

Earn as you learn

As design colleges encourage students to market their work, are they selling or selling out?

Industrial designer Ron Arad was the professor in charge of the Design Products MA at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London from 1997 to 2009. It is an academic stint that kept the RCA in the first rank of international design schools. Arad had a saying then, a bit of shtick: 'We take highly employable people and make them totally unemployable.' And he wasn't really joking. But that was then.

Design and art colleges remain places of unfettered experimentation, of course, but times are tough. And commerce is not the dirty word it once was in academic circles. The reasons for this are well-rehearsed - rising student fees, the wider marketisation of academia - but the degree to which student and graduate work is now being marketed and finding a market is still surprising.

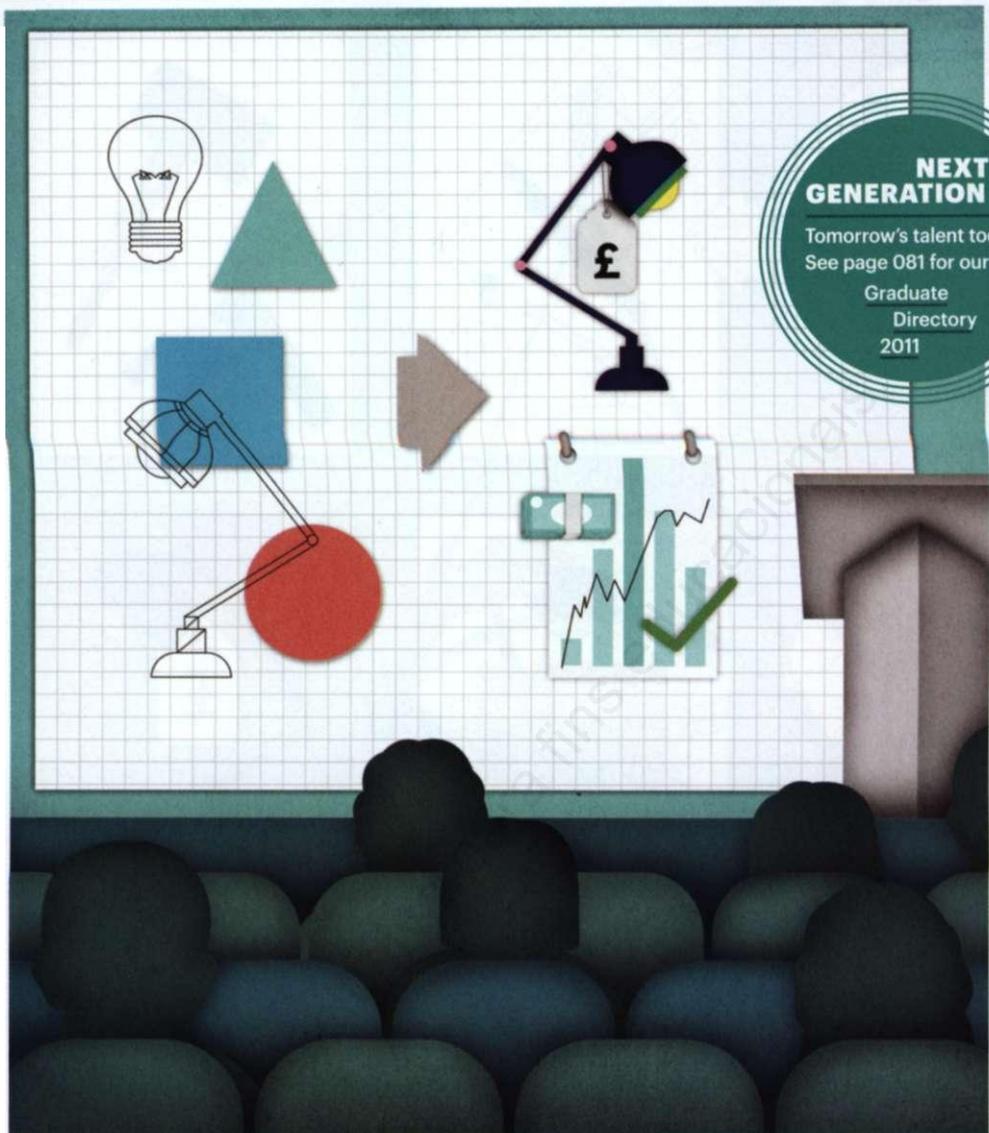
Students, whether of design, fine art, fashion or craft, are increasingly considering selling their work and making money. 'Universities have to be business facing,' says David Sanderson, head of the MA in Ceramics at Staffordshire University - hardly the sort of language you expect from a professor of pottery. And even at the most rarefied design and art schools, commercial engagement is on the cards. Ilse Crawford, head of the department of Man and Well-being at Design Academy Eindhoven, says, 'I feel it's important not to confuse education and the commercial, philosophically. But within the school, commerce is taken seriously. We wouldn't sell our students work, though we are considering setting up a parallel business to help them.'

Students, philosophically or otherwise, don't seem to object. In September, the London College of Fashion (LCF) ran a three-week pop-up store, the College Shop, off Carnaby Street, to sell alumni work. At the RCA, the post-Arad generation of Design Products teachers, course head Tord Boontje and senior tutor Gareth Williams, have started an initiative called the Design Products Collection, launched at London Design Festival in 2010 and shown at Salone del Mobile in Milan in 2011. It commercialises work developed by students during

their MAs. Meanwhile, Staffordshire University's Sanderson, partnering with sales and marketing expert Charles Whit and supported by the Higher Education Innovation Fund, has set up a company at the university called Flux, which employs its MA ceramics students to produce a very commercial range of bone china.

The organisation DegreeArt.com regularly trawls the UK's art colleges, spotting saleable talent. 'We're not dealers, just agents,' says co-founder Elinor Olisa. 'We're pretty experienced at picking out students who look like they're going to make a career out of being artists. We give them support, though only through sales. We don't invest in anyone's output.' Sophie Derrick, who started a fine art MA at Wimbledon College of Art in 2011, is Olisa's 'girl of the moment'. Her work, which challenges the division between painting and

'There's no conflict in studying and selling. I need to make a living'



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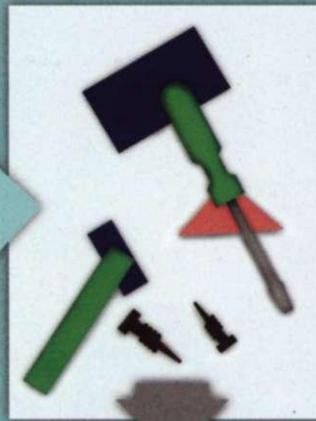
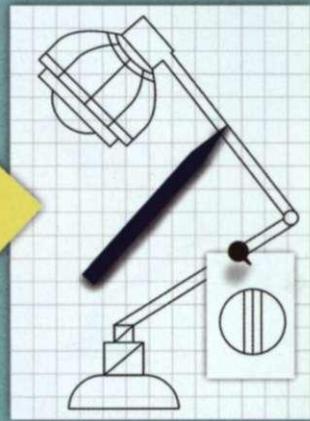
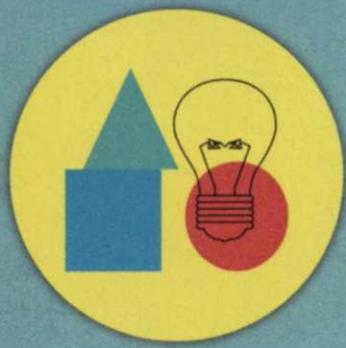
SWITCHED ON

Projects such as the RCA's Design Products Collection, which commercialises MA students' products, and Staffordshire University's Flux, which produces MA ceramics work, expose students and fresh graduates to the practicalities of business and marketing, as well as developing their design skills

photography, is being snapped up, and Olisa sold 12 pieces at the Affordable Art Fair in Battersea in October. 'It's really spurred me on,' says Derrick.

Among the 13 RCA alumni whose work is included in the Design Products Collection is Julian Bond, who left the college in 2010. So far he has sold 155 of his ceramic 'Pixel Vases', produced in an infinitely alterable mould to create a unique piece every time. His latest coup is an order from upmarket department store Lane Crawford in Hong Kong. 'It was only when I went to the Salone del Mobile with the RCA in 2010 that I realised you needed support materials, business cards, a coherent story,' says Bond now. 'In 2011, I went to Milan again, properly armed. It was a friendly way of entering the real world, where things have to work and deals have to be made.'

For fellow RCA graduate Marc Owens, creator of the 'Avatar Machine', a suit that allows the wearer to appear in their own realtime movie, the Design Products Collection allowed him time to develop what was really no more than a video camera on poles and a big puffy body suit. It has brought recognition. The suit was recently shown at MoMA in New York, and has inadvertently given Owens an »



is preparing a range of homeware for Norman Hartnell. Her 'Musical Glasses', though, are already in production with an Austrian crystal company.

With Flux in Staffordshire, students provide the blue and white patterns for the china, which is made in one of the oldest factories in Stoke on Trent, the centre of British ceramics history. When Flux was launched at the international homeware showcase Maison et Objet in Paris in January 2011, it took £25,000 in orders. Returning to the show in September, it picked up a further £45,000 worth as well as clients in China, South Korea, Russia, the US and elsewhere. The factory has since had to bring in more staff, including a specialist gilder.

'I've watched the demise of the quality local brands since the 1970s,' says Sanderson, who is passionate about Potteries history. 'We've really helped re-evaluate the desire for these classic skills.' Sarah Callard, who worked on the first series of china, has since graduated and is now employed by Flux, working with students producing new designs, while Canadian student Jenna Stanton says this was the only course she wanted to join, because of its commercial offshoot. 'We've proved there is a market for this high end work,' she says.

Fashion designer Alice Bastin received instant attention with her graduate collection in summer 2010, pairing blocky tailored pieces with fragile frayed chiffon. By the time she had started her Womenswear MA at Central Saint Martins in 2011, following a stint in the Celine atelier, she'd already sold some of her work at the LCF's College Shop. 'It was a learning curve,' says Bastin. 'It was good to face up to pricing. Most pieces I sold for less than I'd invested in them. That's a reality check.'

Rudi Joti, an accessories and footwear graduate of LCF's Cordwainers College who has done placements with Jimmy Choo Couture and Alexander McQueen, also embraced the College Shop. 'I put in some accessories in small quantities, and I think they were too expensive. But it directed people to Showtime [the London College of Fashion alumni website] and I've since had orders for shoes.'

Perhaps it will no longer be the case, then, that we have to pity the poor student. Sevan Garo started his MFA at Kingston University in 2011, secure in the knowledge that DegreeArt.com was happily promoting his work - a series of expressionistic paintings, ceramic pieces and printmaking. 'There's no conflict in studying and selling,' he says. 'I need to make a living from this - it's what I want to do. And I need someone to help me do that.'

entrée into the world of advertising. When the creative director of one of London's leading ad agencies realised that the callow youth he was chatting to at a private view was the 'Puffy Avatar guy' (the suit has been a YouTube hit), he invited him in for a meeting.

The Design Products Collection isn't, a purely altruistic experiment, says Williams, who sees it as 'a way to support students after college. But also to communicate the values of the course. All colleges do projects with industry, but that's seldom about actually bringing products to market.'

London's other big-brand college, Central Saint Martins, has long had close industry links. Now, however, an initiative is being formulated with investment from Silicon Valley and in partnership with Method, a design and innovation consultancy. Called Method Design Lab, the project 'will source and back ideas from students and staff,' says Tim Hoar of Central Saint Martins' Innovation department, 'but it's a separate company, outside the remit of education. There, it's our job to teach not to make judgements.' Not that Hoar has eschewed the commercialisation of student work till now. His department takes selected undergraduates to shows such as Pulse - a London trade fair - where, in 2011, undergraduate Jasmine Lau's 'Musical Glasses' (wine glasses that play different notes when filled with the appropriate amount of liquid) were a hit. Lau has now completed her BA and

THE ONLINE SHOP WINDOW

Of course, it's not just colleges who are developing the market for student and graduate work. Stefan Siegel, a London-based Tyrolean bored with his banking day job, and his computer whiz brother Daniel, started Not Just A Label (NJAL) in 2008. 'We knew a lot of aspiring designers who were telling us of their difficulties and one thing led to another,' says Siegel. What they came up with was a no-brainer bookmark for every fashionista that now generates 21 million hits a month: an online showcase for 7,000 emerging fashion designers from 92 countries. Siegel sees NJAL as a way of outmanoeuvring the lumbering luxury goods giants and creating 'thousands of brands'. 'We saw an opportunity to create a platform that recognised tomorrow's leading designers before anyone else does.' The constant stream of new talent - an average of 189 designers are added each month - requires a massive scouting operation around the world (indeed, we asked NJAL for a long-list for this issue's edit of graduate fashion talent, see page 081). Many pieces offered are limited runs, and customers can often e-mail designers directly. The site also offers designers directories of stores, manufacturers and photographers. www.notjustalabel.com

CASHING IN

Above, seeing an idea through from conception to point of sale is all part of the new learning curve



For more about Not Just A Label (see box) and our collaboration to select the fashion talent for this year's Graduate Directory, see Wallpaper.com