

**The Best**

**Art School**

**Is a**

**Warm Room**

**Night School, London (2010–11)**  
**Fairfield International, Suffolk (unrealized)**  
**Solid House, Suffolk (2017–)**

Ryan Gander is a prolific inventor of worlds that are possible, parallel, and fictional. He once produced a faux government billboard campaign called “Imagineering,” with the strapline: “Daydreamers wanted.” Several years ago, working with collaborator Simon Turnbull, Ryan conceived of a residential art school near to where he lives in Suffolk, to be housed in an abandoned Victorian school and called Fairfield International. Why? To take some of the phrases that flash upon Fairfield’s website: “Because things are falling to bits around us”; “Because you want to make art more than you want to be an artist”; “Because time and space is your currency.”

The Fairfield International project was, for a number reasons, not ultimately realized. We spoke via Skype in May 2015, five days after the general election had resulted in the first Conservative majority since 1992. Ryan was in his white-tiled studio in Leiston, Suffolk, with a number of assistants moving quietly around in the background. The mood was somewhat somber, as he talked about his own experiences of graduate programs in the Netherlands, why he wanted to set up a residential art school, and the challenges he has encountered along the way.

**Ryan Gander**

**Several years ago, I remember you saying you wanted Fairfield International to be a hybrid of a residency and a Dutch art academy. What were your experiences of studying in the Netherlands?**

I was at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht from 1999 to 2001, and then the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam from 2002 to 2004. I didn’t get into any art colleges in London, so it was essentially the only option I had. Very soon I realized that these opportunities are all the same—it doesn’t matter if it’s in Anglesea or New York City. Having some time and some space to be able to be an artist is the only thing.

Ambition makes good artists. Not ambition to be famous or recognized or have money, but ambition to contribute to art history, to make work that gets recorded and kept safe. At the time, there was a different kind of ambition in London, the kind that I thought I needed. But by happenstance I ended up in Holland, where people aren’t that into being famous artists. It’s not the same culture as in Britain. In Holland, artists are very art/society—artists there are like postmen or something. Being an artist is a very everyday occurrence. Not so much now, because the Dutch government is different. But back then it was part of the makeup of society.

I liked the idea that you could be someone who liked making art, and you knew you’d only be good at making art if you practiced at it. My mum always said I was really lucky because I got paid for doing my hobby, and she wished she got paid for doing family history or embroidery. She’s got a point. Art is a very privileged thing to do, and if you can just do that—not teach or have another job—then you’re super lucky.

**When you talked about artists playing a social role, it made me think of Night School, the monthly series of talks you ran out of your studio in East London.**

Do you remember that BBC program *Why Don’t You?* from the ’80s? “Why don’t you start a lemonade stall?” It was that ’80s kind of entrepreneurial spirit, but not to make money—just to be interesting and to be interested. Because I was renting a studio space that wasn’t used in the evenings, it seemed to make sense that we spent a couple of hours putting away all of the desks and computers and just did something else for fun.

It was massively enjoyable and really popular. We had all sorts of lectures and activities, like card tournaments, and film

screenings by a vast range of people: artists like Cory Arcangel, David Batchelor, and Elizabeth Price; performances by people like Maki Suzuki; Q and As with Ethan Wagner and Thea Westreich; even a cookery school by Martino Gamper.

Night School lasted for a year or so, and then moved to the ICA for six months. By that point, the studio was getting full of work, and there were five people working there, so we'd all have to stop at lunchtime to put stuff away. It was taking about five days of man-hours, and then you'd have to clean up the beer the next day. We thought for a while about getting the railway arch next door, but it was too expensive. There was no point in charging for something like that to pay for it—well, that's what art schools are. It wasn't meant to be an art school; that was the whole point.

**Even when something is monthly, it generates so much work. A lot of smaller-scale projects only last for a short amount of time.**

People get tired. There's something in the human psyche that really likes new things. Excitement only lasts for a year or so. Last night I was watching a documentary on Nirvana. They were so good *because* they stopped. They'd probably be shit if they were still around now.

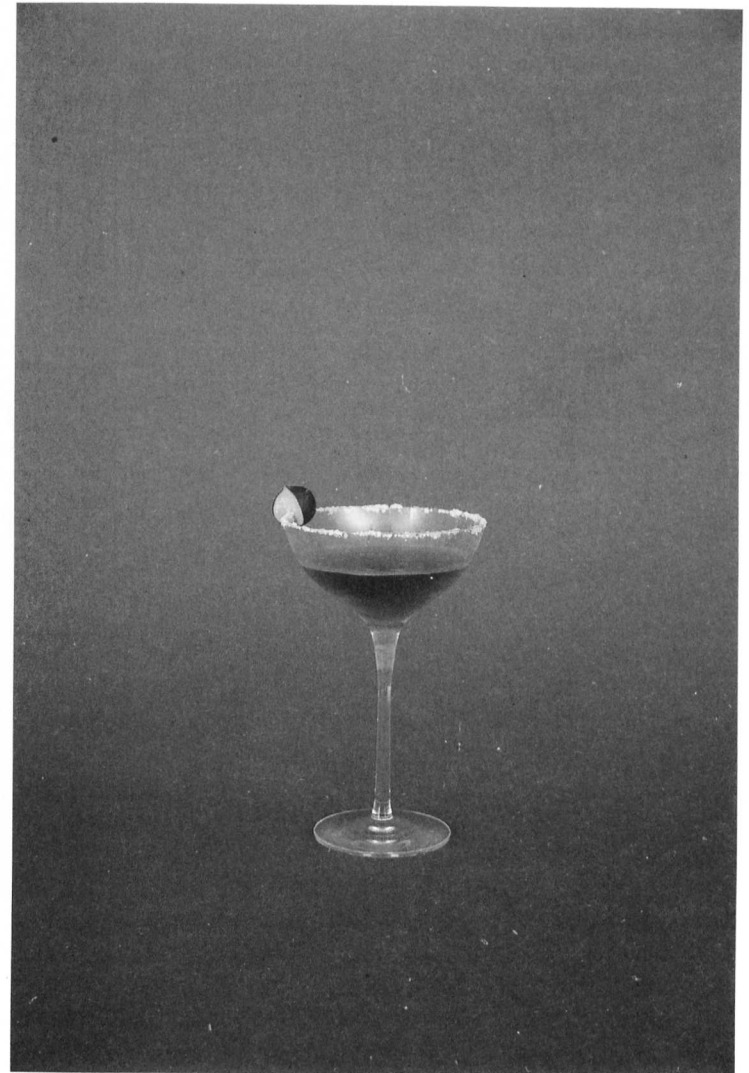
**What was your main motivation for trying to set up an art school?**

I see loads of young artists who could be really, really brilliant, but who are not in a position to participate at all. It's a financial thing. They have a really strong work ethic, they're talented and interesting, they have a really alternative perspective on things, they're developing their own language, and they work in a market in Birkenhead selling rugs, or in Birmingham in a mobile phone shop, or whatever. It's really fucking annoying when there are artists who dress like dealers who have loads of money and no ideas.

**What was the initial ambition for Fairfield International?**

It started with a building, really. Development and education have always been a massive theme of my practice. For example, I'd designed art schools architecturally and structurally before as artworks. I'd also written a postgraduate course for Amsterdam University, their first PhD in Visual Language, though that never transpired.

Then, a few years ago, Rebecca and Olive saw this school in Saxmundham.<sup>1</sup> Rebecca said, "You should buy it and turn it into an art school—it's been empty for ages." And I said, "That's a great idea."



*The Fairfield International, 2013, a cocktail created by Ryan Gander and Simon Turnbull*

### How many students did you plan to have?

Six at a time every five and a half months. So twelve in a year.

### What shaped that approach?

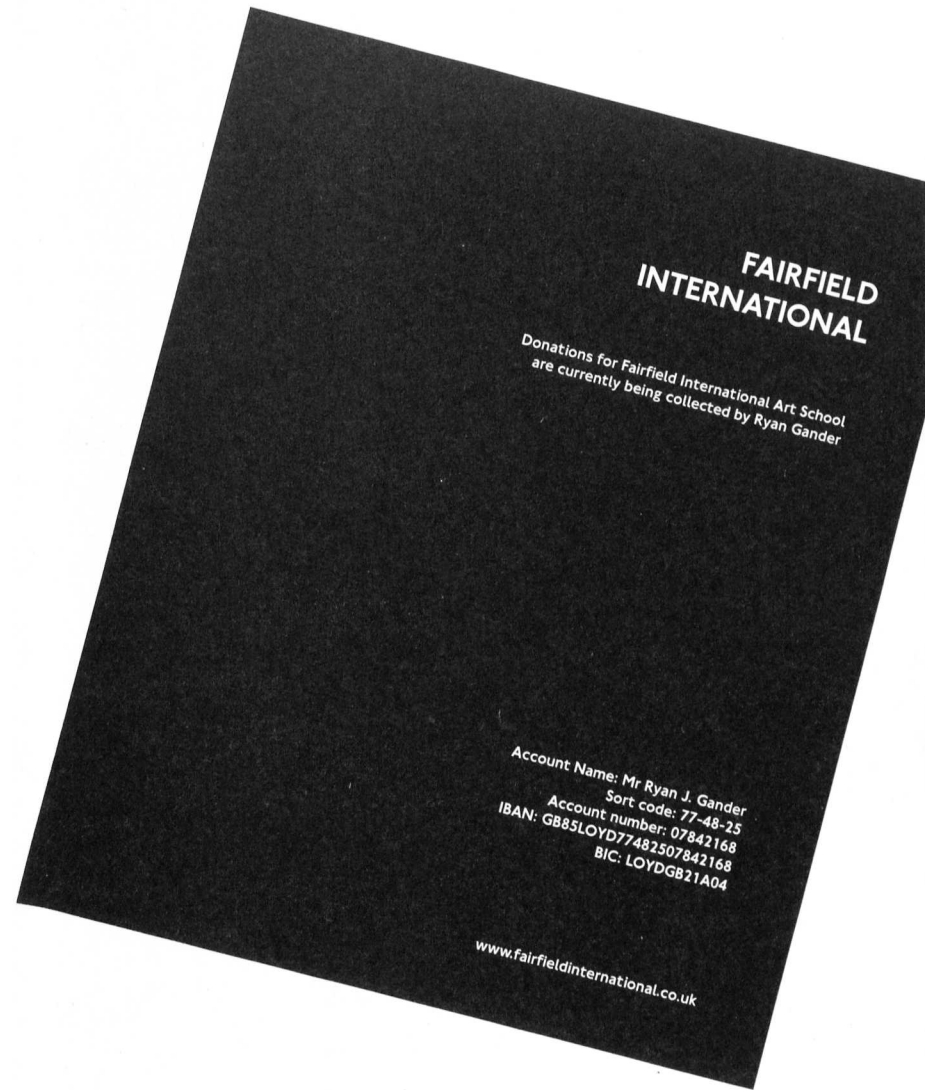
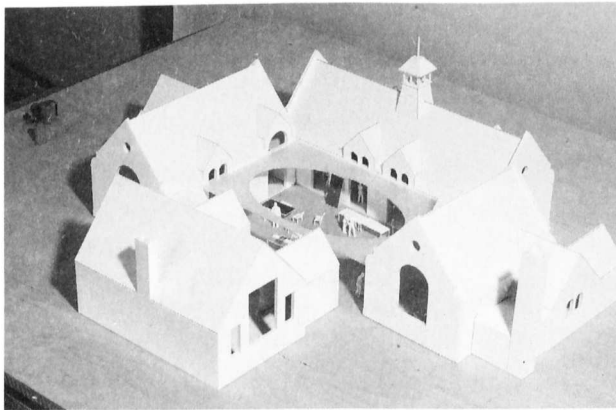
The building, but also because the structure had to be so official, and I don't think you could have had any fewer. It wouldn't have been self-sufficient or sustainable with less than six, because of the cost of the building and employees to run it. But also because Saxmundham is a tiny town with nothing to do, so you'd need that many people so you didn't get cabin fever. Saying that, the distance from London, and the capacity to concentrate, is one of the things I am attracted to, both for me and other artists.

### What state was the building in when Rebecca first saw it?

It was an old Victorian red brick: high windows, pitched roofs, three or four buildings on an acre and a half of land. It had been derelict for fifteen years. It seemed really simple because no one wanted it and it was owned by the county council.

To start with, we did some lunches and invited different people to come and give some ideas. We thought maybe it was a rubbish idea, but people seemed quite enthusiastic. There was lots of criticism in different areas, at that stage, and we changed the plan a lot. Interestingly, Sarah Lucas said two things in those initial meetings. The first was, "I thought you were just going to buy it and make a huge studio for yourself." And then the other thing she said was, "Instead of building it with money, build it with bricks." Which at the time I thought was a really naive thing to say, but now I actually understand what she was on about. I didn't understand at the time.

A model of Fairfield International



## FAIRFIELD INTERNATIONAL

Donations for Fairfield International Art School are currently being collected by Ryan Gander

Account Name: Mr Ryan J. Gander  
Sort code: 77-48-25  
Account number: 07842168  
IBAN: GB85LOYD77482507842168  
BIC: LOYDGB21A04

[www.fairfieldinternational.co.uk](http://www.fairfieldinternational.co.uk)

An advert for Fairfield International published in the *New York Times*, September 2014

# because a warm room is better than a cold one

But then it turns into a really sad story. We got two guys who were going to buy it, with the idea that when we'd raised the money to build it, we'd pay them back. Or that if it was operational at that point, they'd let the debt go and they'd be benefactors. That was all worked out, and they were really good people. About four or five months ago, we were just about to sign but the council had put in an extra clause. It was a covenant for twenty-five years stating that the building could only be used for the purposes of an art school. That was fine, because that's what we wanted to do. But the people who were buying it didn't want that covenant, because if the art school didn't work then they couldn't sell the building on. The council knew that we couldn't go ahead with this covenant, so it didn't happen.

## **That whole process sounds exhausting ...**

I'm a firm believer in letting the world take a turn, just stepping back and seeing what happens. Sometimes you have ideas and the world sorts them out, whether or not they're needed. The world is a great sieve for sorting out what it does and doesn't need. Usually things take place from the bottom up, because they're really needed, and it's obviously a time when these things are really needed. That wasn't the case fifteen years ago because people went to art college and they signed on. The Dutch had a *Staatsstipendium*, but we had unemployment benefits, which was our own type of that. Everything takes its own course.

## **So what happens next for the art school project?**

We had a big rethink. I decided that I didn't want the money from these two people. Instead, Rebecca and I decided we'd sell our house and buy a site that was for sale in Melton, which is just on the outskirts of Woodbridge [about fifteen miles from Ryan's current studio in Suffolk]. It's a complex with a doctor's surgery, a registry office, a sports hall/leisure center, an electrics factory. It's one complete thing, with a car park with about forty spaces and a little wooded area. It's good. Really horrible 1980s/'90s architecture: brown with a red stripe.

We were about to exchange contracts and then the local parish council decided that they didn't want an artist there who was going to have three residency studios, employ three people, and do workshops and lectures and a summer symposium in a gallery ... They decided they wanted it for a sports

*Opposite and overleaf: Screenshots of quotes from the Fairfield International holding page*

center, but they only wanted 20 percent of the site. So they asked the county council to put an asset of community value order on the building.

**What does that mean?**

It means that I can't buy it. That all happened about three weeks ago. If we were in Manchester the whole process of setting up an art school would have taken about two months.

**I remember talking to you before about the benefits of the rural context. But what you've sketched out is the more pernicious, cynical side of that.**

One irony is that this is exactly why Suffolk is so beautiful and unspoiled, with no motorways, and why everything feels so remote. Suffolk is cut off because the people who live and govern here are kind of narrow-minded. But there's a team of very talented solicitors, arguing for the asset of community value, so we'll see.

**How have your ideas for this new school shifted from you earlier plans for Fairfield International?**

The change is that I got worn out of the idea of being financially indebted to someone else. It was becoming very clear that if someone bought this building we were in debt to them. Like Open School East, where Anna [Anna Colin, the co-director] has said that the problem is not being indebted financially, but in the amount of energy spent in telling the funders what's going on. Then you end up spending money on someone who just does that. The admin becomes self-fulfilling.

If you pay for it yourself, though, you're not then answerable to anyone. That way it can be exactly what you want, even though it would be downsized. With this new site, the plan was that in the front half of the building there would be an industrial kitchen, a dining room, a big open studio for us to work, and I'd have a small atelier at the side that was private. The back two-thirds of the big building would be a gallery, a kitchen, and a packing space. And then the back would be a woodwork shop, sound-recording studio, additional gallery/project space, and a bar, kitchen, three studios with bedrooms, kitchenettes, and bathrooms on mezzanines. So we'd have three participants at a time. The doctor's surgery across the car park is a little bungalow and that's where Rebecca, I, and the girls would live.

The site would be really good because it's got solar panels on the roof, where the artist studios would be. And they'd have raised enough money, selling the power back to the grid, to

because time and  
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currency

give each of the artists a maintenance grant. So there's kind of a nice metaphor for the whole idea, because sunlight paid for them to make art in a weird way. But my big journey over the last three years has been: It doesn't need to be frosted glass anymore. It can be plywood. It can be a shed! I don't give a shit.

### **Who would those students be?**

Originally, with Fairfield International, we planned to have a selection committee. But essentially, for the new project it would be whomever I'd met I thought was good, while at the same time adopting the principles of potential and financial need.

With Fairfield we had this idea that we'd have "scouts." From my experience of selections you shouldn't take open submissions too seriously, because you often get people who don't need the opportunity or who never come—they just want to be associated with it. Also, you find artists who, when they send in pictures, there's one really amazing work. You think they're really good, but as we know being an artist isn't about making one really good work. It's about having an interesting, sustainable practice that's also peppered with shit works. That's what makes a good artist.

The scout idea was to have people in different countries who'd ring in and say, "There's this guy ..." I mean, we don't actually really need it. I've got this list of about fifty people now who I'd love to call and say, "I've got this place, come and stay and make some work for six months."

### **I like the idea of a scout system being used at a sports center.**

Yeah, like baseball scouts! I hadn't thought of that.

### **Who would be teaching?**

There wouldn't be any teaching. There would be visitors because there are always visitors here anyway. With Fairfield, though, it was an open syllabus where people would choose to do whatever they wanted. Whoever would be invited to come would be invited for dinner, rather than to teach. Whatever they decided to do in the day would be whatever naturally happened in the day. It was almost like an anti-academia, a not-holding-hands-with-academia sort of thing.

**That was one of our ideas with Open School East. That you could put a lot of emphasis on lunches and dinners. Like you, we started it with dinners to see if people thought the project was a good idea. But all those bits around the crits or workshops, getting a coffee or going to the pub, is often where the more interesting conversations can happen.**

For me, that was most of what I learned when I was "officially" learning. For example, Charles Esche would come to the Rijksakademie. We'd do a studio visit and I'd be terrified. Later, because I'm English, he'd say, "I'm staying in this hotel around the corner, do you want to go watch the football?" And then Charles started talking about art, and I'd learn a million times more than in the studio visit.

It's the big problem with the elitism of spectatorship. People who aren't learned in the arts feel like they're going to be humiliated because they don't understand. If you take away that fear of not knowing, then you're left with someone who is like a kid, who says exactly what they see, and they're usually right in what they say. Sitting down with food when you're drunk is about taking away boundaries. No one's going to judge you.

**There's a line in your work *Culturefield* (2014) that describes it as "an imaginary place invented by the artist to explain a perfect space for research and creative discussion." Finding a building that would fulfill some of those things sounds a lot like what you're wanting to move toward.**

During the '90s and early noughties, there was this weird obsession with the studio-less practice. I always found it a bit daft when artists would say, "Oh I just make art from my phone and the Yellow Pages," "I work on my laptop," or "I live in Berlin and Maui and London ..." I never understood or appreciated that kind of mentality, because my practice is physically bound. A building is a good foundation to start learning from. So for me, the motivation is to find a building, one that I can leave behind as well—a place where developing and learning can continue for whomever's there and not just me.

**Are there any schools, whether past or present, that have been particularly interesting for you?**

I think it was Claes Oldenburg who said, "The best art school is a warm room." You don't need anything really, even tutors. You just need to be in a place where you have space and time, where you can just have other people around you making art. Nothing exists in isolation, does it? For me, a warm room; that's the ideal.

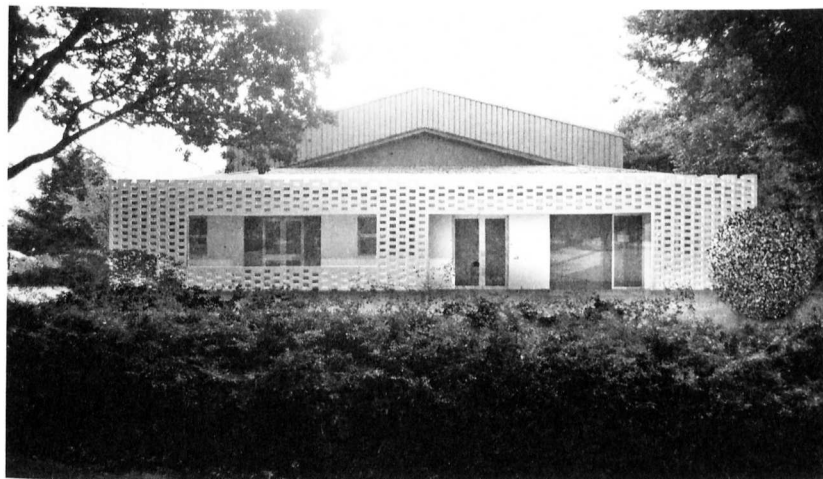
<sup>1</sup> Rebecca May Marston ran Limoncello gallery in London and is married to Ryan. Saxmundham is the town in Suffolk where they live, and Olive is their eldest daughter.

Fairfield International doesn't exist as it was planned, but like all great creative endeavours it was a matter of process. We expected it to take a concrete form but all along it was a state of permanent optimism, ambition and enthusiasm.

What I learnt from the project is that you can let things happen organically, finally arriving at the same projected point, but in a totally different way. Really, the idea of Fairfield International followed all the historical conventions of what we know art schools to be. It could easily have been absorbed by that, finally becoming a staid cliché. That's not a desirable alternative. In the meantime, I've bought a building myself which will house an informal, sporadic, spastic form of art school, one with no schooling whatsoever. A school of hard knocks. Solid House—the name is a near anagram of its former name, Lindos, after the former owners' favourite Greek town—will be my studio, workshop and gallery, and in the loft space the builders are currently constructing three apartments for residency artists.

My change in ethic has changed with the buildings. The Victorian building felt very formal: dot the i's, cross the t's, use letterhead papers, these are the benefactors, we are an institution, which becomes the machine of applying for Arts Council funding. Solid House is ridiculous. It's so free and open and uncool, and so not ironic. It embodies precisely the idea that the only things that matter are the actions that take place in it.

Most of the time it'll be for me to view and photograph my work. Once or twice a year, there'll be exhibitions. I also thought I'd organize summer symposia with artists present: have a big show, talks, screenings, and big dinners. People can camp. It'll happen organically and sporadically, certainly not as formally as we initially thought Fairfield International should be. For me a studio is a place where anything can happen. Alongside money, the greatest enabler of possibility is people.



Architectural renderings of Solid House, Suffolk:  
*above:* Interior view of studio space;  
*below:* Exterior view of office with customized brick screen