

# **Sequel – An artistic collaboration between the Slade School of Fine Art and UCL Museums & Collections**

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## **Abstract**

*Students of the UCL Slade School of Fine Art made new work in response to old works in the UCL Art Collections for on-line and physical exhibition in the first half of 2009. This was the first collaboration of this sort and has already led to further, similar projects. The project provided a fantastic opportunity for students to get hands-on with a remarkable collection of old masters and modern treasures as well as being a rare and valuable experience for their futures as professional artists. At very little expense this collaboration had a large impact providing improved awareness of the Art Collections and UCL Museums and Collections more widely.*

## **Introduction**

*Sequel* was a collaborative project between the Slade School of Fine Art and UCL Museums & Collections, with a particular focus on the objects of the UCL Art Collections.<sup>1</sup>

*Sequel* began with an invitation to all current students at the Slade to revisit the past masters within the UCL Art Collections and to create new work in response; to continue to develop their own practices using contemporary media and contemporary modes of thinking while taking time to consider and appreciate what has gone before.

Despite being on adjacent sides of the same university quadrangle and despite deeply interconnected histories, The Slade School of Fine Art and the UCL Art Collections have in more recent years grown apart. This unprecedented project sought to rejuvenate this seemingly obvious partnership in the spirit of collaboration that has always been at the centre of so much of UCL's teaching and research.

UCL Museums & Collections are committed to strengthening their on-line presence and are always looking for new ways to reach audiences, especially with limited facilities for temporary exhibitions. As such, *Sequel* was conceived to produce artworks for on-line exhibition, created either as digital works in their own right or as works to be documented digitally. The exhibition of these works continues to exist at [www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/sequel](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/sequel).

In March 2009 *Sequel* was launched with a one-night only physical installation of all works, new and old, in the Strang Print Room, where much of the UCL Art Collections are housed.

## **A brief history of the UCL Art Collections and the Slade School of Fine Art**

The UCL Art Collections contain over 10,000 objects including paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures dating from 1490 to the present day. Works on paper are housed in the Strang Print Room, and paintings and sculptures are displayed in public rooms around UCL as well as in storage on and off site. Only a tiny fraction of these works are exhibited at any one time. The collection was founded in 1847 with a gift of the sculpture models and drawings of the neoclassical artist John Flaxman. For a long time, the objects in the collections were a central part of the Slade's teaching programme, an invaluable resource on its doorstep.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sequel* was organized and curated by: Andrea Fredericksen, Simon Gould, Wynn Abbott, Susan Collins, Brighid Lowe, Jon Thomson and Dryden Goodwin.

The participating artists were: Emma Connor, Patricia Delgado, Andrea Greenwood, Erin Gutierrez, Hyo Myoung Kim, Janne Malmros, Junko Otake, Stephanie O'Connor, Kate Keara Pelen, Ryan Riddington, Alex Springer, Patricia Townsend, Amanda Wasielewski, Jayne Wilton.

The world renowned Slade School of Fine Art was founded in 1871 and was the result of a bequest from Felix Slade who envisaged a school where fine art would be studied within a liberal arts university. It is this guiding principal which makes for such a fascinating context in which to create art and which strongly supports projects such as *Sequel*.

### **What actually happened**

Responding to an open invitation to explore the UCL Art Collections, more than 30 students received an introduction to the history, contents and locations of the collections from curator Dr Andrea Fredericksen. Save for a handful, none of these students had visited the collections before, despite being frequent exhibition-goers. The students ranged from first year undergraduates to MA and MFA students and incorporated the Slade's painting, sculpture and media specialisms.

The students then had a month in which to delve deep into the collections in their own time and to come up with a proposal for a new artwork based on something they found during this period. This process included one-to-one discussions with Dr Fredericksen that the students had to arrange for themselves, as well as discussion with their tutors. Their proposals were then reviewed by all the UCL Museums & Collections staff and Slade staff working on the project.<sup>2</sup> Those students who made successful proposals were then given a further month to create new work. As well as making the work this entailed further discussion with relevant staff about how best to produce and present their work for the project website.

### **How did the students as well as the Art Collections benefit?**

Studying art is extremely different to most other subjects. Students decide what work they produce and when. Assessment is mostly based on presentation and discussion of a portfolio at the end of the year. Teaching is often more guidance and suggestion in contrast to more didactic approaches. Students are expected to seek out opportunities for themselves in order to further their burgeoning practices. This project was therefore immediately one such exciting and unusual opportunity delivered to their door. It was very encouraging then that so many students took up the challenge.

*Sequel* offered the students access to a professional archive and collection and a taste of the procedures that go along with this type of interaction. Knowing how to make an appointment with a curator; understanding how to write a proposal differently from an essay; learning how to navigate a largely hidden collection; researching and making work outside of the studio – for many these were new and valuable experiences which will benefit them in the years to come.

Perhaps more fundamental than all of these, *Sequel* allowed students hands on access to thousands of remarkable and historically important objects and created a scenario in which they felt this was relevant and inspiring to them.

The ongoing website and the launch event also gave all participants exhibiting experience for its own sake and for their CVs.

*Sequel* was also a fantastic opportunity for the UCL Art Collections to reconnect with the Slade and to provide an object-based teaching facility in an informal way which could still count for the students' formal assessment. The packed opening night brought a largely Slade audience to the Strang Print Room, including staff and students, many of whom were not regular visitors. The ongoing benefits of these new networks to the Art Collections are significant, as detailed further below.

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<sup>2</sup> Project staff were: Andrea Fredericksen, Simon Gould, Wynn Abbott, Susan Collins, Jon Thomson, Brigid Lowe and Dryden Goodwin.

More generally UCL Museums & Collections benefited through all the extra views to its web pages through the *Sequel* microsite.

### **Then what happened?**

Since the launch of *Sequel* several of the students have devised new projects to continue working with the Art Collections while others have begun to work with the Grant Museum of Zoology and with one off UCL projects like *Object Retrieval*.<sup>3</sup> Despite these opportunities always existing for Slade students, it is projects like *Sequel* that provide a real stimulus to action.

*Sequel* was conceived in many ways as a pilot to see how this kind of collaborative object based work could happen. Its success and the relative ease of producing the project have meant that this is now planned as an annual event.

*Sequel* is also a very flexible model in which both the Art Collections and the Slade can be variables. For example the UCL geography department is now working with the Art Collections, with students also producing work in response to the paintings, prints, drawings and sculptures within. This came about as a direct result of the geography department having heard about *Sequel*. Such is the diversity of the contents of the Art Collections and this way of working that it is easy to imagine this happening very effectively with students from a whole host of departments, tailoring the projects to their own intellectual curiosities.

Early discussions with the Slade about working with other collections at UCL have similarly been met with enthusiasm.

These partnerships are not difficult to arrange but as is so often the case in large institutions, they do not often happen. It is often simply a case of people not having the time to take a sideways glance at what other departments have to offer. *Sequel* may be a simple idea but it could so easily have not happened, which would have been a great shame for those who took part and experienced it.

### **One final thought**

For all the positive effects *Sequel* has had on the staff and students involved, as well as for the collections themselves, it cost virtually nothing. The only real financial cost was to buy the wine for the opening. UCL is hugely fortunate to have these sorts of object-based resources to hand and *Sequel* has been a great reminder of the possibilities of what can be done with these objects when put at the heart of teaching.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to all of the artists, curators and other contributors who created *Sequel*.

### **Contact**

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.objectretrieval.com](http://www.objectretrieval.com) (accessed December 22, 2010).