

HAYWARD GALLERY

WIDE OPEN SCHOOL

The Hayward Gallery's Wide Open School is an unusual experiment in public learning. Its programme of courses is devised and delivered by over 100 artists from approximately 40 different countries. It is not an art school, however. Instead, it is a wide-ranging forum where artists lead and facilitate workshops, collaborative projects, collective discussions, lectures and performances about any and all subjects in which they are passionately interested.

That is a territory as expansive as the imaginations of artists. If you peruse the **Wide Open School** course guide, you will encounter a remarkable diversity of topics and approaches to learning. It includes material that is under the radar of mainstream culture – things that are overlooked or neglected for one reason or another. It also features courses that involve looking at familiar subjects in a new light. Contemporary artists regularly find fresh ways of approaching research and thinking from other disciplines, from history to physics, from anthropology to economics. Building on these tendencies, **Wide Open School** exists as a meeting ground for overlapping fields of knowledge. It establishes a temporary haven for lateral thinking.

Yet while they span an eclectic spectrum, the courses in **Wide Open School** also share a common goal: they offer participants a direct experience of how artists think about and question things. Artists are often great self-educators. Their work demands that they continue to learn, and to invent new ways of learning. They are always looking, and they know that while you may not always find what you are looking for, you can always find a novel way of using what you do find and what you already have. Artists are also experts at embracing contradictions, and knowing how to move forward in understanding a problem without first having to neatly resolve it. It is impossible to 'teach' someone how to work like this, except by example and through practice – which is why many of the classes in **Wide Open School** incorporate some form of 'active' learning.

Most schools are in the business of transferring knowledge from teachers to students. **Wide Open School**, on the other hand, is more like a labyrinth of learning in which various possibilities are explored and developed. As one of the participating artists suggests, it is a school for people who love learning but do not necessarily like schools. It serves up a scenario where people explore subjects for which they share a common curiosity, rather than where 'students' are 'taught' in any conventional sense. It also provides us with an opportunity for playing with the rules of how we educate ourselves,

but it is not a new model for an academy. Playful and serious at the same time, it aims above all to create an energetic atmosphere for formulating and exchanging ideas.

Wide Open School is open to everyone. There are no applications required, no entrance exams to take. Enrolment in courses is on a 'first come, first served' basis, except in those instances where an artist has specified their desire to work with particular age groups or individuals with special learning needs. While the majority have been invented by artists, a handful of courses are based on proposals from the public. Accommodating different modes of learning, classes range in size from one-on-one conversations to small groups to large gatherings. Several are conducted in languages other than English, depending on languages spoken by the artist leading the class. The broadly international character of the **Wide Open School** faculty is a significant part of this project, reflecting the historical urgency for us to actively learn from different cultures and different parts of the world.

Wide Open School takes place in classrooms built in the Hayward's gallery spaces. But it is not an exhibition in any sense, and it demands a very different type of engagement. It asks its participants to make an unusual commitment of time as well as energy. It obliges us to be attentive and open. It invites us to use our intelligence in unusual ways, and to confront our desire to understand and to be understood. It requires a willingness to discuss issues and to make things with strangers. And its success depends on our ability to realise that the contribution of each and every member of the school is significant.

It is our greatest hope that **Wide Open School** can provide learning experiences that lead to the kind of intuitive insights and sharpened perceptions that our encounters with art produce. It might not be an exhibition by any stretch of the imagination, but in this sense **Wide Open School** may end up being more like a collective work of art. You will have to be the judge of that.

Ralph Rugoff
Director, Hayward Gallery