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Spirit of '68. The 'next' role of the art/design school?

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Abstract: From the current political and cultural landscape, the workshop sought to develop discussions surrounding the potential for art and design education to instigate and make socio-political comment and change. The rationale for the study coincides with the forthcoming 50th anniversary of the 'Spirit of '68', in which dominant ideologies across Europe were interrogated, attacked and in some cases, overturned. Integral to this historical climate were the role of students, particularly those engaged in art and design courses, who challenged and changed educational policy and the future landscape of the arts. Much like the cultural climate of the late 1960s, our own times seem to question the validity of the arts within education (particularly in relation to funding and the provision of courses) whilst promoting a distrust in a liberal elite and a de-politicised population.

The aims of the workshop were twofold; to consider the ways in which Art School (and in the UK this includes Design Schools too) education had changed since the student led revolutions in 1968, and, to consider the ways in which Art School Thinking could be integral to daily life in the 21st century.

Keywords: Art School, Education, Change, Politics, Social Role

1. Introduction

The Warwick Commission Report (2015) concluded that the arts in the UK were in crisis and, regardless of political rhetoric¹, continual cuts in government subsidy² plus cuts in arts subjects in schools had created a two-tiered predominantly white middle-class system that lacked inclusivity and diversity. Also, whilst the arts accounted for 5% of the British economy, i.e. £76.9bn, they attracted

¹ For example, "the arts play a vital role in our communities, helping to bind people together and create real social value". George Osborne (Conservative) 2010 (Serota 2010a) and "Far from wasting public money, the subsidised arts give back far more than they receive." Ed Vaizey (Conservative and one time Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries), 2009, (Serota 2010b).

² In October 2010, The Guardian newspaper reported that the Arts were facing their worst crisis since the 1940s as a result of 25-30% cuts to government subsidy (Serota 2010a).

less than 0.3% of the budget spend (Brown 2015; Cottone 2016). Lack of investment, poor access to arts subjects at school level³ and a drive towards science and mathematics had, effectively, eroded the perceived significance of the arts in daily life. The impact of this is hard to imagine let alone measure; creativity, cultural engagement and production, and even inclusivity, diversity and different modes of expression and critique are becoming seriously endangered (Fearon 2016). This is not only a UK problem; these issues have been cited in the US (Israel & Kessler 2011) and in other European nations, including Italy (Hooper 2008; de Cagna 2016).

The Arts find themselves in difficult times; they offer employment, make money, but lack public investment and diversity. This implies that the true value of the arts - discussion, critique, creativity, expression and political opposition - is being eroded: The voice of opposition is being silenced.

As we approach the half-century anniversary of the student protests of 1968, the heart of which, in the UK at least, was the Art School, this workshop aimed to consider the role of the Art School both now and in the future, considering how these institutions can articulate and work for social and cultural change.

It solicited discussion from conference delegates that will contribute to a wider project that will assess and develop the future meaning and role of the Art School in society.

2. Historical Context

The history of education in the Arts (in the UK at least) emerges in response to industrialisation and coincides with the birth of a museum culture. Such development underpins the ideology of education in the arts as threefold;

1. to improve the taste of the designer and consumer,
2. to improve the moral standing of the population via the appreciation of the arts, and
3. to meet the 'needs' of industry.

One can see that there are elements of classification here (socially and within the arts); a) work, industry, practical = design/masculine/working class or trade, and b) leisure, pleasure, morally uplifting, useless = art/women (other than male geniuses) self-supporting upper classes (McRobbie 2003). This ideology has been evidenced in arts education, as well as in arguments for and against the arts, from the 19th century onwards, and is partially responsible for a wider understanding of what the arts represent, mean, and ultimately what they are 'worth'.

As the division between art and design became clear, Design Schools focussed on meeting the requirements of industry with the specific purpose of developing and improving British exports. This was an uncomfortable relationship from the outset - industry rarely offered funding or other forms of support - and this gulf was widened by the onslaught of post-war technological advancement; industry was moving quickly, whilst education was not.

The post-war socio-cultural climate also proved challenging for arts education; there was a general desire to 'level the playing field' and to accept more students from diverse backgrounds into Higher Education (HE), whilst developing qualifications of equitable standards. The Coldstream Report

³ Between 2003 and 2013 there was a 50% drop in the GCSE numbers for design and technology, 23% for drama and 25% for other craft-related subjects. In 2012-13, only 8.4% of students combined arts and science at AS level. The number of arts teachers in schools has fallen by 11% since 2010 and in schools where a subject has been withdrawn, drama and performance has dropped by 23%, art by 17% and design technology by 14% (Brown 2015).

(1960) aimed to categorise the arts in terms of disciplines⁴. By 1966, discussions surrounding the purpose and place of UK Art Schools, combined with a concern for more students undertaking HE in the arts with no prospect of associated employment⁵, saw many Art Schools merge with polytechnics (Piper 1973, 13) (distinguishing them from 'Trade Schools', cutting evening classes and once again creating a 2 tiered system). The result of these alliances was the instigation of the National Diploma (ND) Diploma in Art and Design (DipAD) - effectively a degree course - which required students to have academic qualifications for admission rather than solely a portfolio and the Foundation Course⁶, failure of which would prohibit acceptance to a higher level of study.

On 28th May, 1968, in response to the control of Student Union funds, students occupied (sit in) Hornsey College of Art for 24 hours⁷. The aim was to imitate the student protests in Paris earlier that month (Tickner 2008, 32) and included speakers drawn from staff, journalists, student union representative, and offered spaces for the discussion of grievances and outcomes that were to be presented to the Principal and Board of Governors. What started as a protest and think tank, escalated into an intensive 6 week debate about art education per se, which included a 3 day conference and the production of over 70 documents (Tickner 2008, 35). A fairly minor local issue had snowballed into a national debate that aimed to challenge government legislation and effect the future management of arts education.

Following Hornsey, Art Schools across the UK joined the protest – most of which were peaceful – encapsulating a zeitgeist of the ability of the individual to effect social change. These protests were not without precedent and reflected if not drew from concerns not just from within the arts community, but also from popular culture too. For example, Meredith Tax (1972), a prolific writer and political activist, identified key common themes arising from creative practice during 1970s counter culture. These practices were:

- a) Social and shared – such as found in rock groups, street theatre, workshops, collectives,
- b) Participatory, therefore requiring response – poetry/spoken, music/dance, art/audience, and
- c) The mixing of media – for example, 'rock' combined music, posters, clothing, dance and poetry

Tax emphasised the collective potential of the arts; a collective built on what the individual can bring to the mix. She argued that the boundaries of our knowledge and expectations must be extended and that the commonalities of the arts are must be considered, i.e. what is shared, what is distinct, to each of the disciplines. This approach echoes the research of the design guru, Buckminster Fuller, who in *Utopia or Oblivion* (1969) called for a broad general focus for education, one which covered a wide variety of subject matter and disciplines, and one to be determined and led by the student rather than the curriculum. Buckminster Fuller called this 'design science', but was witnessed in compulsory education experiments such as the open classroom (Knock 2011) innovative schools such as Scotland Road, Liverpool (de Castella 2014) and pioneering, but not standard art schools like Black Mountain College (1933-57) (Molesworth 2015).

⁴ This included fine art, graphic design, 3D design, fashion & textiles) incorporating a compulsory art history element (15% of overall grade to ensure academic gravitas

⁵ This equated to 7000 graduates seeking employment per year. This should be compared with 500,000 new graduates in the sciences and humanities per annum (Black 1973, 29).

⁶ A Foundation Course that allowed students to experiment before specialisation was also introduced (Hickman 2005)

⁷ See Tickner, L (2008) Hornsey 1968: the art school revolution, pp. 30-1, in which she describes the event as initially a 'critical seminar' to protest and discuss, as well as to be entertained, on a number of issues pertaining to education and students engagement with the management of their own experience.

The purpose of art and design education was much as it had been since the 19th century; to meet the needs of and to feed directly into industry (skills & ideas). Indeed, the core values and purpose was effectively the same as those presented in Coldstream:

- To influence public taste
- To provide a sound basis for the development of small-scale craft or artisan based industries & enhance the diversity of the economy.
- To perform a 'cathartic' and 'reflexive' social role
- To develop visual literacy (in the light of new media and technologies in daily life)
- Education through doing – a possible supplement in times of 'enforced' leisure...

However: there was resistance to the classifications of courses outline by Coldstream, and more diversity and merging of skills and disciplines was called for, as indicated in concepts of cross-disciplinarity outlined by counter-cultural studies proposed by Meredith Tax. Likewise, the reliance on 'art' history as the focus of complementary studies was seen as problematic and often unrelated to the subjects of study. With the development of the New Art History and new critical disciplines emerging from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies (BCCC) Arts degree courses started to implement subject specific histories⁸

In real terms, the Spirit of '68 as played out through Art Schools, changed very little indeed. What was most significant though was the attention that the rebellion brought to arts education. It also marks a climate in which the value of the arts have been articulated and utilised in daily life, i.e. the core values within Arts education have moved from creativity, aesthetic development and moral education towards creation, performance and practice, which not only demonstrates agency, but a more defined emphasis on professionalism and 'innovation, thinking and doing' (Sanders & Stappers 2008). Nonetheless, the evidence emphasises a clear attempt to frame and dilute arts education to fit standardised educational frameworks in other disciplines and, as a consequence, many of the core components of arts learning, thinking and practice are devalued or negated.

3. Contemporary Context

Art and design HE in the UK today is subject to the same neoliberal market forces as its STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) contemporaries. Audit culture and metrics rule at all levels: the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF 2014) was employed to assess the quality and impact of research in UK Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] and its findings used to determine how subsequent research funding was allocated; the National Student Survey (NSS 2017) is the means by which current students can give 'honest feedback on what it has been like to study on their course at their [publicly funded HEI] institution', its results are used to rank institutions and thereby influence their place in the market sector; and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF 2017) is currently being implemented in order to 'recognise and reward excellent learning and teaching'. A HEI's TEF results were originally intended to be used as a means to determine the level of tuition fees it could charge its students but this plan experienced a setback when it was blocked by the House of Lords in March of this year (Havergal 2017). REF, NSS, TEF and their brethren past and future risk shaping the very thing that they were intended to monitor and promote, as well as absorbing time and resources that might be more fruitfully deployed elsewhere.

Art and design education is vital to the UK's economy; in 2014 alone the UK's creative industries generated over £84 billion GVA (UK Gov 2016) - design proving to be the fastest-growing creative

⁸ , Later, the development of a more inter-disciplinary contextual studies became standard.

sector, worth £3.2 billion (Montgomery 2016) - and it is one of the few areas of the economy that has grown consistently since the late '90s. In response to internalised narratives of 'employability' and 'professional practice' combined with market pressure exerted by publicly accessible Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2016), increasingly the art and design HEI's emphasis is on metrics as evidence of success while understanding that the very things that are valued by employers within the creative industries - creativity and innovation (Sorrel 2014) - are notoriously resistant to quantification.

4. Future Context?

Participants in the workshop hailed from HEIs in the UK, North America and mainland Europe and their contributions demonstrated the diverse antecedents of each countries' Art (and Design) Schools while iterating the pervasive demands of shifting national and concomitant institutional politics on the arts educators' energies.

Building on the discussions that took place within the workshop, this project aims to consider the ways in which HE art education can be understood, experienced and valorised through Europe-wide ethnographic research. Through the collection and analysis of aural histories recording the experiences of those who were students (and staff) in Art Schools during the '68 protests and the impact that their formal and extracurricular educational experiences had on their lives, the intention is to identify or elicit core skills that arise and are developed as a result of education within the arts, that offer new ways of seeing, doing, thinking and being in everyday life.

Anyone wishing to contribute to or collaborate on this project please contact the lead author with an expression of interest and details of their HEI affiliation.

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