In A Class of Their Own

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"Over the last thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is reasonable to expect that everything, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. As any number of theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of the 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible attainable."

Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism

The incomprehensiveness of art education

John Beagles

"The incomprehensiveness of art education, the incomprehensiveness of art schools (and perhaps also of wider culture that it informs, as it must make what was previously deemed to be 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as intrinsic to art school culture, pedagogy and by extension the creation of wider culture that it informs."

Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics in its familiar state of permanent liberalism and managerialism.

In recent years it’s been fashionable, with some justification, to accuse critics of resorting to crude economic determinism when discussing culture and education. However, the consequences of massively increasing tuition fees and by extension student debt, especially in the humanities, will, if they go ahead unchallenged, result in the most unsustainable. The idea that this is simply how it is – as numerous voices stated, the accession of late neoliberal ideology upon state funded 'public' university education – aka 'corporate pedagogy'. As numerous voices stated, the accession of this cast-as-technocratic market rationalism (managerialism) is creating a dysfunctional relationship between student and tutor, one which is more akin to that of consumer/customer and 'knowledge provider'. This reciprocal commercial relationship is further muddled, because, as Fisher has written, ‘it’s never too clear if the students are the consumers or the actual products being produced’.

While the magazine pages and websites of art publications (even Frieze ran with a similar ‘debate’) were consumed with a largely inadequate perception of art school’s future, other critical voices in the sector were less vociferous in tone, keener to stay away from too much overt discussion of the politics of policy – involvement in social issues often came across as being beneath many. However, this work was similarly underpinned by a shared sense of emergency. In books such as ‘Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)’ and ‘A.C.A.D.E.M.Y’, contributors proposed how art schools could and should respond to the shifting function of art in a world dominated by Fisher’s pervasive business ontology. The talk was of alternatives to existing models. In articles by educators such as Yve Lomax, Simon O’Sullivan, and Irit Rogoff, the focus was less on respoding to economic and policy assaults and more on trying to identify the possibilities and potentialities of developing radically new forms of and locations for art education. Against the instrumentalism and resultant specialisation of market driven aesthetics, they proposed alternative practices that develop ‘embedded criticality’, ‘non teleological epistemologies’, and ‘problem based learning’. The danger of this approach lies in what methodology skills are learned, namely any assessment of where we are and how to get somewhere else. Rather, it tends to simply ‘wish’ us out of ‘crisis’ while acquiescing to the imperatives of ‘now’, as witnessed by the sudden Big Society-oriented academic research interest in ‘co-operatives’.

The pervasive sense of crisis that saturated these different responses continues to be hard to dispute. While it’s difficult to contemplate the rather self-serving mythologising of a Halcyon period of ‘free and open zones of experimentation’ which often underpins defences of art school values (and perhaps secures its conservation), this doesn’t invalidate the anger prompted by the application to education of neo-liberal ideology and its beliefs in market liberalism and managerialism.

However, while signs of the pathogens infecting the system were hard to ignore, there was a problem in the focus on the reasons for the breakdown. Reading the varied discussions, the defences and alternatives felt hampered in their potential by a blind spot. The majority of these exchanges paid insufficient attention to the ongoing, but now it seems exponentially increasing, problem of class exclusion within art schools and the resultant rise of a homogeneous student body. This is an old story but it’s clearly getting worse and will continue to do so – not least due to tuition fee increases and ‘globalisation’ representing the imposition of this neoliberal ideology on a transnational scale. The consequences of this are dire, and not just for art schools. The one solution I can see – as a practicing artist and tutor – is a renewed, reimagined, core insertion of comprehensive education values as absolutely essential. To be clear, this isn’t just about economics, or questions of diversity, or core values of universal access based on fairness and equality. As fundamental as these are, the assertion here is that a diverse, comprehensive mix of students is absolutely intrinsic to school culture, pedagogy and by extension the creation of wider culture that it informs.

Art for a few

The one ‘selecting’ institution that readily agreed to participate did so at the insistence of a senior manager who was concerned that their admissions tutors were ‘trying to make everyone middle class’.

‘Art for a Few’, National Art Learning Network

NALN’s recent report, ‘Art for a Few’, reaffirmed that for art school education issues pertaining to the lack of social diversity are still central; identifying problems relating to continuing overt and covert exclusion (non selection) of students from ‘outside’ the dominant middle class strata. As the report remarks, ‘the art academy has a deeply embedded, institutionalised class and ethnically biased notion of a highly idealized student against whom they measure students’. While there are many programmes run by national organisations aimed directly at widening the intake of students from outside the ‘normal’ or ‘usual’ selection pools (the report highlights how some tutors refer disparagingly to students as WPs, aka Widening Participation Students), profound problems still persist.

The report’s figures (based on those provided by UCAS) state that those students classified as coming from the lower socio-economic classes (referred to as SEC 4/7s) which range from those in routine occupations to small employers in Fine Art represent 24-33% of the whole student population (these figures refer to the period between 2004/5 - 2007/8, and compares to 32.4% for all HE students in the UK coming from households classified as SEC 4/7s). As this is a mean average, this figure needs to be digested with some skepticism. Fluctuations between geographical areas and schools suggest a far more pronounced spiking of those statistics at some schools. For instance, some controversy surrounded this question of class composition in relation to Glasgow School of Art – in 2002 a Guardian article ran with the headline ‘Glasgow “posher” than Oxbridge’, while a Wikipedia entry in 2008, stating that its class diversity was the third worst in the UK after Oxford and Cambridge, provoked a principled defence of the school’s record on inclusion. While the figures that prompted these articles on the alleged elitism (which related to a 2002 report) were flatly disputed, with some justification, they do point to possible fluctuations within the figure of 24-33% inclusion. For instance, the mean average figures are undoubtedly upwardly skewed by the much higher than average composition of SEC 4/7 category students (working class students) at schools such as Wolverhampton and Sheffield.

The Good Student and the Consensual Idyll

‘Art for a Few’ evidenced how the sample art schools’ admissions procedures were formally and informally prejudiced against students from outside the usual spheres of selection (the...
Qualifications are identified as being a further emphasis on academic qualifications as another makes clear, “judged from a white, middle class about the right type of student. Notions of then revolves around naturalised assumptions misrecognitions and complex power relations.”

In histories of classed and racialised inequalities/schools, something which isn’t being flagged up by groups of distinct students, operates within art school in a way in which students from the SEC 4/7 category are prejudiced against. High quality academic qualifications are identified as being a further privilege. Many of these figures are biassed ideas of effective signs of intelligence – which seem natural and innate are partial and class centric.19

Once they are in...

What the report makes clear is how art schools at the point of selection continue to play an active role in perpetuating class-based inequalities between generations (i.e. people from the same backgrounds become artists). For Bourdieu, a key factor is that this cultural reproduction frequently occurs despite the best efforts of those involved in education – exclusion operates often as a result of hidden assumptions on the part of educators. The mechanisms of cultural reproduction don’t just begin and end at the point of selection. The perhaps thornier question is what kind of experiences those “lucky enough to get in”to art school from outside the usual territories have once they’ve crossed the threshold?

If, as ‘Art for a Few’ reports, there are in many art schools explicit class centrist assumptions regarding what kind of applicants will make the best future art students, it’s logical that these assumptions (biases) continue to operate with regard to the kind of teaching that occurs within those very same institutions and the kind of education experiences students from the SEC 4/7 groups can expect to experience. The nature of these experiences may well be more difficult to ascertain or ‘prove’, but if the model of the ‘good student’ is a pervasive model, it does seem reasonable to assume that those same internalised categories for grading and assessing students at the point of entry continue to operate internally within the pedagogic culture of the schools.

It’s a shame that the NALN report didn’t explore this further. Issues over inclusion at the point of selection are perhaps better known. However, observing these students’ experiences once in art school are more problematic. For instance, researching the social background of students who drop out of art school would be significant. This kind of research might highlight how even in schools where SEC 4/7 inclusion rates are high, problems of self-exclusion and the equally problematic one of ghettoisation are high, both as a result of implicit and explicit pedagogic practices. As Bourdieu’s analysis shows, the most effective means of cultural reproduction is the generation of the feeling (‘habitus’) that ‘that’s not for me’. The worry is the distinct possibility that in culture, with clusters/pocket groups of distinct students, operates within art schools, something which isn’t being flagged up by statistics of inclusion and diversity.

Too Obvious

Within any discussion of exclusion and the need for embedding of comprehensive values within art school culture lies, as detailed in the NALN report, the thorny question of class division, hierarchies and exclusion. The problem of focusing on this issue of class and exclusion within art education is ‘difficult’. Not least because talking about class more broadly is in itself a deeply troubling thing for many to do. Firstly because, as David Harvey has written about at length, there is a pervasive, ideological issue today in discussing class at all. He notes: “Progressives of all stripes seem to have caved in to Neoliberal thinking that since it is one of the primary fictions of Neoliberalism that class is a fictional category that exists only in the imagination of socialists and crypto-communists. The first lesson we must learn, therefore, is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is. The mass of the population has either to resign itself to the historical and geographical trajectory defined by overwhelming and ever increasing upper class power, or respond to it in class terms.”

Elsewhere, Harvey goes on to discuss this ideological sleight of hand in greater detail. The idea of a classless society or the notion that class distinctions are no longer applicable is itself an ideological construct. Few would dispute, and Harvey doesn’t himself, that traditional, simplistic divisions of society into working, middle and upper class are no longer appropriate – for one they fail to take into account the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality – but to extrapolate and state as many do that class issues have disappeared is at best delusional and at worst ideologically self serving. The statistics Harvey uses to show how much richer the rich have got during the last thirty years are stark.21

While Harvey and others identify this naturalising of class inequality and class power as the central, pivotal achievement of the neoliberal project during the last forty years, there has been a far longer silence in the art world as regards class, and it remains the elephant in the room. Rarely does it make any kind of substantive appearance. Although the collaborative group Bank made numerous, highly entertaining excursions into this territory in the mid 1990s, it has generally remained the guilty liberal secret that has propelled many well intentioned participatory practices and socially inclusive public art works. Unfortunately, this ‘traditional’ often embarrassed, guilt-ridden silence that dominates within the art world now, is a matter of urgency, to be broken within the spaces of education.

To Be Comprehensively rewritten (out of history)

Predictably, following Milton Friedman’s and the Chicago boys’ credo, it is every day clearer that ‘crisis opportunities’ are being manipulated and

the UK’s current Conservative/ Liberal coalition government is implementing Klein’s ‘shock doctrine’. Within the sphere of state education, as many Tories have been gleefully pleased to announce, the opportunities for Conservatives to further privatise are the ones set up for them by the previous Labour government. Education secretary Michael Gove22 recently announced plans for schools in England to opt out of Local Authority control point to this – thus green lighting the perennial Tory dream of finally demolishing the state supported comprehensive system. After years of ‘softening up’ by both Tories and New Labour, the comprehensive system, like the health service, is sufficiently on its knees that the ‘sound logic’ of the necessity of applying ‘business ontology’ to education seems likely to be passed without significant parliamentary opposition – who, after all, is there to oppose it?

It is clear to most that this legislation, coupled with what is already known as the postcode lottery22, will result in the effective privatisation of the state education system. With a certain historical irony, a moment of crisis is being used to implement legislation that will reverse a previous moment of crisis legislation – which was after all what the Keynesian welfare state emerged from. The consequences will effectively plunge us back to a pre-welfare state, an explicit hierarchical division of education. For an ideology that finds abhorrent the very notion of anything public and outwith (seemingly) the logic of profit, the situation looks perilous. Writing from the context of US education, Henry A Giroux’s analysis is prescient: “Public schools are under attack not because they are failing or are inefficient, but because they are public, an unwanted reminder of a public sphere and set of institutions whose purpose is to serve the common good and promote democratic ends.”23

We are then faced with a pivotal moment, one where the very idea of public subsidised free universal comprehensive education is in danger of being erased from the imagination as a popular viable ideal. The Conservative assault is hardly surprising, but is exacerbated by the manner in which this conception has been internalised and accepted widely across society – the ‘natural impossibility’ of a comprehensive system owes its success to a similar ideological sleight of hand deployed when (not) discussing class.

Faced with this moment, it is clear to me that issues about exclusion need to be equally embedded alongside all curricula and pedagogic innovation. It is no longer forgivable or strategically appropriate to regard them as appendices to be dealt with by external WP programmes. Tackling exclusion and transforming the culture of art schools are two inextricable sides of the same coin.

Focusing on issues about student satisfaction, or criteria of the latest evaluation regime of Higher Education, resources, or alternatively suggesting the creation of independent small scale artist-run...
Fraser and Nina Power have recently written by an ‘entrepreneurism’ of the self – finds project or dimension to education – body snatched by neoliberal dogma. The loss of an emancipatory pedagogic vacuum within art education since filled power and control is a good thing, it has created a always been hampered by its epistemological particular problem for art education, as it has vague, intangible and contradictory. This is a the public interest which that principle is meant to defend culture from government, and there’s been no ‘big idea’ to get behind – e.g. key of ideological debates that could distinguish has been a similar failure of the imagination to education sector too. Just as the Left has largely been failing in popularising a set of alternative values (Simmel’s regards that only reproduces as fundamental a problem of naming)\(^2\)), within art education there has been a similar failure of the imagination to express opinions of core. The sort of ideological debates that could distinguish between liberalism and democracy. Consequently, there’s been no ‘big idea’ to get behind – e.g. key values such as the means to defend culture from government, and the public interest which that principle is meant to protect – just an increasingly confused, often tribal, partisan defence of something frequently vague, intangible and contradictory. This is a particular problem for art education, as it has always been hampered by its epistemological instability, something that since the breakdown of rigid Modernist certainties has increased. While this loss of an authoritative power and control is a good thing, it has created a pedagogic vacuum within art education since filled by a range of satisficing projects that reproduce an emancipatory project or dimension to education – body snatched by an ‘entrepreneurism’ of the self – finds echoes in other areas. For example, both Nancy Fraser and Power have recently written about the depressing consequences for Feminism of a similar decoupling of its radical politics, or as Fraser puts it, Feminism’s ‘emancipatory edge’\(^3\) from its everyday practice, as a result of neoliberalism’s ‘granting of its demands. As Power pithily remarks; “striped of any internationalist and political quality, feminism becomes about as radical as a diamante phone cover.”\(^4\) The fundamental differences here centre on the sort of democratic society one believes in: a technocratic and managerial one, mainly geared towards supporting freedoms of expression hedged within consumerism, or one geared towards freedoms and equalities in public discourse as a whole.

### ‘Interesting things happen in art schools because of an interesting mix of students’

While a publicly stated commitment to the ideals of multicultural education, to directly confront issues related to class exclusion as being vital to the production of artistic culture, may be read as archaic, an example of one of Žižek’s “lost causes”, it’s telling how frequently in a sublimated form the ‘ideals’ of comprehensive education haunt contemporary discussions about art school and the future of art education.

In Steven Madoff’s ‘Art School Propositions for the 21st century’ there is, for example, a text by Boris Groys entitled ‘Education by infection’. Groys examines the challenges faced by educators teaching in a post-postmodern “free for all”\(^5\) culture, where no one tradition dominates. In this new pedagogic space, he writes, “just as art after Duchamp can be anything, so art education can be anything”. Groys’ “solution” for how art education can be reinvigorated uses an idea coined by Malevich, namely the “trope of biological evolution.” Adopting Malevich’s work, Groys discusses how artists (and art students within the confines of an art school) need to modify their immunological system of their art in order to incorporate new aesthetic bacilli.\(^6\) For Groys, this means artists/students/educators opening themselves up to distinctly different forms of work, experiences, subjectivities and identities. Groys states that this was an essential aspect of progressive modernism that needs to be reaffirmed and grasped: “radical modern art proposed that artists get themselves infected with exteriority (and) become sick through the contagions of the outside world, and become an outsider to oneself.”\(^7\) (There is not scope here to also critique the pathologising of communion in Groys’ motif.) For Groys, this is essential for the production of art that avoids the kind of stagnation and status favoured by “sincere artists”. Sincere artists, in Groys’ analysis, are dull and powerless, because by being sincere they follow a repetitious programme – who those favour ‘risk and experiment’? – fundamentally predicated on openness. This is, for Groys, the essential characteristic feature of art schools’ “modernist inheritance”. An inheritance that favours the revelation of “the other within oneself”, and asks the student to become ‘other’ – “to become infected by Otherness”.\(^8\)

In another context, Iain Biggs in his article ‘Art Education and the Radical imagination’ makes similar claims to Groys’ for the need to assert the importance of inter-relatedness (‘cross pollination of students’) within education. Biggs talks about the pedagogic forms needed to embrace the “reanimating of alternative narratives, based on values inherent in alternative histories and memories” which are distinct to the student that validates by the new establishment. That only by turning away from the competitive, market driven, unethical mode of being in art school (heroic individualism and the progressive careerist model) can we reimagined notion of art school – as being both an ethical, and, more practically, a structural necessity for the informing of artists and art – should also be best understood as part of the bigger problem now facing those who used to, once upon a time, refer to themselves as being of the Left. The problem is the familiar inability\(^9\) to popularise a seductive, imaginative alternative to the bankrupt values of our consumerist-capitalist entertainment-network, which permeates the art education sector too.

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By Biggs, the shift away from the competitive, career orientated individualism, dominant in much academia including art education, towards what he calls an “ethical imagination” – a capacity for imaginative empathy – is “fundamental to any just society”; “it makes possible our ability to allow the ‘other’ its own existence – not for my sake, nor because it conforms to my scheme of things, but for its own sake”. The fact is that experience of the other is now frequently pedagogically manufactured as a segregated curriculum activity – students or artists sent out on field trips to carry out research into what ‘non-art people’ are like. And this is the problem – the extent to which multiculturalism in practice fails to involve interculturalism. If ‘contact with the alien’ or ‘other’ is only ever temporary and structurally prescribed, the kind of interrelatedness, ‘infection’ and ‘ethical imagination’ argued for will at best only ever be transitory. Where art education has, all too briefly, ‘worked’\(^10\), the mutual interrelatedness that Groys talks about as being essential for the infection of the artist with foreign bacilli in art education ecology, not as a bolted on arranged trip to ‘foreign lands’ or manufactured introductions to ‘exotic others’. In an education system that is comprehensive, these experiences of being challenged and opened up to foreign subjectivities and identities that contradict who or what you are, and which are frequently antagonistic to our position, is structurally integrated into the fabric of the pedagogy. This bringing together of distinct identities produces the opposite to an “idyll of consensus”\(^11\) (a homogenized space of agreement) which is, as the statistics indicate, becoming increasingly common within schools purified of ‘infections’ and ‘others’.

### Missed critiques of multiculturalism

New Labour posted multiculturalism’s ‘cultural diversity’ as an innocuous competition of peers, rather than an unequal struggle, writing over inscriptions of inequality and conflict. However, behind the egalitarian rhetoric, issues of inclusion and control were obscured by talking as if all cultures were distinct and equal. A central issue in the politics of multiculturalism has been its ability to simultaneously recognise and disavow difference – political turmoil has instead been defined as the result of failed communication. Under new Labour, institutions were increasingly valued for their multicultural credentials – who benefitted from the use of multiculturalism as a signifier of institutional value when institutional statements of multicultural purpose have not evidently resulted in tangible changes in staffing or pedagogic practice?

**Prag Patel:** “Sure. And what’s happened in education in the last decade is just a kind of liberal multiculturalism. There’s been no actual antiracism, just ‘recognising diversity’ it’s different religious festivals – a lesson on how not to tackle racism in schools. One main finding was that the kind of antiracism schools espoused was dogmatic and moralistic with an air of superiority that was very dangerous. One thing I find frustrating is that the media are discussing these issues in such a compartmentalised...
way. There’s no attempt to link economics or social deprivation with racism, for instance... But this is not my idea of a civil rights movement. If race is the only focus there’s a danger of returning to a hierarchy of oppressions, whereas my experience is that one has to deal with things simultaneously.24

As Homi Bhabha states: “To question the deployment of ‘difference’ as a counter to the negatively perceived ‘totalisation’, is not to deny the fecundity of a notion which insists on subjectivity as polymorphic, community as heterogeneous, social formations as mutable and culture as vagrant. It is to recognise that ‘difference’ has been diverted by a postmodernist criticism as a theoretical tuse to establish a neutral, ideology-free zone from which the social distinction and political contest inscribed in the protagonist pairing of coloniser/colonised, have been expelled. A policy statement defining difference in terms of being is promulgated from the planned inequalities of actually existing social regimes and political struggles.”25

The consequence of this consensus – where social distinction and political contest have been expelled – appears to conform to a broader technologically produced narcissism; as Robert Hassan writes of the negative aspect of new technologies: “Through the technological ability to be exposed only to what you want to be exposed to, opinions, views and ideas ring as if in an echo chamber. As Sunstein puts it: ‘New technologies, emphatically including the internet, are dramatically increasing people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others’. More than ever there is the tendency to listen out only for ‘louder echoes of their own voices’.” This presents a major problem as far as a vibrant and diverse democratic functioning is concerned.26

A homogenised student body produces its own form of this broader technologically masculously constructed narcissism – “I only think with ideas that reinforce my pre-existing values.” It also increasingly appears to replicate the production of consensual islands or ghettos produced by broader social engineering (or apartheid) dominant in our cities and towns (‘Where are Britain’s working classes?’). These characteristics should be anathema to art school culture. The consequences of encountering distinct subjectivities, namely forms of disensus and antagonism, should exist between students, and occasionally between student and tutor (something which the wholesale butting up against a dominant culture, imbued with an untroubled sense of being at home within culture, is revealing itself in all its own unquestionable value was (and remains) a denial dominated.27

The following statement by tutors reflects a blind spot in much of the art world’s imagination of the rhetoric of freedom, choice and liberty. “Playing God, Social Darwinism

“This government knows that culture and creativity matter. They matter because they can enrich all our lives, and everyone deserves the opportunity to develop their own creative talents and to benefit from others. They matter because our rich and diverse culture helps bring us together. They matter because creative talent will be crucial to our individual and national economic success in the economy of the future.”

Tony Blair

There is another, grimly amusing aspect in which the application of a business ontology reboonds when judged against its own rhetoric: the consequences of neoliberal education restructuring directly contradict the stated aims of its education policy – producing dynamic, original thinkers for the knowledge economy. In this, the actuality of neoliberal practice, as opposed to its ideological rhetoric, is revealed. Its economic agressive brand of Social Darwinism produces exactly the kind of conditions the neoliberal project was purported to rid society of, namely the stasis and stagnation of flattened, state controlled culture. Harvey elucidates how neoliberal ideology and its beliefs in markets and managerialism are riddled with these kinds of transparent flaws and apparent contradictions. Some are nakedly self-serving, such as a deregulated private banking system that can’t be allowed to fail and must be shored up by increasing public debt. What might be presented as flaws in the system, for example those which allow for the unregulated greed of individuals to ‘abuse the system’, are in reality, as Harvey and Klein have written, intrinsic structural features.

In a 2008 lecture, Judith Williamson referred to our society as being one where a culture of denial dominated.28 Within this culture we actively seek to ‘unknown’ basic facts of our own experience. Williamson explicitly focuses on the inability to discuss global warming. We can think of this active unknowing as being another example of the kind of cognitive locking that, as much paraphrased remark by Slavoj Žižek, has meant it’s been easier to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism. Day by day it seems that this denial, this unknowing, this cognitive locking, is loosening its grip. Now, after forty years, the “political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites”29 is revealing itself in all its blunt, brutal greed and venality. The hollowness of the rhetoric of freedom, choice and liberty reverberates. The internal contradictions and brutal economic reality of this system are now so publicly known through personal experience as to undermine the authority of the daily common sense pronouncements of ‘capitalist realism’ – nobody needs a degree in economics to see this anymore. What’s more, the various ways in which this system was previously manufactured and bought (easy credit) can no longer deliver on the promise of paying tomorrow for pleasure today.30

Lord Browne’s 2010 review of Higher Education funding and student finance, ‘Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education’, revises the illusion of perfect competition, the sovereignty of consumer choice and demand – its suggestion, that the block grant for teaching be abolished; its overwhelming belief, that social value can only be thought in terms of long run ‘returns’.

In a scathing overview of the review,31 Stefan Collini made clear the catastrophic consequences and ruinous folly of further adopting the business ontology within higher education – referred to as the requirement to ‘meet business needs’.

In Collini’s analysis, the report represents a blueprint for a devastating attack on the public role of universities in our social and cultural life. That we are now at pivotal moment is clear for Collini: “What is at stake here is the possibility that the culture of the future are to be thought of as having a public cultural role partly sustained by public support, or whether we move further towards regarding them in terms of purely economic calculation of value and wholly individualistic conception of ‘consumer satisfaction’. He goes on to show how the consequences for the notion of ‘institutions and the social class of their student body […]’ Free competition’ between rich and poor consumers means Harrods for the former and Aldi for the latter: that’s what the puritans have ‘chosen’.32

As I noted at the beginning, events have overtaken this article. Initially it was set to highlight a blind spot in much of the art world’s critical discussion of the future of art schools. The aforementioned failure to grasp the fundamental, intrinsic need for a principled adherence to and argument for comprehensive values as being absolutely core in art school culture. Not just as an idea, but intrinsic in practice. Based on what increasingly seems a rather cosy idea, namely that we will in the foreseeable future have more than say, ten art schools in Britain (just the ‘right chip ones’). This blurring of the present situation and the starkness of the choices facing us, means that the imperative to assert the absolute core values of comprehensive education (free, universal access for all and a commitment to a thoroughly diverse body of students) is, now more than ever, unquestionable. The pernicious capitalist realism that has labelled this as a fanciful utopian impossibility needs to be shown for what
it is. David Harvey is quite clear about the kind of immediate, imperative choices that need to be made:

“What I think is happening at the moment is that they are now looking for a new financial set-up which can solve the problem not for working people but for the capitalist class. I think they are going to find a solution for the capitalist class and if the rest of us get screwed, too bad. The only thing they would care about is if we rose up in revolt. And until we rise up in revolt they are going to redesign the system according to their own class interests. I don’t know what this new financial architecture will look like. If we look closely at what happened during the New York fiscal crisis I don’t think the bankers or the financiers knew what to do at all, now what they did was bit by bit arrive at a ‘briocage’; they pieced it together in a new way and eventually they come up with a new construction. But whatever solution they have in mind at present, we are in there and start saying that we want something different.”

1944 to the Present

Other social reformers believed in the idea of the ‘social mix’ – the theory which anticipated the steady amelioration of social class differences and tensions through the pupils’ experience of ‘social mixing’ in a new comprehensive school. This very narrow view of egalitarianism could be found in one of Circular 60/65’s definitions of a comprehensive school:

A comprehensive school aims to establish a school community in which pupils over the whole ability range and with differing interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process.” (DES, 1965, p. 8).}

Notes

1 Jones, K, New labour: The Inheritories in Education in Britain 1944 to the Present, Cambridge, Polity, 2003
2 Harvey, D, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, Oxford, 2007, p. 16
4 Michael Corriss succinctly pointed out how the internal logic of the humanities creates a key Fraser in student criticisms, “while complaints about poor provision are legitimate, these are often tinged with the value for-money mentality of consumers who aren’t satisfied with what they expect from their purchase. In this situation, it is the role of managers to use the complaints of students against teaching staff, and the ‘customer is always right’ culture does little to accustom students to the experience of robust criticism or demands for intellectual rigor, while the weary hypocrisy of passing students who were failed is imposed by managers who value the income far more than the educational standards of the teaching staff”. Art Monthly, issue 302
5 Fisher, M, Capitalist Realism, Zed books, 2009, p. 42
7 Maria Walsh makes this point very well in her contribution to Art Monthly’s special on education. She also counter intuitively, and interestingly, offers some reasons for why we should be optimistic about the changing face of art school.

Writing in 1965, for example, leading sociologist A.H. Halsey could begin a New Society article with the ringing declaration: ‘Some people, and I am one, want to use education as an instrument in pursuit of an egalitarian society.’ We tend to favour comprehensive schools, to be against the public schools, and to support the expansion of higher education (Halsey, 1965, p. 13). Other social reformers believed in the idea of the ‘social mix’ – the theory which anticipated the steady amelioration of social class differences and tensions through the pupils’ experience of ‘social mixing’ in a new comprehensive school. This very narrow view of egalitarianism could be found in one of Circular 60/65’s definitions of a comprehensive school:

A comprehensive school aims to establish a school community in which pupils over the whole ability range and with differing interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process.” (DES, 1965, p. 8).