In a Class of their own
The incomprehensiveness of art education
John Beagles

"Over the last thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is everything that is going on in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. As any number of theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badouin 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 to be impossible attainable."

Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism (Zero books, 2009)

Prologue

As is often the case, events have over taken this article. When I started writing this text, art education was in its familiar state of permanent crisis. Certainly it seemed those working in art education had become rather fatigued by the burden of increased managerialism and its attendant bureaucracy. Now, however, it seems we have accelerated into a new phase.

In occupations 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 devastating canker in UK education since 1945. That is the point of reverse and eradicating those socially progressive advances they have been – is the ideological objective of this government, as it was of the last. In education, the core values of a comprehensive system designed to ‘suit the many as well as the old fitted the few’ have been subject to systematic dismembering. Consistently the argument has been that this system is inefficient. The idea that this is simply how it is, is the basis of Mark Fisher’s useful notion of ‘capitalist realism’. While the trashy capitalism of this system may become more naked, David Harvey argues the restoration project of neoliberalism has always been about an ideological and political endeavor to restore classic power to small elites. In 2008, Naomi Klein framed the project this way: ‘...that really what we have been living is a liberation movement, indeed the most successful liberation movement, of our time: the movement by capital to liberate itself from all constraints on its accumulation. For those who say this ideology’s failing, I beg to differ. I actually believe it has been enormously successful, just not on the terms that we learn about in University of Chicago textbooks. That I don’t think the project actually has been the development of the world and the elimination of poverty I think this has been a class war waged by the rich against the poor, and I think that won. And I think the poor are fighting back."  

The Ship is Sinking

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In recent years there has been a steady flow of publications, magazine articles and impassioned letters decreeing the state of the problem and gloomy future prophesied for art education. Art Monthly was prominent in describing this crisis, devoting tracts of the magazine to various contributors’ thoughts on the subject. The majority of these contributions were influenced by Fisher’s business ontology and poetics focused on and were united by their condemnation of the impact of New Labour’s enthusiastic advocating of neoliberal ideology upon state funded ‘public’ university education – aka ‘corporate pedagogy’. As numerous voices stated, the accession of this cast-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 negative perception of art schools’ 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 such issues often came across as being beneath many.

However, this work was similarly underpinned by an assumed 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 condition of 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 Iris Rogoff, the focus was less on responding to economic and policy assaults and more on trying to identify the possibilities and potentialities of developing radically new forms 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 sociology skills it entails, in accepting any assessment of where we are and how to get somewhere. 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 countenance 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 generated 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 hempered 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 increase 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 sole solution I can see is – 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, but 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 the 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 Arts 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, institutionalized class and ethnically biased notion of a highly idealized student against whom they measure students.”

While there are many programmes run by national agencies aimed directly at widening the intake of students from outside the ‘natural’ 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 4-7)2 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 4-7). 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 Oxford’8, 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 Ideal

‘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
The method of exclusion operating within art school culture at the point ofentry into the system then revolves around naturalised assumptions about the right type of student. Notions of good communication skills are, as the report makes clear, ‘judged from a white, middle class perspective’, which result in judgments [...] being enacted, which are claimed to be ‘fair’ and ‘transparent’ and even ‘value free’ but are clearly (from the long list of quite specific and value loaded sets of expectations) [...] embedded in history of classed cultural inequalities/misrecognitions and complex power relations’.16 The report goes on to question the increasing emphasis on academic qualifications as another perspective ‘which seem natural and innate are partial and biased ideas of effective signs of intelligence – which seem natural and innate are partial and central’.17

Once they are in...

What the report makes clear is how art schools at the point of selection continue to play an active if largely occluded role in what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed ‘cultural reproduction’. Bourdieu’s analysis is fairly explicit in setting out how education plays 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 schemes explicit class-centrist assumptions regarding what kind of applicants will make the best future art students, it’s logical that these assumptions (by associations) 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 category can expect to receive. 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 entry are a particular ‘nose of its kind’ and those figures do suggest that these are perhaps well known. But questions regarding 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 groups are dominant, 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 of two-tier culture, with clusters/pockets/groups of distinct students, operates within art schools, something which isn’t being flagged up by statistics of inclusion and diversity.

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 Gove18 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 lottery19, 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 outweighs (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.’20

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 prognosis of its ‘natural death’, its ‘flawed logic’ as a system, 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...
art schools, still means that the wrong questions about, and causes for, the current state of art education have been being proposed. At present, either the defences of art education are too reactive, and willing to replicate and reinforce the neoliberal agenda, for instance the focus the students’ dissatisfaction reinforces the paradigm of student consumer and teacher provider; or, as with much of the discussion around new art schools becoming uncritical, the possibilities are undermined by a failure to identify how they would face greater challenges than pre-existing schools in terms of diversity.

The second aspect is the inability to imaginatively publicly state the need for the centrality of comprehensive values as core to any 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 inability24 to popularise a seductive, imaginative alternative to the bankrupt values of our consumerist-capitalist-entertainment-network, which permeates the art education sector too. Just as the Left has largely failed in popularising a set of alternative values (Simon Critchley regards this as fundamentally a problem of naming25), within art education there has been a similar failure of the imagination to express comprehensive values 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 need for education to 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 authoritative power and control is a good thing, it has created a pedagogic vacuum within art education since filled by an ever more monolithic, conservative model (heroic individualism and the progressive careerist driven, unethical mode of being in art school – students or ‘worked’ by Boris Groys entitled ‘Education by infection’. Groys examines the challenges faced by educators teaching in a post-postmodernist ‘free for all’29 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”26. Adopting Malevich’s work, Groys discusses how artists (and art students within the confines of an art school) need to “become infected by Otherness”, and modify their immune system of their art in order to incorporate new aesthetic bacilli27. 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”28. (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 stasis favoured by “sincere artists”. Sincere artists, in Groys’ analysis, are dull and powerless, because by being sincere they follow a repetituous programme (they only reproduce “their own existing taste” and only “deal with their own existing identity”). In contrast, Groys argues that the production of creative, “insincere artists” (in a creative industry newpeak – to try to recoup it from market avidity – those who favour ‘risk and experimentation’) is 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”.

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 need to embrace the reanimating of alternative narratives, based on values inherent in alternative histories and memories which are distinct to students’) within education. Biggs talks about the need to embrace the reanimating of alternative narratives, based on values inherent in alternative histories and memories which are distinct to those validated by the new establishment. That only by turning away from the competitive, market driven, unethocal mode of being in art school (heroic individualism and the progressive careerist driven, unethical mode) can we recapture a pedagogically transformative role for art. Biggs argues that only by changing pedagogical practices can this be done. For him this is about ditching what Paulo Freire critically called the “banking concept of education” – “where knowledge is seen as a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those whom they consider to know nothing” – to one which is far less hierarchal and is centered on problem posing and a relationship where students and tutors develop, simultaneously, powers of “critical solicitude”. For Biggs this is representative of “good educational practice”, the kind of pedagogy that ‘ensures that teaching is based on: “A real concern for the students’ self understanding, because genuine self understanding is always an understanding of our interrelatedness to others, and so finally to questions about the common good in a just society.”’

For 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 pedagetically 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”29, the mutual interrelatedness that Groys talks about as being essential for the infection of the artist with foreign bacilli and a guilt induced quid 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”30 (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 called upon to demonstrate 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? 

Draper Patel: “Sure. And what’s happened in education in the last decade is just a kind of liberal multiculturalism. There’s been actual antiracism, just ‘recognising diversity’ different religious festivals – a lesson on how to tackle racism in schools. One main finding was that the kind of antiracism schools espoused was dogmatic and moralistic with no serious investigation of class or 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.”

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 polymorphous, 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 rule to establish a neutral, ideology-free zone from which the social division and political contest inscribed in the antagonist pairing of coloniser/colonised, have been expelled. A policy statement defining difference in terms of ‘bias’ is proofed from the planned inequalities of actually existing social regimes and political struggles.”

The consequence of this consensus – where social division 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.”

A homogenised student body produces its own form of this broader technologically manipulated narcissism – “I only engage 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 adoption of a consumerist ethic absolutely negates again). Instead, butting up against a dominant culture, imbued with an untroubled sense of its own unquestionable value was (and remains) a depressing experience for those not ‘blessed’ with an unprovocable sense of being at home within ‘real’ culture. However, the often antagonistic debates created between these ‘others’, whose subjectivity is often motivated by being bored out of and out of place, and those at home within culture, frequently leads to a questioning of dominant modes of thought. In the case of art, it has led to fundamental questions regarding the ontology of art – those radical destabilizing acts that, like Hassan writes of the negative aspect of new technologies:

“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 about a much closer and more fair share than it has ever been possible to experience.”

Tony Blair

There is another, grimly amusing aspect in which the application of a business ontology reverbates on judgment 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 aggressive 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 the need for a new approach to education. That is, as Lord Browne’s 2010 review of Higher Education funding and student finance, ‘Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education’, rehashes 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 and seen in terms of purely economic calculation of value and wholly individualistic conception of ‘consumer satisfaction’.

He goes on to show how the consequences for education of such minimalism are not only to be thought of in terms of their immediate merits, but that the ideological assumptions underlying them are in terms of purely economic calculation of value and wholly individualistic conception of ‘consumer satisfaction’.

It is revealing itself in all its brutal, 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 claim of the common sense pronouncements of ‘capitalist realism’ – nobody needs a degree in economics to see this anymore. What’s more, the various words of Pol Pot for this system was previously manufactured and bought (easy credit) can no longer deliver on the promise of paying tomorrow for pleasure today.”

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 ideal, 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 ‘free market’). But what has become clear is the present situation and the starkness of the choices facing us, means that the imperative to assert the absolute core values within education is [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 labeled this as a fanciful utopian impossibility needs to be shown for what Book Bloc and their books at demonstrations in Rome, November 2010.
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 ‘bricolage’; they pieced it together in a new way and eventually they come up with a new construction. But whatever solution they may arrive at, it will suit them unless we...

Notes

1 Jones, K, New labour: The Inheritors in Education in Britain 1944 to the Present, Cambridge, Polity, 2003
4 Michael Corriss succinctly pointed out how the internal politics of the national institutes a key bugaboo 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 a matter of bad management 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 weak hypocrisy of passing students who was failed by the imposers 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 changes that art school can bring.
8 Few independent reports seem to disagree upon the impact of fee increases within the humanities, specifically in arts education. ‘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 pupils’ experience of ‘social mixing’ in a new comprehensive school. This very narrow view of egalitarianism could be found in one of Circular to/69’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).”
9 Writing in 1965, for example, leading sociologist A.H. Halsey could have begun 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. 11). 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 pupils’ experience of ‘social mixing’ in a new comprehensive school. This very narrow view of egalitarianism could be found in one of Circular to/69’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).”

Comprehensive Education

The 1944 Education Act raised the school-leaving age to 15 and provided universal free schooling in three academically differentiated types of schools – streamed entry was based on “accident of innate ability”, selection at the age of eleven via the 11+ exam. Following the 1964 General Election, the Labour government instructed all local authorities to prepare plans for the conversion of a common comprehensive education system of new schools, either by amalgamation of existing schools or by building new ones. Clyde Chitty, in 2002, reflected on differing conceptions of comprehensive education, past triumphs and mistakes, thus: “...many genuinely believed that a capitalist society could be reformed, and that the new comprehensive schools would be a peaceful means of achieving greater social equality – greater social equality in the sense that working-class children would be able to move into ‘white-collar’ occupations or move on to higher education. Apart from any other considerations, the emphasis on art, culture, and theory

Building Trinity Comprehensive School, May 1964

Apart from any other considerations, the emphasis on art, culture, and theory...