

## Exhibition Guide

**Darcy Lange *Work Studies in Schools***  
**26 November 2008 – 25 January 2009**  
**First Floor Galleries**

Darcy Lange (1946–2005) was born in Taranaki, New Zealand. He attended art school in Auckland, moving to London in 1968 to undertake an MA course in sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London. Shortly after graduating he had his first solo exhibition at Ikon.

Lange's earliest works were large-scale sculptural exercises in geometric abstraction, bold and brightly coloured in a style that was very characteristic of the period. However he was to become increasingly dissatisfied with abstraction during his time in London, where he became influenced by emerging conceptual art practices he encountered there and yet disillusioned by what he perceived as the growing separation between art and aesthetics on one hand and peoples' everyday lives on the other. "Art seems to have become isolated ... The public, despite fifty years of abstraction and the knowledge and education of its existence, prefers to accept and feel an affinity with pictorial and representational art."

Lange made his first video in 1972. In a published interview four years later he described his conversion to this new medium: "I went up to Phil Slight's place, a friend who taught in an educational college in Birmingham, and he showed me his video machine, and it just seemed obvious that it was what I wanted to use. And I used it. The first tape I did was in Birmingham."

Brought up in the more egalitarian society of New Zealand, Lange was also deeply affected by the prevailing class system he encountered on his move to England. This developing political consciousness was a further factor in his gradual disenchantment with abstraction and corresponding attraction to realism, and underpins the schools studies which investigate the reproduction of prevailing social structures from generation to generation.

Ostensibly a continuation of his earlier studies of people at work, in *Works Studies in Schools* Lange shifts his attention from manual labour to the professional practice of teaching and the institutions of education. Filmed across a total of seven different schools in two cities, firstly in Birmingham during 1976 and later in Oxford in 1977, it provides a clear microcosm of the British education system at that time.

This exhibition opens with the earliest example of the three-part video format Lange was to develop further in later schools studies, that of 'classroom study', 'teacher response' and 'student response'. By showing the classroom footage to his subjects, and then recording interviews with them on their reactions to seeing themselves on video, the artist formalised a process of looking, thinking and responding that was intended to empower those he filmed. He believed this would produce a study that was as objective as possible, because it embodied different points of view.

In addition to the three-part structure, Lange felt that the juxtaposition of different video studies, or researches as he preferred to call them, might make viewers more aware of their own place in society. The selection of *Studies in Three Birmingham Schools* demonstrates the difference in quality of education, both between schools and between classes within the same school. The engaging nature of Mr Perks' English class at Ladywood Comprehensive contrasts sharply with the similarly first-rate yet more academic approach of Mr Trott at King Edward's, as well as with other more authoritarian approaches at Ladywood itself. Ladywood served a population that was working class and mixed race, while King Edward's attracted more privileged boys and correspondingly the style and intention of the teaching was tailored accordingly. King Edward's was a feeder school for the country's best universities and pupils were encouraged to think of themselves as future leaders. The pupils at Ladywood Comprehensive on the other hand would have fed the city's factories, in particular the motor industry which during the 1970s was the main source of employment in Birmingham.

Lange's experience in Birmingham led him to extend the project and in 1977 he embarked on *Studies of Teaching in Four Oxfordshire Schools*. His three-part structure was refined and in addition he made a sharper contrast between two state and two public schools, with comparisons drawn between the teaching of history, science and art in each. A further layer of reflection was added by the discussion that took place between Lange, the art critic Guy Brett, Ron Jones, a lecturer at the School of Art Education in Birmingham, and many of the teachers and pupils from the featured schools. This was filmed at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford during an exhibition of the Oxfordshire studies held there in 1977 and was included as part of the show.

*Work Studies in Schools* was initially made possible due to the support of the School of Art Education, then part of Birmingham Polytechnic. The Birmingham studies were filmed using a video camera on loan from the school and the discussions and conversations about education that took place there influenced Lange's approach. A complete video library of the Birmingham studies can be accessed in the foyer of the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Margaret Street, throughout the exhibition (Monday – Friday, 9am–6pm).