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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 quite normal that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. As any number of theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badou 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 (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 totally fatigued by the burden of increased managerialism and its attendant bureaucracy. Now, however, it seems we have accelerated into a new phase.

In occupations that have 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 decisive and seismic changes to UK education since 1945. That of course is the point. Reversing the mood that moves the subject.

"I think anger is very important, and, contrary to the longstanding belief that the defences and polemics focused on and were united by their condemnation of the impact of New Labour’s enthusiastic advancing 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 Prieze with a similar ‘debate’ were consumed with a largely lenient perception of art school’s future, other critical voices in the sector were less vociferous in tone, keen to stay away from too much overt discussion of the politics of policy – involvement in structural 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 dynamics 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 Irit 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 futurology skillfully avoids, 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 contest 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 liberalization 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 homogenous 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, reinvigorated, 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 ethically 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 Wideners 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), which range from those in routine occupations to small businesses 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 “poorer” 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 variations 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
Class centrist. The report goes on to question the increasing emphasis on academic qualifications as another dimension of cultural reproduction. As Bourdieu’s analysis shows, the perhaps thornier question is what kind of assumptions on the part of educators – exclusion operates often as a result of hidden and ideologically self-serving. The statistics of inclusion and diversity. WP student. As the report noted: “Normalised student identity is subtly held in place whilst the WP student is constituted as ‘Other’, deserving of higher education access but only to ‘other’ kinds of discourse and institutions.”

The model of exclusion operating within art school culture at the point of entry 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 hierarchies of class and cultural inequalities/misrecognitions and complex power relations”.

The report goes on to question the increasing emphasis on the kind of teaching that occurs within art schools implicit class-centrist assumptions about the right type of student. Notions of 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” at 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 category 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 entry continue to operate internally within the pedagogic culture of the schools.

The kind of exclusion operating 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. As he notes: “Progressives of all stripes seem to have caved in to Neoliberal thinking 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 at is 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.

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 needs now, a matter of urgency, to be broken within the spaces of education.

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. As he notes: “Progressives of all stripes seem to have caved in to Neoliberal thinking 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.”

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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 Gove37 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 lottery36, 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.”

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 proposition 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 are 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 of student dissatisfaction reinforces the paradigm of student consumer and teacher provider; or, as with much of the discussion around new art schools becoming ubiquitous, the fact that the creativity undermined by neoliberalism is a complete failure to identify how they would address this core issue of exclusion and diversity – small scale, privately funded independent schools would probably face greater challenges than pre-existing schools in terms of diversity.

The second aspect is the inability to imaginatively and 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 inability 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 (Simmel, for example, in his 1903 essay, regards this as fundamental to a problem of naming17), within art education there has been a similar failure of the imagination to express comprehensive values as 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 freedom of speech 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 authority is a good thing, it has created a pedagogic vacuum within art education since filled by aestheticism, the production of an emancipatory project or dimension to education – body snatched by an ‘entrepreneurialism’ of the self – finds echoes in other areas. For example, both Nancy Fraser25 and the ‘core values’ model can be reused and written about the depressing consequences for Feminism of a similar decoupling of its radical politics, or as Fraser puts it, Feminism’s ‘emancipatory power and control is a good thing, it has created a new arena for activism,щинкынг хотел, ирүү жана башкаларга дайындоо кылуу мүмкүн болуп келишет. Бул жана башкаларга дайындоо кылуу мүмкүн болуп келишет.

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

While a publicly stated commitment to the ideals of comprehensive 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’ 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 evolutionary mutation’. Adopting Malevich’s work, Groys discusses how artists (and art students within the confines of an art school) need to modify their emancipatory system of their art in order to incorporate new aesthetic bacillus.26 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”27. (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 repetitious programme – 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 pollution 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 the student, the educator and the establishment. That only by turning away from the competitive, market driven, unethical mode of being in art school (heroic individualism and the progressive careerist mindset) can we get the 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 hierarchical 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 oriented 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 interculturality. 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, worked28, the mutual interrelatedness that Groys talks about as being essential for the infection of the artist with foreign bacillus is manufactured 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 “ideol of consensus”29 (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?

Pragna Patel:

“Sure. And what’s happened in education in the last decade is just a kind of liberal multiculturalism. There’s been an actual antiracism, just ‘recognising diversity’ it’s different religious festivals – a lesson on how not tackle racism in schools. One main finding was that the kind of antiracism schools espoused was dogmatic and moralistic which was quite 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 polypomorphic, community as heterogeneous, social formations as mutable and culture as vagrant. It is to recognise that ‘difference’ has been diverted by a postmodernist critique as a theoretical tuse 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 brute, nakedly self-centred conditions, eroded 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 produced 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 consumerist ethic absolutely negates against). Indeed, 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 untroubled 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 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 Conceptualism, produce the sickness Groys argues for. This is mainly because students from outside the strata of ‘normal art students’ are frequently, because of their backgrounds, more troubled by the divisions in the broader culture that allow for art’s ‘freedom’.

I am not adhering here to a grassroots fantasy of art schools or some pseudo bullshit version of Cameron’s ‘Big Society’. I don’t have unbridled faith in the power of students to exclusively develop innovative art, autonomously. Conversely, however, at the moment there’s a compensatory overemphasis and faith in pedagogic innovation as the primary, at times it seems exclusive, means of generating energy within the art education system, reducing the economic growling pedagogic practices from the 1960s is timely, but the power, control and authority, however much it is self-questioning, still lies with those who buy the script. It’s an imposition of change from above, however well meaning. The folly on the part of city managers as to believing they can engineer the evolution of culture in our cities has been proven to be oxymoronic to ‘real’ culture. There’s a similar danger within the art education system of believing pedagogic and technological innovations are ‘engines of change’. Not least, because the notion that art schools and art tutors can envisage the art of the future is, it always has been, something that should be resisted or dismissed outright.

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, grimmer aspect in which the application of a business ontology rebounds 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 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 our society as being one where a culture of denial dominated. Within this culture we actively seek to ‘unknown’ basic facts of our present condition: 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” 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 dominant sense pronouncements of ‘capitalist realism’ – nobody needs a degree in economics to see this anymore. What’s more, the various warts-spotting for this system was previously manufactured and bought (easy credit) can no longer deliver on the promise of paying tomorrow for pleasure today.

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 appropriate to ‘niche’ or ‘luxury’ manufacturing. In a scathing overview of the review**, Stefano 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 whether the education in 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 universities are devastating. The upshot of all this is: “the most likely effect of Browne’s proposals [...] will be to bring about a much closer correlation between the reputational hierarchy 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 later: that’s what the punters have ‘chosen’.”

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 principle, based on what increasingly seems a rathercosy idea, namely that we will in the foreseeable future have more than, say, ten art schools in Britain (just the blue chip ones?). Has the blinding enormity of the present situation and the starkness of the choices facing us, means that the imperative to assert the absolute core values of 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 labeled 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 capitalists, but 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 by bit by bit arrive at a ‘briocale’; they pieced it together in a new way and eventually they come up with a new construction. But whatever solutions we get we get in there and start saying that we want something

class interests. I don’t know what this new financial capitalist class. I think they are going to find a solution of immediate, imperative choices that need to be

over 6% by 1999, while the ratio of the median

their share of the national income from 2% in 1978

The top 0.1% of income earners in the US increased

Art Monthly

who value the income far more than the educational

students who should be failed is imposed by managers

intellectual rigor, while the weary hypocrisy of passing

students against teaching staff, and the ‘customer is

what they expect from their purchase. In this situation,

Americans from 1.6% in 1978 to 7.4% in 1994, and rising to

The top 0.1% of income earners in the US increased

Deplorable. I think that rising to 20% in any society would be a deplorable situation.

You may be interested in the recent article from Art Monthly, issue 302

Fisher, M, Capitalist Realism, Zed books, 2009, p 42


Maria Walsh makes this point very well in her contribution to Art Monthly’s special edition on education. She also counter intuitively, and interestingly, offers some reasons for why we should be optimistic about the changing face of art school.

Few independent reports seem to disagree upon the impact of fee increases within the humanities, specifically, the emphasis on fees seems to have

Art for a Few’, National Arts Learning Network, 2009

Ibid.

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Note

Notes

1 Jones, K, New labour: The Inheritors 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 Corris succinctly pointed out how the internal language of the system is a key flag 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 easy for college managers to use the complaints of students against teaching staff, and the ‘customer is always right’ culture does little to accentuate students to the experience of robust criticism or demands for intellectual rigor, while the weary hypocrisy of passing students who should be failed is imposed by managers who value the income far more than the educational standards of the teaching staff,” Art Monthly, issue 302

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