

SYMPOSIUM: TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPT OF THE ART SCHOOL

On Sunday 22nd May, 2016 The Precarious University held the symposium 'Towards a New Concept of the Art School' as part of Chorlton Arts Festival, 2016. The symposium aimed to form a critical discourse on the art school's history and potential and construct a radically open and popular concept of the art school for the 21st Century within the unique surroundings of the Smallest Sculpture Park in the World garden. The resulting dialogue between participants is transcribed, in abridged form, here.

The Precarious University is a collaboration between @.ac and Levenshulme Contemporary Art Centre

List of Participants

Nick - studied history and interested in ideas about new forms of education and living in a society without authority (anarchism/libertarianism).

Andy Broadey - Lecturer in Contemporary Art, History and Theory, University of Central Lancashire. Co-founder of @.ac (<http://www.attackdotorg.com/>) and Levenshulme Contemporary Art Centre (<http://www.lcac.org.uk/wp/>).

Jasmir Creed - Graduate of Wimbledon College of Arts and current art in residence at Paper Gallery.

David Daly - taught art at Rossendale and Accrington College.

Dave Griffiths - Senior Lecturer, Interactive Arts, Manchester School of Art. His thesis was on the politics of education in Africa - clash between World Bank model and radical pedagogy. Is interested in collaboration between the art school and the science faculty.

Claire Hignett - Member of Islington Mill Art Academy for two years (<http://www.islingtonmill.com/>); constructed her own Foundation course. Says the Art Academy is "a great place to be vulnerable."

Ahmed Hassan - Exhibiting artist at Chorlton Arts Festival for the past ten years and member of Southern Voices.

Jane Lawson - artist and member of School of the Damned: Class of 2017. (<http://schoolofthedamned.tumblr.com/-2017>). Jane is also co-coordinator of the Castlefield Gallery Associates programme.

Giles Marshall - former technical demonstrator at Salford University

Nathaniel Mason - Artist and Graduate of Performance Art at Falmouth School of Art; he watched this institution, and art education generally, decline into a business, therefore becoming disillusioned with it. He now lives off grid without locality on a narrowboat.

Richard Miles - Head of Contextual & Theoretical Studies, Leeds College of Art. Interested in the relationship between aesthetic ideology and aesthetic education. Co-founder of @.ac (<http://www.attackdotorg.com/>), which he regards as an ongoing and evolving social sculpture, and education as a social good rather than a commodity. Wants to either save or eradicate the art school, if it is beyond salvation.

Bob Nancollis - Curator of The World's Smallest Sculpture Garden and retired lecturer from Rossendale and Accrington College.

Dr Amanda Ravetz - Senior Research Fellow, Manchester School of Art. She is interested in the idea of a co-op within a non-co-op - drawing on the ideas of Stafford Beer and Viable Systems Models - and considers the extent to which this can influence the art school <http://www.tlinc.com/articl12.htm>

Lisa Risbec - Artist and member of Islington Mill Art Academy for four years. (<http://www.islingtonmill.com/>)

Callum (Edinburgh Art School), Laura, Rory (both MSA), only stayed for a short while

Jane: Perhaps we could start with considering the different kinds of art school we have been involved with?

Clare: Islington Mill Art Academy started with six students from Stockport in 2007. Maurice Carlin was the founder.

Lisa: Black Mountain College was an inspiration for the structure of teaching and learning at IMAA. Teaching and learning are devolved in a similar manner. Initially the emphasis tended to be quite academic, but now there is a greater emphasis on practice. IMAA doesn't exist to be radical but serves to facilitate needs of learners. It is sustained through situatedness within Islington Mill, so there aren't any remits set by funders. Nobody officially teaches but there is a programme of visiting practitioners structured through an economy of exchange.

Everybody's a teacher, everybody's a learner. The Art Academy doesn't have a physical space at the moment. Five of them are renting warehouse space and paying £30 pcm each towards business rates.

Clare: The institution is sustained by being handed down through different agents/artists, and operates through needs of learners. Funding might be perceived to limit these core values.

Dave: IMAA has had an enormous influence in the Northwest and has informed ventures, such as the DIY Art School, Lionel Dobie gallery, and from a craft orientation Makers Dozen.

Richard: The emphasis on making in some of these current organisations is paradoxically consistent with the ideology of the original Schools of Design, which in the C19th were dismally vocational in orientation; essentially they were set up in the 1830s to train workers in the service of manufacturing, with no grander romantic or emancipatory ambitions. This romantic myth of the art school forms in C20th discourses of the avant-garde, which are then mythically translated into art education. The process of Polytechnicisation in the 1960s further confuses these contradictory ideologies with the foundational ideal of the University (the disinterested and autonomous pursuit of research, and the dissemination of that research through teaching). Certainly, the instrumentalism of the post-Browne era neo-liberal university has heralded a turn back to the vocational, and away from the academic. The emphasis on making, and not theory, in a lot of the new alternative art school models therefore has, for me, a peculiar symmetry with the mainstream neo-liberal art school model, though obviously these institutions begin from quite different positions, politically and ideologically.

Jane: You cannot apply to School of the Damned if you have done an accredited MA. There is no money, no bank account. We meet in London and sessions are based on a labour exchange between teachers and students. For example, 7 hours of their time for 7 hours of our time. Tutors are contacted by individual students; each intake inherits a structure for the school but can tailor and change it.

Richard: The labour exchange model that has developed at SOTD proposes a gift economy rather than a commodity economy. The curriculum and agenda are developed by each individual student year group and then passed on to the following cohort, which is also a form of gift. Interestingly, this gift economy model has been fantastically successful; the number of applicants is booming! This contradicts a lot of the messages coming out from a lot of university VC's and marketing departments! However, the success of the school, in terms of applicants, now brings the potential of selective enrolments, which could be regarded as a retrograde step

and a challenge to its existing, radically open, structure.

Jane note: NB School of the Damned already does selective enrolment; last year there were around 70 applicants and 20 were selected.

Lisa: Open School East offers a targeted point of entry for the art world.

David: And the Ryan Gander school attempts to run an institution on merit with no fees and is means-tested. However, it is still dependent on patrons for funding.

Andy: Gander discusses the importance of his own experience at the Rijks Academy in shaping his thinking for this venture.

Jasmir: Turps Banana, in London, seems to focus on painting.

Richard: For me, Turps Banana is an anti-institution. It starts from the premise that art education, within the university at least, is a waste of money, taught by non-practising academics who know nothing about professional art practice. From this very cynical point of negation, it says 'to hell with education', and instead valorises a model of art education without art educators, just professional artists working in dialogue. For me, this is a really dangerous development, perhaps even ultimately conservative, and a lot less interesting than other models around. It is certainly not radical – Ultimately, it is a fee based platform for exhibition, framed around an anti-educational nihilism. There's no theory, or pedagogy, just technique and an emphasis on professionalism, networking, and being in proximity to the London-centric art scene and its celebrity artists. It still costs £3,000 p.a., and for that you get studio space, a platform to show in London, and contacts, which ultimately is presented as the best route to artistic success.

Andy: I think it is important not to binarise art making/art education into activity within and beyond the art world.

Dave: Perhaps we need to talk about art worlds in more pluralistic terms?

Bob: There are myriad art worlds.

Richard: I agree we need to avoid slipping into an inside/outside model. The 'undercommons', as raised by Morten and Harney, outlines a strategy for differencing institutions from within, whilst avoiding co-optation, and it is all the more powerful because it destabilises the assumed borders between inside and outside in situations. The 'undercommons' is a model that mutates from within. I'm also trade union rep at Leeds College of Art. Whilst I'm fully aware of the problems with trade unions, and their complicity with the boss class in some situations, I maintain this role because of the opportunity it gives to difference from within; from the 'undercommons'.

Andy: Strategy is important. It is about how and why one might shift around these parameters.

Richard: Strategy, in the sense that we are talking about today, needs to concern reciprocity, networking and different models of educational exchange. I really want SOTD to expand their model outside and beyond the singular London based model they have currently. It would be fantastic to seeing not one, but many Schools of the Damned emerge!

Lisa: Publishing is also important as it makes existing methodologies available to a wider audience.

Jane: What's the structure for Anti University?

Nathanael: Totally open. You can organise events and they will host them as long as they are free. I'm organising a three hour boat trip as a model of experiential learning.

Ahmed: Art education in Sudan didn't include African art.

Richard: I think our discussions should also note the forthcoming UCU lecturers' strike, which has been called in protest at the 14% pay cut, in real terms, for university lecturers over last 5 years, and the growing inequality in pay between men and women. This squeeze in lecturers' pay has meant that most lecturers can't afford to go on strike. This is particularly true for art lecturers, who mostly work part-time to subsidise their artistic practice. In addition, there is a general lack of co-ordination, and even understanding, between UCU and the Student Union. It is difficult, at the present moment, to see where the opposition to the commodification of education is going to come from. New strategies are needed!

Dave: I'm interested in ways of subverting the academy from within, and what people within the academy can learn from alternative models. Can we discuss problems to do with current academy from viewpoint of teaching learning and research?

Bob: People at the top have a radically different view from those on the ground. It's the rule of documentation, and evidence, over and above teaching.

Dave: To demonstrate that you are teaching and/or learning rather than doing it is the problem.

Lisa: Students feel that they need a return on their investment.

Richard: This is absolutely part of the post-Browne agenda.

Dave: Everyone is commodified within a contractual dynamic. Learning is relegated. Everyone is made precarious from teachers to students.

Dave: So, perhaps we can call this the neo liberal context of the art school. How can art schools be radical under these circumstances?

Richard: Strikes and traditional critical models don't fit with the present context. However, unions offer the possibility of collective resistance and networked struggle and perhaps we might think about how we could build from this.

Dave: I find the strike as a critical model highly problematic when precarious hourly paid workers can't afford to go on strike.

Richard: Absolutely, the ruling class understand this and exploit it. As a counterpoint, The Edu-Factory collective developed as a global network, formulating a proposal for a Global Autonomous University in the process, out of similar university struggles that we are currently experiencing in this country.

Jane: Networks need to be linked to actions.

Amanda: Despite these critical interventions students tend to audit education. They fit together parts into process of skills acquisition.

Dave: The co-founder of Islington Mill Maurice Carlin came and talked at MMU and it seemed from the dialogue that students didn't know where to begin about self-organisation.

Lisa. If learning is a financial decision can the model of change be invoked at all?

Dave: The most radical step would be for art schools to break away from universities?

Richard: Since the removal of state funding from all but the elite institutions, art schools are now essentially privatised and though this can produce a certain freedom, with the wrong people in charge it also produces a certain inertia or conservatism. Art schools remain bound within a peculiar Stockholm Syndrome- resistant to the status quo but strangely bound to it.

Amanda: But art schools would still be businesses, even if they became independent.

Dave: Nonetheless, they could invoke certain changes.

Dave: Of course, one constraint for any alternative model is that art is very resource heavy.

Clare: Yes, and mature learners and other non-traditional students increasingly demand technical or practice-based learning on craft courses.

Richard: And historically art schools solely offered technical or skills based tuition. The Coldstream report and Polytechnicisation bolted on theory into the curricula, mainly to evidence the degree equivalency of the new higher qualifications. Theory was always an uneasy fit at the art school. Theorising art within the academy, or the university is very different from within a vocational training college.

Ahmed: There can be a compression of practice and theory that can be useful.

Amanda: Practice PhDs can be reflective opportunities. Research training is constrained by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) drip down requirements for research degrees. Chapter B11 offers criteria for a proper research degree – 18 indicators. We can perform these requirements but these sessions could be more radically open. There is the opportunity for educators within the system to use the spaces where they do have some viable autonomy. Viable systems models can operate autonomously but viably and through synergy. Each unit requires recursivity. We need to move away from command control. Management needs to offer stewardship.

We're happiest and we work best when we have autonomy.

Synergy; five levels of recursiveness. Away from command and Control to Service.

We might also look at the issue from the alternative perspective of why, with the possibility of an alternative art education, would students be interested in the mainstream?

Clare: Art schools still tend to dictate your route into the art world.

Nathaniel: I looked at alternative models and explored the framework of developing MAs, though gathering people was a challenge and I feel like I need further education to develop.

Jane I'm aware of the lack of equipment and skills development at SOTD. You don't get what you might on a mainstream MA.

Amanda: Nonetheless within mainstream art schools students lack a control over curricula. There is a lack of autonomy.

Clare: I've learnt skills of self-organisation from alternative models.

Jane note: These are taken from my notes, but I don't know who said them

Alternative art schools are now competing with MAs – numbers are affected. Do we need to get art schools out of the University?

Richard: At MMU less than 50% of student fees come back to the Art School. Art schools now get 0% funding from the government (as with all arts and humanities subjects). Science degrees cross-subsidise arts and humanities a bit.

There are lots of older people with money to spend, who are willing to spend £600 on a weekend course in a small group with a craft artist.

Independent arts schools need premises but probably wouldn't get access to the government loan book. This would always limit student involvement to a certain degree.

Dave: There are other things we can do for non-registered students, such as access to lectures. As an organisation we should be opening the doors to non-registered students.

It is interesting to consider how these opportunities be realised in changing circumstances, such as universal basic income, which has been piloted in Switzerland.

Andy: It would free up labour time, because artists need time to practice. Conversely, fees have eradicated access to education for marginalised students. I want the art school to be a place where marginalised people can find expression.

Richard: The government spin is that accessibility to HE has been by the reforms to the loan system, due to the increase in the minimum repayment threshold. Time will tell whether this is true or not. The question of the financial sustainability of the whole system remains, of course.

Clare: It's interesting that academies can be free but art schools have to be regulated.

Richard: Neoliberalism, and deregulation, opens opportunities for private 'for-profit' providers, but it also opens opportunities for radical, anarchist, models of alternative education. The general appropriations. The general decline in power and influence of centralised quangos like the QAA, and the increased importance placed on the student voice via mechanisms like the NSS, could manufacture a situation that is ripe for appropriation by progressive or activist students.

Jane: It would be good at this stage if we could move the discussion onto practical solutions and proposed actions.

Dave: It would be good to get early career researchers involved in these discussions. We can also open sessions at Manchester Art School for non-Students.

Clare: There are regular crits at Islington Mill featuring residents and academy students. They are on the last Wednesday of the month.

Richard: We also need a progressive educators network. This is key. It would need to focus on activism rather than just being an information exchange or network.

Jane: A network or information node might help us to collapse the boundaries between the different kinds of institutions we have been discussing.

Clare: We don't need a structure we need a dynamic. An organisation needs a critical force of three to keep things moving.

Amanda: Yes, threeing works. The dynamic quality!

Next Steps

Richard to set up a central info point – Independent Progressive Educators' Network.

Can involve: early career researchers, UCLAN, Horse and Bamboo, Whittaker, Rawtenstall
Ahmed can host meetings of up to 14 people.