

Can't Get No Satisfaction

Letter to *Art Monthly* magazine

ANYONE CONSIDERING FINE ART (at undergraduate level) in England and Wales should google the National Student Satisfaction Survey, particularly the Results By Institution. Six of the bottom ten are or were art schools. Bottom of the survey, that is to say the 'least satisfactory', is the University of the Arts London. This will come as no surprise to anyone who has studied or taught there recently.

The results are a confirmation that something systemic is wrong with the way in which the education of fine artists is managed. At its simplest, the expectations of those studying at the University of the Arts are not being met. At the London College of Communication (University of the Arts London), students (on the BA Film and Video course) were demanding their fees be refunded, 'due to staff shortages and lack of organisation' (LCC News Sept 20 2007). Tutors and course leaders work under conditions that are both stressful and unsustainable. They are under valued and feel intimidated. Dissent, whether it's from students, parents or tutors, is unwelcome.

A culture of contempt has developed.

The University of the Arts isn't the only offender. Art education is under attack and has been for over 20 years. The driving force behind this is the politicisation of higher education and the public sector in general. Tutors are frightened to speak out for fear of reprisal. An art school purged of dissent and scepticism is anathema. The problem is exacerbated by the appointment of managers who have no personal experience of fine art practice. They can't understand the kind of knowledge that supports such a discourse. They 'project their facile understanding of art, and in doing so they infantilise our discourse, our practice and our culture. They see 'subjectivity' where there is analysis.

This is not a matter of resourcing, its a matter of priorities. Money currently spent on marketing, publicity and administration should be spent on teaching. Management culture has led to the prioritisation of the administrative over the academic. We now certificate rather than educate. Quality assurance has become a tool of management that enables the standard of education to be eroded 'legally'. The Research Assessment Exercise ties up scarce resources, and can result in an unbearable kind of fiction. No longer do all students have a dedicated work space, and the impact of this is significant. Some students will have only six 'tutorials' during the entire three years of study."The list is endless. Any attempt to query the situation is met with a rather lame attempt at corporate sophistry.

Amidst all this cultural degradation there are contradictions. The level of management is deplorable and bullying is rife. The general quality of teaching in art schools in Wales and England is of a very high standard, only hindered by 'teaching and learning' initiatives. Once there were about ten independent and very distinct art schools in London. Now we've ended up with the educational equivalent of British Leyland, synonymous with 'badge engineering'. It should be broken up in order to restore diversity and choice. The current 'take it or leave' attitude isn't acceptable.

There is still some choice. The Slade still manages to do a magnificent job as does The City and Guilds of London School of Art. Both these institutions have specialised in fine art and offer excellent BA fine art courses. Both have also managed to maintain the transformative power and joy of education through art.