

Article

Education & Beyond: Shaping & Locating Identity - Unwrapped

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Visual Artists Today: On Becoming

AT THE *VISUAL ARTISTS TODAY* SYMPOSIUM IN MAY 2015, HOSTED BY ARTS WEEK AT BIRKBECK AND COORDINATED WITH FELLOW MPhil/PhD COLLEAGUES, RUTH SOLOMONS AND NIKI ZANTI, I CHAIRED THE FIRST PLENARY SESSION *EDUCATION AND BEYOND: SHAPING AND LOCATING IDENTITY*. This had been highlighted as the preliminary or 'becoming' stage in the 'becoming', 'being' and 'unbecoming' lineage we identified as stages of artisthood. The session was organised to cover a chronological trajectory of sorts in becoming an artist, with a focus on art education as a catalyst. This paper highlights some of the key themes that emerged from the presentations and the discussion which followed, critiquing them using theoretical interpretations that relate to my own research in the area, before surveying one of the significant debates of the session and the wider subject overall more closely, that is the contradictory and complex nexus of creativity and innovation versus business, the market and professionalism.

To briefly introduce my own research, the working title for my project is *The Professionalisation of Visual Arts Practice in the UK from the mid 1980s to the Present*. It explores the evolution of the artist identity and artistic practice during this thirty-year period relating to changes in the political, social, economic and educational landscape. It encounters the impact of the embracing of the visual arts by the overarching creative and cultural industries,

the influence of commerce and the market, including neoliberalism and current economic policy affecting opportunities and creating potential drawbacks for artistic labour, and the value, agency and identification acquired through the art school years, all of which are posited in relation to professionalisation and investigated using a sociological framework.

The first speaker at the symposium, Jenny Robins, explored areas of secondary school art education and its influence on early stage identification with art and arts practice in her presentation *All Inspiration is Valid*. Her research, carried out at UCL's Institute for Education, looked at the extent to which different secondary schools embodied an open approach to encourage 'non-academic making', outside of what might be legitimated through the art classroom and correlated this with the number of children who might self-identify as artists, or show an understanding of what an artist's career might be.¹ Robins's research highlighted the necessity for openness in allowing children to make their own minds up about what an artist could be, and stated that art teachers ought to overcome or circumnavigate the 'ideological baggage' surrounding the terminology of being an artist in order for their pupils to be open in the process of making and identifying with being an artist. The relationship between how we are taught to identify with art and artists and the difficulties artists have relating to their identity today, especially when faced with the innocuous question of, 'what do you "do"?' was emphasised as being influenced and shaped by our early experiences in art education.

Next, Indrani Ashe's presentation *The Unconventional Woman: Portrait of the Artist in Limbo* defined an MFA postgraduate perspective, charting the potentialities of a future art career replete with the fortuitous yet precarious social capital accrued from a Goldsmith's art education. As a recent graduate, Ashe embarked on a performance project which entailed undertaking fifty anonymous dates for a new dating app that she explained was testing her relationship with her self-identity. Her identity as a student had amassed a certain cultural cache, or 'social capital' as she described it, which prevented her from leaving London due to the possibility of its dissolution.² Ashe described her project as having transitioned her into the position of an artist brand, and aligned her with areas she preferred to resist ordinarily, such as the reductive arena of commodity and commercialisation. She questioned what it was she was supposedly selling and referred back to art historical contexts of the canon of artist as brand. To reflect on Ashe's presentation it could be interpreted that the artist identity is subject to place and the capital gained through educational value, something that can be related to the cognitive monopolies and social closure as aspects of professionalisation discussed in my own research when overlaying the sociological framework of Magali Sarfatti Larson's *Professionalisation Project* (1977) onto the visual arts. Ashe's experience also demonstrates that the artist identity is ever changing; in education it is one entity, but outside the formal educational institutions it may be necessarily altered by adaptations that occur in the process of continuing with a creative practice.

Lastly, and perhaps the final phase in 'becoming' an artist, taken via formal educational routes at least, was the positioning of the practice-led PhD by artist-researcher Alison Goodyear, who spoke on *Prearity: practice and the PhD*, and who described carving out a new understanding of an identity that encounters both the creative and academic spaces, yet which faces a pertinent kind of precarity specific to the artist-academic. Goodyear described her approach to her practice-led PhD at Chelsea College of Arts, as necessarily splitting her time between two 'caves', that of the 'writing cave' and that of the

‘painting cave’, and discussed her strategy, not without its struggles, for finding a balance between the two.³ The precarity she experiences is described as being that of a new kind, different from the better-understood financial precarity artists face, hers is concerned with ‘maintaining an artistic practice alongside the requirements of a burgeoning research practice’.⁴ Goodyear went on to say that the most challenging aspect of the practice-led PhD is the increased knowledge and comprehension of her subject, which means that the positioning of the self and understanding one’s identity as an artist has become even more difficult and precarious because, as she posits in a question, ‘how do we find a space for ourselves?’⁵ Goodyear’s presentation highlighted one of the significant questions concerning identity, that of where we situate ourselves in the world relating to how much we know about that world: a constantly shifting paradigm.

As the symposium was opened up to the audience focal points from each presentation stimulated discussion, with the main axis gravitating towards the oft-presented conflict between creativity and inventiveness versus the forces of economy, business and professionalisation. The emergent debate highlighted that there seems to be a broad misunderstanding of what are seen and experienced by some as necessary and desirable skills to be obtained by fine art graduates when moving into post-educational stages of artisthood. The subject of ‘skills’ and what artists might need in terms of access to skilling throughout education was discussed during a conversation on the contradictory yet necessary states of ‘convergent and divergent’ thinking, assumed to be involved in the abilities of the artist brain. This idea, raised by an audience member, was that both thought processes were necessary in fulfilling the artist trajectory - albeit if that is to be of a career allied to the market, but they added, that many artists were not able to do this because they were not taught to ‘sell themselves’ and so they would not be able to ‘differentiate’ themselves from ‘thousands of other artists’.⁶ Uniqueness and originality of course can be related back to Ashe’s commentary around the artist as brand, and in terms of quantifying identity, is also detailed in the other two speakers presentations, whether in highlighting the need to break down the idealistic tendency behind it, or in acknowledging its necessity and seeking it, but not quite knowing how to get to it. However, during the ‘necessary skills’ debate that ensued at the symposium, various ideas were considered for how to combat this identified ‘lack’ in skilling, including a 12-step program in business skills, mentoring schemes between BA and MA courses and alternatives to the formal educational outlets that are taking place already. Neither the need for solely creative education nor the requirement for skills to be taught as necessary for the continuation of a practice post education reached a general consensus, which is echoed in wider debate on the topic, as will be the main focus in this paper discussed in greater detail hereon in.

Inside the Art Schools: Creativity vs. Necessary Skilling

One has to ask: Should the art school turn itself into a monastery that protects students from the evil forces outside or should it invite the market in and become a kind of lively bazaar? It seems to me the answer is neither and both.⁷

Taking art director and educator Daniel Birnbaum’s comments as a reference point, we can look at how this issue has spurred some of the art world’s most esteemed artists, educators and institutions to enter into and perpetuate the discussion. The impassioned dialogue on the difficult realities, tensions and

fears surrounding the embedding of professionalism in art schools today is heard through the views of Ute Meta Bauer, Daniel Birnbaum and Bruce Ferguson.

Before entering the microcosm of the discussion, however, it is first useful to situate the art school within its historical context and look to some of the impactful changes in policy affecting its development within the UK to explore the nascence of professionalisation in art education. A moment of revolution for the art schools can be traced back to the 1960s and to the influence of Sir William Coldstream, who was Professor of Fine Art at the Slade School of Art at the time. His *First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education*, otherwise known as the First 'Coldstream' Report, is widely considered to have transformed art education by underpinning it with academic roots, through the introduction of entry grades and an additional tier of learning in the guise of the Foundation Course, through the integration of art theory and written assignments, encouragement of interdisciplinarity across UCL departments, and final year portfolio presentations.⁸ These steps are seen to have fundamentally embedded a new approach to art making, theorising and understanding, and ultimately, marking and evaluating, that was, and is still today, more rigorous and academic in nature than pre-Coldstream (see Robert Strand's 1987 *A Good Deal of Freedom* for an in-depth critique of this).⁹ The report and the intellectualisation it brought about also effectively functioned as a means to further engender a divide between the fine arts and crafts, or 'high' and 'low' art forms, and sought to not only differentiate the fine arts but also elevate them as a more intellectual pursuit. However, what the report did not cater for at this point in the early 1960s was the artist's capacity, desire or even ability to build a career as a professional practicing artist upon graduation, moreover it was anticipated that a fine art degree should easily be transformed into a teaching qualification. This is a marked difference from today's fine art BAs, which as I have identified through my research, are becoming more overtly geared towards and preoccupied with building the professional careers of practicing artists.

That the art school is party to state interest, its wider political context and links to the national economy are also necessary to acknowledge by briefly considering the influence of some of the external political and economic landscape that surrounds it. These areas are seen as having instrumentally shaped the direction of art and design education today and historically. After all, the first British art schools were founded on competitive grounds between the UK and their European counterparts to reduce the deficit in trained British designers, and so to be able to be more competitive in industry and the wider economy.¹⁰ When considering the current debate on increased professionalisation, the political motivations and influences behind the art school remain contributory factors in shaping the current incarnation of the art schools. For example, the impact of a more neoliberal political climate in general can be considered somewhat significant in its encouragement of individual entrepreneurialism and a liberal capitalism that adapts to markets and commercialises the previously non-commodifiable. When considering the place of creativity in all of this, there are plenty of reports published by quasi-government affiliated organisations that point to an increased interest in art education as providing the backbone for the continued growth of the creative industries and knowledge economy. One example is the 2013 Centre for Economics and Business Research report, *The Contribution of the Arts and Culture to the National Economy*, which demonstrates their stance on the importance of art education, and specifically the education of 'creativity' in

benefitting the national economy. It states,

Artistic education is important for developing creativity, an essential supporting pillar of the UK's increasingly knowledge-based economy. Continual innovation and creativity in knowledge-intensive activities are imperative to maintain growth. Education in arts and culture fosters this creativity.¹¹

This, and further reading through the CEBR report, is indicative that the political aims and interests of the national economy are inextricably linked to art education and are as important today as they were at the founding of the first art schools. Interestingly it is 'creativity' itself which is supported as being the lynchpin in nurturing the growth of the creative economy. The sacred preservation of creativity is also the undercurrent fuelling much of the debate on the subject in and around today's art schools as professionalisation is being included as part of the curricula activity of fine art studies to a greater extent.

Artist and former Dean of the Royal College of Arts, Ute Meta Bauer, discusses the relationship the art market has with the educational institution in her 2009 essay *Under Pressure*.¹² Bauer confronts the idea that the art school needs to work to understand better their relationship to the market so to avert future art making from the threats of market pressures. Her stance is cautious of the market's capitalist intentions, where she warns of the negative impacts of market directives on creativity, noting that the, 'rapaciousness of its desire for the new discourages memory and deep criticality.'¹³ She questions the increasing endorsement coming from art school curriculums of the necessity with which artists need to be aligned to the market, and that it is in the hands of the art institutions themselves not to buckle to the market trends and demands. She asks,

Is it still possible to believe [...] in the artist as an organic intellectual whose role is not to act subordinate but to be a critically independent voice that negotiates civil society? [...] The biggest challenge may not be the pressure of the art market, but the willingness of the academy to challenge itself.¹⁴

Bauer admonishes the heightened market-centred educational backdrop she sees as permeating many fine art courses, and optimistically searches for alternative notions, such as the idea that artists will resist the lure of the market approach and this resistance might prevail as a way out of the restrictive forces of commodification in order that a more critical artist can be maintained. Whilst hoping for the endurance of a pure form of art that is unscathed by its potential for profit, Bauer also concedes that universities need to find a way of educating art students on the beneficial market properties that, in her view, bare less negative influence over the intentions behind the art works produced. She states,

The idea of making ephemeral and process-oriented work that cannot be absorbed so easily by the market still exists within the academy [...] New art will undoubtedly offer new possibilities of resistance, while the equal challenge remains to find ways in which what is useful about market thinking can be incorporated into art education and artistic practice.¹⁵

Ostensibly, Bauer's approach is a fairly measured response to the situation, ultimately preferring that artists' work is not heavily influenced or shaped by

the market to the extent of the commercialisation of the art object, yet acknowledging that there are merits to the market, and that these should be taught as part of a broad arts education today, but in a way which does not commodify the artists' ideas and output. This is a similar viewpoint to those of writer and curator Daniel Birnbaum, quoted earlier, who believes in the need for some teaching on the art market and business, and is pragmatic in his attitude towards art students and their relationship with the market, saying that, 'sooner or later they will be part of it, so perhaps it's important to understand a few things about the forces involved.'¹⁶

A stronger opinion, however, is the stance of curator and art director Bruce Ferguson, who is firmly of the impression that art schools need to reflect changes in the wider economy and artistic labour, and infuse an integrated commercial element to learning; in essence, to become more market driven. He proposes,

There is a set of necessary professional skills, many of them social, that is more of a priority than ever before: networking, writing and speaking skills, fiscal planning, that mastery of intellectual property rules, and most importantly, associated with conceptualizing and mounting exhibitions [...] Simply put, as the arts have become professionalized, the need and demand for more professional skills have emerged [...] the hippy vision of art school as a 'safe' environment or monastery where students are encouraged to fail, experiment and explore, is outdated [sic] and dangerous. Schools now should be seen for what they are - personal entrees into a professional world with a responsibility to guide young artists [...] Business schools change their curricula in relation to the way in which business is done, and art schools must be flexible enough to do the same.¹⁷

Though Ferguson acknowledges that external demands are driving this necessity his views seem set within a rigid framework of commercial realism that does not agonise over a possible loss of criticality or the preserve of creativity. Rather, he sees the art school as having a strict responsibility as a training ground for young 'professionals' to emerge from, that is failing its students if it hasn't equipped them with the 'necessary professional skills' he lists as essentials by the time they graduate.

The debate has been demonstrated to be profoundly divided and divisive, with many facets to consider, though only a small handful from either side having been examined here. The anti-capitalist resisters have reproached the scourge of the market fearing and cautioning against reduced criticality in one camp, whilst the proponents of the market hold the pragmatic view of the necessity of business skills grounded in the rationale of career entitlement on the other. For the latter, the element of practical realism is heavily favourable in elevating their side of the argument, it cannot be avoided; the market and business exist, and for the most part artists will need to engage with it at some point, so as Birnbaum suggests, perhaps art students need to know about it. But, the notion that the market is damaging for creativity and that the art object is being diminished through commodification is a cautionary counterweight that bares down heavily on the previous argument. Bauer's point about resistance is worth remembering that artists will find a way of circumventing hostile environments and can evade a host of possible dangers to safeguard their integrity, be it the market, policy, economic difficulty or an education that has 'failed' to give proper 'professional training'.

However, it does appear that for the future of a nourishing and well-rounded art education there is a possible middle ground that needs to be

reached. There needs to be a strong commitment to creativity and critical practice to generate ideas as its foundation, but it is also necessary that art schools acknowledge a relationship with the market, as Bauer suggests. They must necessarily integrate understanding of association with business, without losing sight of the powers of the market nor the role of undiluted innovation, originality and imagination as key principles in the future of art making.

The position of the artist identity in all of this will no doubt continue to shape-shift, as it becomes possibly more business focussed, more deeply brand-like and more professional, whilst hopefully retaining its ability to be flexible, to be resistant and to ultimately be a source of creativity and vision. What this paper has explored, and indeed what materialised from the symposium is that the artist identity is undoubtedly seeded through education, and is a variable, plastic, highly personal attribute, which is wholly exceptional to the individuals who call themselves artists.

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Notes

- 1 Jenny Robins, *Visual Artists Today*, symposium, Birkbeck, University of London 2015.
- 2 Indrani Ashe, *Visual Artists Today*, symposium, Birkbeck, University of London 2015.
- 3 Alison Goodyear, *Visual Artists Today*, symposium, Birkbeck, University of London 2015.
- 4 Alison Goodyear, *Visual Artists Today*, symposium, Birkbeck, University of London 2015.
- 5 Alison Goodyear, *Visual Artists Today*, symposium, Birkbeck, University of London 2015.
- 6 Anon. *Visual Artists Today*, symposium, Birkbeck, University of London 2015.
- 7 Daniel Birnbaum, 'Teaching Art: Adorno and the Devil', in *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, ed. by Steven Henry Madoff (London: The MIT Press, 2009) pp. 231-247 (p. 238).
- 8 NACAE, *First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education*, (London: HMSO, 1960).
- 9 Robert Strand, 'A Good Deal of Freedom: Art and Design in the Public Sector of Higher Education, 1960-1982' (London: Council for National Academic Awards, 1987).
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 11 Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) 2013, 'The Contribution of the Arts and Culture to the National Economy', <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/CEBR_economic_report_web_version_0513.pdf> [accessed on 01.12.15] p.5.
- 12 Ute Meta Bauer, 'Under Pressure', in *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, ed. by Steven Henry Madoff (London: The MIT Press, 2009) pp. 219-227.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- 16 Daniel Birnbaum, 'Teaching Art: Adorno and the Devil,' p. 238.
- 17 Bruce Ferguson, 'Art Education', in *Education*, ed. by Felicity Allen (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011) pp. 175-176 (pp. 175-176).

Works Cited

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<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/CEBR_economic_report_web_version_0513.pdf> [accessed on 01.12.15]
- National Advisory Council on Art Education, London, HMSO., *First Report Of The National Advisory Council On Art Education* (London, 1960)