragile and 'for best'.

Alys: How can we find time as artists and teachers for risk?

Vega: Play is rehearsing risk -
configurations of cards,
shuffling them
while telling our future selves to be brave.
The cards invite us to action
the dance of objects to make new stories and new things.

Figure 14



Figure 14
Cards and Hands.

Acknowledgements

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Vega Brennan has over 16 years' experience teaching art in schools. She has MAs in the History of Printmaking (London) and Fine Art and Education (Northumbria). She worked at Tate Britain's Print Study Room, Leeds City Art Gallery and West Yorkshire Print Studio

(formerly Eastthorpe Visual Arts). She is a founder-member of Cumbria Printmakers and in 2009 she set up Cumbria Art Educators, a network for artist educators and art teachers. She lectures on the PGCE course at the University of Cumbria, specialising in Art and Design education. She also runs Linden Print Studio, an open-access printmaking studio. Vega Brennan (she/her), Lecturer, Art and Design PGCE, Institute of Education, Arts and Society, University of Cumbria, Bowerham Road, Lancaster LA1 3JD, Email: vega.brennan@cumbria.ac.uk.

Alys Mendus (she/her) is a feminist artist academic who gained a PhD on a Freedom to Learn Scholarship from the University of Hull, UK in 2018. She published a book from her thesis, 'Searching for the Ideal School Around the World: School Tourism and Performative Autoethnographic-We' (2021) filled with her stories, poems, photos and lino cuts. Alys works as a Casual Academic lecturing and as part of research teams at University of Melbourne, Deakin University and Western Sydney Universities in Australia. Alys was based in Cumbria, UK when this paper was written and crafted. Email: alysme@gmail.com.

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