

The Blind Screwing the Blind

A Further Critique of Undergraduate Fine Art Education

IN MARCH 2007 I WROTE a letter which was published in Art Monthly and The Jackdaw. It described the wilful and systematic destruction of art education in Britain. This destruction was primarily politically motivated and not, as claimed by successive governments, implemented purely out of economic expediency. Public expenditure was a fig leaf. It was ideological not pragmatic.

The response to my letter was overwhelming. In spite of the consensus and good will – unsurprisingly – nothing happened. No one representing ‘the management’ had the audacity to address my analysis because they knew it was accurate. Any counterargument would have demanded a form of thinking that would’ve made a North Korean official blanche.

With a crushing sense of inevitability the juggernaut of cultural vandalism rolls on. It’s a matter of power and priorities. The market is currently the supreme and sole arbiter – and the market is without morality or conscience. For too long discussion of value and meaning has been suppressed in deference to that of product, profit and celebrity; the emulation of the corporate and the tacit acceptance of a morality redolent of RBS, Barclays etc. dominates.

The YBA phenomena was a market construct which relied upon the synergy of the media, capital and the art market. Now the aspirations and rhetoric of universities is to constantly reference this notion of success, which is confirmed only by celebrity and wealth. Education has become a product which is cynically designed to exploit people’s dreams and aspirations solely to make money – lots of it.

The state has abandoned art education as something worthwhile for something lucrative. Endgame. Art schools were once exemplars of liberal education. A project synonymous with social justice, equality and opportunity. Mass education and social mobility. Social transformation has given way to social engineering. The difference? In the first, the outcomes were unanticipated. In the second, they were not only anticipated but desired. Education is about opportunity and generosity – concepts alien to corporate capitalism.

Humanist and socialist values were once pillars of higher education. Both have now been purged; extinguished by profitability and ignorance. What has been imposed is a half-arsed form of privatisation. I don’t remember voting for that. Do you? It amounts to an attack on opportunity, diversity and ultimately democracy. Increasingly it’s only the wealthy and privileged that have access to HE. Opportunity is being denied the poor. I’m convinced that the political class regards an educated working and lower middle class as an irritant.

What started in the 1970s as an attempt to curb what was then perceived as a left-wing bias in education has subsequently resulted in a massive dumbing down. This transformation was implemented by employing people who'd never been to art school and would have no understanding, let alone respect for the culture. Art education, like any form of education, is intended to be an investment; an investment in people and the future. It shouldn't be motivated by profit. They'll certificate – that's the bureaucratic and lucrative part. It's the educating they can't handle.

The widely-held misconception that art relies upon self expression and subjectivity implies that it's a 'soft subject' and somehow unreal. It is clearly condescending and allows detractors to label art education as indeterminate, unknowable and ultimately frivolous. Life without art in its broadest sense – isn't life. It's existence. This isn't elitism; it's humanism.

Nothing has changed and as before it's the University of the Arts (London) that leads the moral and academic decline. A project of breathtaking cynicism. The Rotherham of the HE world. A corrupt and socially corrosive aberration fuelled by deceit, corporate cant, bullying and intimidation. It's a national scandal that no one seems willing or able to address. It's the fate of students and the frontline staff that concerns me most.

The following quotation from a senior academic member of staff at UAL about his paintings illustrates the tragic decline in academic standards and intellectual integrity:

"A lot of my paintings have shapes and gestures that converse, or are compromised, or can be seen to coexist*, or dominate, or retreat, or expand, or to reiterate*, in other words exist in a visual narrative. This narrative is complex both in formal terms and in its associations and metaphors. I often equate my abstract forms to be metaphysical realms of religious art. I value 'touch' as an expressive function of painting as a major contribution to non-linguistic non-linear narrative."

*In the original version there were modish but specious hyphens in these words. I've addressed the pretence and omitted them.

You couldn't make it up. It sounds like a parody but sadly it's true. There's so much that's awful and plain silly about these ramblings that I don't know where to begin. I'm overwhelmed by a mixture of loss and outrage. It's no longer simply a case of the blind leading the blind; but the intellectually challenged. It's the blind who are now doing the billing. The sense of loss can't be overstated – what was once transformative and improving is now sordid and costly.

The few teaching staff that remain are overworked and undervalued. Staff who have the temerity to complain are casually abused in the corridor by the usual retinue of ex-cops, wheel clampers and dinner ladies that now run the place, all of whom are promoted way beyond their abilities. Human Resources

are failing staff (and therefore students) because HR, like Quality Assurance, has become a tool of management. Artists have been banished. As one member of staff at the Royal College of Art observed some years ago, "I left B&Q to get away from these people".

Art departments in universities shouldn't be confused with art schools. They aren't sufficiently resourced to sustain proper full-time studio-based courses. They should stop taking money under false pretences for what is effectively distance learning. Charging almost £30,000 for a certificate that says the bearer is a qualified artist is both absurd and criminal.

The reason that these departments are full of overseas students is not simply because they can be charged extortionate fees, but can be more easily manipulated. The fact that English is their second language makes it more difficult for the students to challenge the sophistry and bullshit.

Fine Art courses are now validated by people who have negligible experience of art or art education. It all comes back to power. Fine Art education has come to resemble group therapy. To those who constantly complain that "... they don't teach drawing anymore." It's much, much worse than that; they don't teach anything anymore. Something as dismal as this warrants a boycott.

There is an established consensus that art schools should never have become universities. There's a depressing and fatalistic acceptance that 'the damage is done'. However, it's not too late to salvage something. There is cause for optimism, teaching on undergraduate Fine Art courses isn't dead. It's alive and in the hands of independent, artist-led organisations like the Turps Art School and Zeitgeist Arts Projects (ZAP). Of the established art schools – and few warrant the name – The Slade, City & Guilds of London Art School and The Royal School of Drawing all still educate students in proper studios and employ credible, practicing artists.

We must say no to worthless state-sponsored undergraduate degrees in fine art and demand a proper training and education by professionals. No to certification and yes to education. A new model is urgently needed. One that is light on bureaucracy and heavy on teaching. For now, the blind aren't so much leading the blind, as screwing them.

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