

1

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Title Page

‘Art World Strategies: Neoliberalism and the Politics of Professional Practice in Fine Art
Education’

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Art World Strategies: Neoliberalism and the Politics of Professional Practice in Fine Art Education

Abstract

This paper explores how the expansion of professional practice on fine art courses in the UK could be detrimentally impacting on the critical and political ambitions of art education. I argue that the current student fees-debt regime institutes a neoliberal model of higher education with a focus on ‘enterprise’, directing student subjectivity towards competitive opportunity seeking market strategies. I examine the case of fine art professional practice through an analysis of two examples of expert advice directed to the would-be artist: the first which utilises a generic language of business management, recommending art students adopt an ‘entrepreneurial mindset’ in order to gain competitive advantage; the second which utilises the specific language of art world networking as a behavioural strategy for career success. I go on to identify problems with these strategic investor models, both at the level of contemporary art’s critical values, and also with regard to whether the entrepreneurial model offers more and better opportunities overall. I propose a critical professional practice capable of transcending the ‘reality’ of individualist, market competition whilst addressing real world issues of work, career and finance, and conclude with a discussion of where ethical responsibility lies for fine art educators.

Keywords: neoliberalism; fine art education; professional practice; entrepreneurial mindset; art networking; art market

Introduction: The New Student-Investor

‘Professional Practice’ is an increasingly significant component of higher education study in the UK, with new cross-faculty departments set up and school staff employed to service courses and assist students into employment, and ever-larger amounts of curriculum time given over to deliver it. The rise of professional practice can be seen in the context of increased student numbers and an uncertain graduate jobs market, but most explicitly it is a consequence of the student fees-loans regime, a system of undergraduate degree course funding which, since its inception for home and

EU students in 1998 has always been publicly justified on the grounds that on average university graduates will command higher earnings relative to non-graduates, and so should be expected to contribute significantly towards their education costs. The introduction and expansion of fees under the New Labour government, although controversial and much contested within the party and without, represented much needed *additional* funding for universities, rectifying the sharp decline in funding per student that had occurred under the previous Conservative administration as a result of a rapid but unfunded expansion in student numbers (McGettigan 2013, 18-19). New Labour put in greater public investment alongside a commitment to widening access, but in 2009 a ‘vision for a more entrepreneurial higher education sector’ (20) was set out in a report by the then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Peter Mandelson. This report, with its focus on the ‘knowledge economy’ (including the ‘creative industries’) as a global competitive strategy, was followed by the establishment of a reviews panel, led by former BP Chief Executive John Browne, to examine how HE could be sustained with less public money. Towards the end of 2010, the newly elected Tory led coalition government rapidly, and amidst huge protests, put Browne’s recommendations for student fees into law.

This legislation, enabling public HE institutions to triple fees as the government withdrew direct funding, marked the pivotal point in a political project to redefine HE. With student loans covering full costs for Arts, Humanities and Social Science courses, the logic of fees shifted the conception of university education decisively away from that of public benefit – a conception that the principle of ‘co-payment’ still indicated, even if in diluted form. What was presented at the time as an austerity measure following the global financial crash, has been the primary means to transform the conception of higher education from a common social good to a private commodity measured largely in terms of financial returns on investment – the interests of indebted students on one side and a privatizing national economy on the other, magically aligning in the graduate jobs market. If students are now footing the bill for their own education, so the logic goes, then they will choose an

institution and a course which is more likely to promise them a better financial return. The use of debt to create an explicit link between higher educational study and individual future income has put the onus on universities to meet ‘customer expectations’ in this regard. Graduate ‘destination’ data on employment and earnings, whilst not a new innovation in itself, has been made increasingly visible for potential students and their parents, who are encouraged to compare graduate incomes for subjects, courses and institutions on the Unistats website and in newspaper university league tables. The widespread distribution of this ‘consumer data’ further incentivizes competing universities to improve their relative employment and earnings outcomes in order to attract applicants, and the fees they carry with them, in the new higher education marketplace.

There is immediately a problem with the student-as-rational-investor model when it comes to creative degrees such as fine art: they are a seriously ‘bad bet’. Government commissioned research published in 2011/12 showed that the ‘graduate premium’ – the extra lifetime earnings of graduates compared with non-graduates – simply does not apply to students of Art and Design courses, with average ‘value-added’ for arts graduates failing even to cover tuition costs for female students, and amounting to a net loss for males (McGettigan 2014, 7). According to another national survey, two-thirds of artists earn less than £15,000 annually before tax *including* from their non-artistic activity (Harper 2014, 16) – a figure that is significantly below median UK income. The fact that students continue to enroll suggests either that they are economic risk takers banking on high stakes commercial success or that they have non-financial motivations for studying art which are strong enough to override the likelihood of a lifetime of debt (evidence indicates that financial motivations are low for those who pursue this career path (Harper, 10)). A third suggestion, favoured by neoliberal policymakers, is that ‘bad’ decisions on a personal economic level – which therefore represent taxpayer ‘misinvestment’ (the non-recuperation of government backed loans) – are a consequence of a lack of available market information and can therefore be rectified by increasing the visibility and the detail regarding previous students’ economic ‘returns’ in the workplace.

Publishing accurate earnings and employment data of graduates per institution and course will therefore, according to the 2015 Small Business, Enterprise and Employability Act (as quoted in McGettigan 2015), ‘help to create an incentive and reward structure at universities by distinguishing the universities that are delivering the strongest enterprise ethos and labour market outcomes for their students’. With the roll out of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2017, graduate destination data has now become a key metric for measuring undergraduate teaching itself, with the prospect that economic performance amongst graduates (and therefore loan repayment rates) will affect the ability of state funded universities to determine course fees. Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data tracks graduate income and employment much more tightly than before and over a longer period by replacing self-reporting destination surveys with a system that links student loans information with DWP and HMRC tax and benefits data, an innovation ‘which could fundamentally alter the market viability of certain university courses’ (Morris, 2017). Caught in a vice between knowledgeable consumers (students) shopping for sound investment products and pro-marketising lenders (the government) determined to avoid ‘moral hazard’ – the exposure of risk from ‘bad’ decisions students make (McGettigan 2015) – universities and courses feel compelled to focus ever more on the future incomes and career success of their students.

Neoliberal Subjectivity

If we are to maintain that the study of fine art is fed by beliefs and desires which contradict the financial justification given for full fees, then we should be wary of the growing business rhetoric which has come to infiltrate course curricula for the ostensible benefit of students. In particular the ebullient, ‘positive’ language of ‘enterprise’, often seems incongruous when set alongside art’s capacities for ‘negativity’. Negativity, in a critical sense, is the practice of art as the refusal to fully

adapt to or ‘affirm’, but rather to seek to materially transform, perceived reality and ‘necessary’ forms of behavior (Marcuse 2009); or as John Robert’s puts it in relation to avant-gardism, an expression of the subject’s irreducibility and resistance to both ‘natural and social causality’ (Roberts 2007). Angela McRobbie (2015), charting a rhetorical shift begun under New Labour from ‘culture’, with its more problematic Marxist inheritance, to ‘creativity’, sees the entrepreneurial imperative to ‘be creative’ as a means of ‘capturing’ the intellect and enthusiasm of young people for market innovation ‘so that capitalist production is seemingly radicalized and made more interesting’ (40). For her the ‘pedagogic instruments’ targeting ‘individuals in all their uniqueness and distinctiveness’ (39) are in fact ‘highly normative, offering little space for negative subjective status’ (40). Writing of the arts graduate seeking employment in the creative industries, she identifies the requirement to maintain a ‘positive’ attitude: ‘the imperative to self-present in a cheerful if not exuberant fashion’, ‘to keep going and to maintain the middle-class professionalism [which demonstrates] the right kind of “personality” for the work’ (40). By contrast ‘negative’ manifestations involving doubt, difficulty, subversion, estrangement, awkwardness, resistance and paradox are, in my experience, still encouraged on fine art courses as a way to connect, through production, subjective states with wider social concerns. Online course descriptions tend to underplay or render invisible this more political ethos which, sitting uneasily alongside the authority exerted by the contemporary art market, draws on socially oriented avant-garde practices, critical and contextual theories, and experimental art school pedagogies.¹

What is significant about the entrepreneurial ethos which has entered educational discourse across the board, is that, as McRobbie implies, it offers more than career and professional sustainability advice: it targets student subjectivity itself, developing not only a customer mentality with respect to course ‘delivery’ and expected ‘outcomes’, but attitudes and forms of behaviour thought likely to advantage the individual within established, competitive market conditions. This becomes especially clear if we consider another key document from the marketising project for HE – Lord

Young's 2014 government report *Enterprise for All*, which 'looks at fostering an enterprising attitude in both formal and informal education,' in order to meet employer needs, and incubate new businesses in a period of growing self-employment.ⁱⁱ Of particular interest is the way Young opens his report: 'Enterprise means more than just the ability to become an entrepreneur. It is that quality that gives an individual a positive outlook, an ability to see the glass as half full rather than half empty, and is a valuable attribute for the whole of life' (Young 2014, 1). 'Enterprise' is presented in the report less in terms of practical information for those who may wish to run a business or may need to register as self employed (as many artists do), and more as a generically virtuous frame of mind, 'a can-do and positive attitude' (4) which, Young asserts, it is the role of educators (from primary school to university) to foster in students.

The fact that education policy has, over the last decade in particular, been tasked with the role of changing thinking and behaviour so that student desires coalesce with pro-market economic policy, should come as no surprise if we read what has been happening in terms of neoliberal logic. As Michel Foucault states in his 1978-9 lectures on neoliberalism, 'the enterprise is not just an institution but a way of behaving in the economic field' (Foucault 2008, 175). Specifically it is a form of behaviour geared towards competitive strategies, and it is the job of neoliberal governance to actively produce competitive behaviour in individuals, for example by attacking the collectivist principles represented in trade unions, the public sector and the welfare state, so that market rationality and the price system can regulate society more fully. In Foucault's famous formula, the art of neoliberal government consists in extending the 'enterprise unit' beyond business organisations to the point where the individual becomes 'an entrepreneur of himself' (226) — a subject whose primary task in life is to seek returns on investments. From the perspective of recent changes to HE, undertaking a degree becomes an investment in one's 'human capital', a fact that gains financial expression in the quantitative figure of the loan provided by the government, and which should motivate potential indebted students to focus on likely economic returns. This focus

demands business adaptability, or in other words, conduct conducive to economic success under current market conditions. The neoliberal subject, says Foucault, quoting Gary Becker, is someone who ‘accepts reality’ and acts accordingly; someone, that is to say, who will conduct themselves in a way ‘which responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment’ (269).

Whilst ongoing criticism and concerns over university fees have necessitated some stalling from the present minority Conservative government (e.g. the maintenance of universal fee caps, and the raising of the loan repayment threshold) the market based approach continues to move forward. In this context a newly resurgent left Labour opposition offers hope that fees may be abolished entirely – at least for home students. Given this possibility, we still need to address the ways neoliberal structures and culture enforced within HE institutions have been and are being entrenched to the extent that they may continue in the future to produce modes of subjectivity geared towards individualistic, competitive market strategies. How these structures and this culture relate to the values of a critical fine art education and the possibilities art offers for counter-hegemonic identities is what I wish to explore in this paper.

Professional Practice in Fine Art

Whilst there are many professional and life trajectories that can productively stem from a fine art degree, there are no clearly defined jobs awaiting graduates as there are in some other subject areas. In this essay I will focus on the transition of the student to the role which most closely adheres to their educational activity on the course — namely being, or becoming, an artist. How courses equip students to reach this goal, something which many course leaders and lecturers claim to want to do (Allan and Rowles 2016, 16), is no mean feat given the sheer number of Fine Art courses in the UK (96 dedicated full-time BA courses according to the online Which? guide), and the many thousands

of graduate and post-graduate students entering into the competitive art world every year. This is before even accounting for the financial feasibility of an activity where, according to a survey from 2011, a third of artists earn under £5,000 per annum from artistic activity (Harper 2014, 16) – probably an overestimation given the survey is from members of a professional body). Another survey from the same year found that ‘7% of visual creators earn about 40% of total income’ (Harper 2014, 15), and we know that the distribution of income and resources amongst fine artists is skewed heavily towards a tiny elite.

Let us begin then by asking what specifically constitutes professional practice for an artist. In a study from outside of the educational context, that looks at the guilt and shame attached to not knowing whether one ‘qualifies’ to be called an artist, Lynne Fanthome (2013) lists ‘current professional practice demands’ as follows: ‘Producing regular applications for funding and commissions; developing self-marketing and proficiency with social media; networking with agencies and arts organizations and circulating at arts events’ (283). Notice that the ‘professional’ here excludes any activity concerned with the primary production of art works, and is instead focused on parallel administrative and sociable practices: application filling, self-marketing, and networking. Alongside an emphasis on the documentation of artworks, and opportunities to work with art world organisations, these are the sorts of things that are now regularly addressed on fine art courses in specific professional practice units, or more holistically throughout the curriculum. Such provision marks a distinct historical shift in the fine art curricula from a situation where, in the past, the professed autonomy of the discipline seemed to exclude or severely restrict any *formal* discussion of careers and professional strategies (see Allan and Rowles 2016), to a focus today which, as one course leader puts it, is all about ‘professionally presenting oneself to the external world’ (120). The message is clear: it is not enough simply to make work, however good, and hope that somehow you will be ‘discovered’ and people will get to see it. You must actively seek out opportunities to have your work supported and recognised.

Even if one were to accept this uncritically as a framework for fine art careers advice, things may not be so straight forward: for while the artist must conscientiously work at attaining recognition, this entrepreneurial endeavour must remain to some extent hidden or symbolically disassociated from the artist's primary activity if he is to 'emerge' pure, recognised by curators, gallerists and collectors in the aspect of his artistic ability or 'genius' and through the inherent quality of the work, rather than as an explicit result of strategic or 'pushy' behaviour. As one head of professional development says, admiringly paraphrasing an influential London gallerist and collector, 'it's a very organic [...] very personal process [...] you can't just inflict [yourself on] them [gallerists]' (Allan and Rowlands, 104); a convivial process, therefore, necessitating the acquisition of privileged information, beneficial connections and a conducive personality.

We are presented at this stage with two perspectives on what professional practice might entail in fine art education – one general, the other specific. On the one side there is the *general* and culturally dominant language of enterprise, already familiar to us from TV shows such as *The Apprentice*, 'inspirational' TED talks, and popular self-help/get-rich business manuals – all part of the wider ideological and institutional ensemble that Henri A. Giroux calls 'corporate public pedagogy' (2005, 4). This enterprise discourse derives ultimately from the neoliberal agenda to turn education into a marketplace of private investment goods and to instill business-oriented values and attitudes in the future workforce. Despite a willingness by some art teachers to describe what fine art students (must) do as entrepreneurial (Allan and Rowlands 2016, 28 and 122), the generic discourse often appears to those in art school as something externally imposed, an alien, managerial mode of speaking which arrives via other agents within the university. In particular it can be something of a shock when the language of 'creativity' re-enters the art school as a business school 'thinking-outside-the-box' conformist dogma. As Katrine Hjelde states, citing evidence from a survey, 'many teaching staff in Fine Art currently consider words like enterprise and employability

to sit very uneasily in relation to their course ethos and curriculum' (2015, 177), a view exacerbated by misgivings tutors have towards neoliberal ideals of the flexible project worker (175). Learning such things as 'workplace etiquette' and 'appropriate [professional] behavior'ⁱⁱⁱ sound like normative impositions of the kind art students would be expected (at least at an explicit level) to question and challenge, in line not only with a critical cultural tradition, but *also*, with the 'outsider' bohemianism which still has currency in the art market.

On the other side, professional practice refers to *specific* efforts to attain art world endorsement or recognition so that one can pursue and sustain a career as a practitioner in the art world. The accumulation of what I will call art world capital – forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1993) specific to the contemporary art world – usually requires that artists vigilantly pursue a whole set of activities aimed at making their art practices visible to individuals with existing symbolic power, whilst holding their artistic persona at a distance from (or at least in an ironic relation with) the economically motivated 'commercial artist' or opportunity seeking 'entrepreneur' marketing her brand. The narrative of artistic career success, the don't-miss-your-chance linear trajectory from 'early-career' to 'late-career artist', comes from contemporary art and so feels 'natural' to the art school, even to the extent that the information provided and the activities and forms of conduct endorsed ('appropriate behaviour') are not recognised or formalised in terms of 'professional practice', but are instead transmitted, via tutors and guest speakers (usually exhibiting artists and curators), as a kind of tacit or 'secret knowledge' authorized, ultimately, by the art market, and influencing all aspects of learning on the course. As Steven Henry Madoff puts it, 'the [art] market shapes which practitioners are patronized, lionized, and distributed like fluid through pipelines into the art school, as elsewhere, and subsequently affect the visions of student practitioners' (2009, 277). In this way the fine art course is already attached to economic activity in the 'real world', even if it has maintained its Romantic 'myth of exception' (276).

As one of the institutions which make up the art world, fine art education is very far from escaping neoliberal ideology (Kenning and Kern 2013). One thing however might be changing. If the sorts of competitive networking strategies practiced by individual artists have to an extent been taught or ‘passed on’ in art school (at least the most prestigious) at an informal and opaque level for a long time, the increased demands on fine art courses to address employability and enterprise directly may well lead to the *specific* operations of art world esteem being codified as a set of explicit entrepreneurial strategies towards artistic career success. Moves in this direction may even be praised as a meritocratic, transparent explication of the secretive ‘rules of the game’, challenging a system which privileges those with existing cultural and social capital. This argument, I would suggest, is dubious (and often employed for cynical ends) so long as it ignores the fact that structural exclusion remains the key operator and measure of art market value and career success. University art departments now relentlessly promote their high esteem star graduates as part of their own competitive marketing strategies. But we should ask to what extent the effort given over to professional practice, and the ever-more time consuming and costly pursuit of market strategies by art students, actually result in any more equally compensated opportunities overall. Furthermore, we should be alert as to how the instilling of individualized, self-valorizing strategic behaviour, underpinned by an objective acceptance of the (art) world as it is (notwithstanding one’s own negative experiences and knowledge as to the reality of the system) may increase art market influence whilst eroding the critical ambitions of the art school and the political agency of art. In what follows I will give two examples of how this might operate: firstly, through a generic business school discourse, and secondly, through a specific art world discourse.

Advice for Artists, Part One: The Entrepreneurial Mindset

Fine artists need to successfully meet the multi-faceted commercial and opportunity driven challenges and operate like entrepreneurs in order to make a living in the arts. While their art specific professional skills are often very sound, artists mostly lack the complementary entrepreneurial skills to meet the market requirements successfully. For this reason, arts incubators could help them further develop their sets of skills, to recognize and realize art business opportunities, and to increase their chances to attract attention on the market.

(Thom 2015, 51)

The quote above is taken from an article in *Artivate*, a new research journal dedicated to entrepreneurship in the arts. It's author Marco Thom employs a language of the business school rather than the art school, as he makes a case for the implementation of business incubators on fine art courses on the basis that 'up to 90%' of fine artists are self-employed and, moreover, operate in an intense 'winner-takes-all' market (51-2).^{iv} As such, whilst they may be good artists, fine art graduates must also be economic realists and would benefit from entrepreneurial training whilst at college or university. The specific aim of the incubators is to increase the prospects of individual commercial success within the field of contemporary art by encouraging students to opportunistically market themselves to 'gatekeepers' — i.e. those with art world prestige. The approach presented takes 'entrepreneurship' beyond the sorts of basic financial and marketing literacy that may prove of practical help for artists e.g. in setting up single person businesses, understanding copyright, using social media or managing contracts, and focusses instead on developing in students a set of five 'real entrepreneurial skills' designated as follows: innovative thinking, strategy, exploiting business opportunities, networking and leadership (53). The teaching of these skills will enable fine art student to acquire what Thom calls an 'entrepreneurial mindset', a condition which encompasses and encourages new 'thinking', 'attitudes' and 'behaviour' (58). Elsewhere in the academic business literature, the entrepreneurial mindset has been defined as 'the

ability to rapidly sense, act and mobilize, even under uncertain conditions' (McGrath and MacMillan quoted in Pollard & Wilson 2013, 7). It is the ability, in other words, to respond to realities 'on the ground' in order to create opportunities for market success. For Thom this is where 'art incubators' come in: by developing a generic entrepreneurial mindset fine art students will, it is claimed, be better able to identify and meet the specific requirements of the contemporary art market.

What are these requirements? In carrying out a survey of 281 fine art lecturers from the UK and Germany – all practicing artists – Thom discovers what are perceived to be the 'key market requirements' for becoming a successful artist. Top of the list is the need to produce 'outstanding work', followed by a need to attract 'attention and visibility'. But he also stumbles upon a finding, quite striking, although uncommented on further by Thom except as a description of market reality: 'The majority of lecturers held the opinion that the market is controlled and managed by a few, that are money rather than artistic value-driven gatekeepers (e.g. gallerists) who define trends and qualities.' This observation would seem to offer a strong, if subjective and potentially skewed, condemnation of the art market and its central role within the contemporary art world, given that gallerists, collectors and other experts and market players do not present what they do when endorsing artists in terms of financial reward, but according to criteria of artistic value (even if such criteria usually remain unstated and are communicated more in terms of gut feeling – see Rowles 2013). The obvious point in relation to the article is that a market based approach to professional success, if adopted with respect to art students, may end up directly contradicting the sorts of artistic values ('outstanding work') which are held up as intrinsic to the art school. These values can be sacrificed, it is implied, for the sake of gaining the appropriate 'attention and visibility' in the real world business environment fine art graduates must operate within. The view expressed that art world gatekeepers are influenced by economic considerations simply describes, from the perspective of the entrepreneurial mindset, business conditions to be negotiated and, if possible,

exploited and does not warrant further analysis. The same positivistic approach is behind the apparently objective statement Thom makes that the art market suffers from ‘an enormous oversupply of individual artists’ (Thom 2015, 59), a fact which is meant to compel individual competitive strategies, rather than make one think critically, collectively and transformatively about how value is determined in the art world precisely through the maintenance of strict barriers to entry and how this system of market control might be challenged.^v

It is easy to see how an economically rational, opportunistically geared acceptance of the world as it is could replace the negative capacities of art (critique, contestation, resistance, etc.) once the artist is identified as an ‘entrepreneur’, with a corresponding mindset (set of thoughts, attitudes and behaviours), as distinct from someone who must on occasion be classified as ‘self-employed’ in order to be paid for art-specific activities. Being ‘self-employed’ is a category of the tax office, a state-imposed identification (business name, unique tax number, etc.); being an ‘entrepreneur’ is a potent form of self-identification, embodied in a set of behaviours and a ‘state of mind’. The former is something artists can maintain as separate from their artistic identity; the latter is something which merges with an artistic persona at the most intimate, subjective level. But perhaps the perception of the artist as entrepreneur is not so incongruous after all if the prerequisite for getting one’s work shown is precisely to invest time and resources in building reputation by self-marketing and targeting ‘investors’ (art world gatekeepers) via network activity. According to one business article, companies seeking differentiation from competitors selling homogeneous products can learn lessons from artists who are ‘brand manager[s]’ (Rodner, Kerrigan and Baumgarth 2014, 112) and who strive for market share by liaising with ‘professionals who have the necessary social and cultural capital to filter through the creative output and bridge the artistic discourse to a wider audience’ (103). With its alienating business-school rhetoric, it could be claimed that Thom’s essay in fact exposes the hidden truth of the art world. Whilst disavowed as such, being a successful artist *is* about brand endorsement by a small number of gatekeepers, art events are primarily business

networking opportunities, whilst even aesthetic and conceptual decisions directed towards art production can be marketing strategies, assimilated to a currently successful ‘look’ or more saleable format or mode of display, etc.^{vi} According to Pierre Bourdieu, artists as much as gallerists and collectors are ‘cultural entrepreneurs struggling to accumulate specifically cultural capital, albeit at the cost of temporarily renouncing economic profit’ (Bourdieu 1993, 83). Despite the increased authority art sales themselves now hold as a feedback mechanism of prestige within the art world (prices acting as cultural capital), it is still the competitive struggle to accumulate symbolic recognition via art world insiders that precedes and largely determines market value. Until recently, initiation into this sort of ‘cultural entrepreneurship’ has remained low key and disguised, implicit in art school rather than communicated as an explicit set of goals. The increased focus on professional practice may be changing things not only through the external imposition of business school practices and discourses, but in the formulation of explicit self-promotional tools and networking techniques specific to contemporary art. It is to this that I now turn.

Advice for Artists, Part Two: Get into the Circle

If you can pick three galleries that you feel are the best fits for you and go every month to their private views, and really put on your ‘I’m being social even though it’s painful’ hat, you will meet them, they’re there. The gallerists are there, the other artists are there, collectors ... everyone you want to know is there, and just get into that circle, elbow your way in, get everyone’s card, be aggressive and just get in there [...] If they know you and they’re your mate, or whatever ... interning or any kind of way you can get involved with the gallery, and just make friends.

The quote above is taken from a curator talk (available for a time as an audio podcast) given to a group of MA Fine Art students at a London art college. The professional careers advice offered comes from an art world ‘insider’, not a business world ‘outsider’, and describes, almost to the point of parody, a situation familiar to anyone who has spent any time on the contemporary art circuit: a world of strategic sociability, duplicitous conviviality and aggressive maneuvering, where, for example, on the spot calculations are made at private views about who it will be more or less profitable to spend one’s time speaking to. The curator describes for the students the field of contemporary art in a tone that leaves no doubt that this is how it is and lays out a set of rules to follow if one wants to be a successful artist. Quite apart from their art practice, ambitious young artists, dependent on endorsement and support, will need to maintain a relentless, dedicated work ethic with regard to professional networking. Whilst artists clearly need to be ‘entrepreneurial’ in this regard (seeking out and exploiting opportunities), the goal as such is not explicitly financial, with recognition not being articulated in terms of the necessary means to economic survival and commercial success but as an end in itself. Accumulation of art world capital demands knowledge and is assisted by specific guidance from insiders with respect to how to play and win the game, but does not require initiation into the more general entrepreneurial language of the business school. Note how, from this point of view, whilst the strategic fine art graduate will adapt their behaviour to the reality of the situation they find themselves in, they do not have to acquire an authentically ‘positive outlook’. In fact the curator’s talk throughout is cynical, adopting a sarcastically humorous tone in order to disparage any ‘idealist’ notion that the annoying reality of the situation could be any different.

Is fine art professional practice to consist, then, in helping all graduates to compete by exposing the operations of artistic recognition and recommending behaviours and networking strategies? Could it even be characterised as a case of democratising access by offering information and opportunities to those without pre-existing social and cultural capital? There are two main objections to this ‘cynical

realist' attitude. Firstly, the aggressively competitive approach to professional success, including the instrumental use of other people and the sense that you are both dependent on specific actors and responsible for your own success or failure, exacerbates an un-comradely, anxiety-provoking networked culture of the kind described so clearly by Boltanski and Chiapello under the term 'anomie' (2007, 420-424). It promotes exclusionary and exploitative practices such as unpaid internships which benefit those not reliant on a wage, but which from the non-commercial perspective presented here, can only be seen in terms of networking opportunities. Learning 'the mechanics of getting what you want', as one professional practice facilitator on a fine art course puts it, means working unpaid if the placement is judged to offer better career value for the individual student than a paid post – but without any acknowledgment that such advice reinforces a system where those who cannot afford to work for free are excluded.

Secondly, such realism ignores how the acquisition of art world capital is facilitated by existing stocks of social and cultural capital. In chasing recognition too directly and obviously, an artist is likely to miss it, because art capital is still largely premised on self-interest remaining hidden. 'Consecration' occurs, in Bourdieu's terms, when the gallerist, curator or collector 'invests his prestige' in the artist by:

introduc[ing] the artist and his work into ever more select company (group exhibitions, one-man shows, prestigious collections, museums) and ever more sought-after places. [...] The art trader cannot serve his 'discovery' unless he applies all his conviction, which rules out "sordidly commercial" manoeuvres, manipulation and the 'hard sell', in favour of the softer, more discreet forms of 'public relations' [...] – receptions, society gatherings, and judiciously placed confidences.

(Bourdieu 1993, 77)

Despite the previously mentioned shift in contemporary art discourse towards a celebration of money and the symbolic authority of prices, Bourdieu's substantial point still holds insofar as the economic value of art is reliant on the maintenance of art's special status, its reputation, as Isabelle Graw (2010, 94) puts it, 'as [...] something that cannot be compared to stocks and shares.' So whilst the career rules to be followed by the ambitious artist are transparently laid out by the curator in her talk, there are problems with this advice even on its own terms because it is obvious that positioning oneself in proximity with individuals possessing symbolic authority will be greatly assisted not only if the artist possesses certain characteristics ('elbow your way in' ... 'be aggressive'), but already has personal acquaintances amongst and connections to the gatekeepers ('if they know you and they're your mate'). Cultural capital in its embodied state would include disposition or 'habitus' – a 'natural feeling' for how to act in select company, a confidence about how to connect to those with symbolic power, a 'sense' for who to approach, a feeling of entitlement, etc. '[T]his practical mastery,' writes Bourdieu (1993, 95), 'gives its possessor a "nose" and a "feeling", *without any need for cynical calculation*, for "what needs to be done"' (Bourdieu's emphasis). Likewise, having existing contacts is a far more reassuringly effortless way of 'working' ones way into the necessary 'circles' of art world prestige. In her talk the curator goes on to explain that 'you can't rock up to a gallery and be like "here's my portfolio, aren't I great, don't you want me?" That's just never going to happen.' Instead you must 'make some platform for conversation before you enter that place.' Coming across as too needy, too direct, or too crudely strategic in your efforts, will reveal you as being exactly the wrong sort of person, the 'annoying' needy intruder, the one who has upset the etiquette of seduction, who has not played by the appropriate rules. Students, especially those from working or lower-middle class backgrounds, are therefore caught in a strange contradiction: the lesson of professional practice is that you cannot sit around waiting to be discovered, you must be proactive and even ruthless as a self-promoter, and exploit every opportunity to gain the attention of those who hold the key to your career success. On the other hand, part of the job of the strategically oriented artist must be to hide from the symbolic

gatekeepers any sense of ‘profit-seeking’, so that recognition can happen as if the gallerist, curator or collector had come upon the innate qualities of an artist of their own volition and through their own intuitive sense and expert judgment — as if the artist has ‘emerged’ naturally into the art world spotlight, without all the tireless self-promotion and breathless networking.

A Double Problem with ‘Professional’ Strategies

The preceding two examples are extreme cases and are not meant to illustrate the current delivery of professional practice within fine art education. But precisely in their clear-cut, unapologetic explications they alert us to an ideological framework which can easily permeate more rounded approaches whilst remaining opaque. Specifically they alert us to how a focus on strategic professionalism can act in opposition to the imaginative and critical ambitions of the art school towards the formation of counter-hegemonic cultures and collective identities. Whether through the inculcation of a subjectively positive or a more cynically realist attitude, and whether deriving primarily from business school or art world rhetoric, the predominant message of these professional discourses is *behavioural compliance and cognitive adaptation to the realities of market competition*. This constitutes a first problem with respect to the strategic approach, the question of artistic quality or extra-economic values which can be ascribed to art in a wider social sense. This problem of value can itself be broken down into the effect it has at the level, firstly, of time management, and, secondly, of politics. At an initial level, time given over to art practice is diminished, both within the curriculum and more pointedly over the course as a whole (and eventually beyond it) as a result of the kinds of demands professional practice places on art students (and artists). The question here of artistic compromise can be highlighted from the perspective of Alessia Zorloni's (2013) economic theory of the art market. Due to the particular ‘network effects’ of the market in artists, where buyers and other symbolic gatekeepers tend to follow what other

gatekeepers are doing (the most reliable criteria of curatorial and collector 'judgment'), making an impression quickly is the best way to induce 'positive feedback', the rapid emergence of a particular artist. As Zorloni explains (99), 'In markets with network externalities [...] competition appears to be particularly fierce at the initial stage because, with the achievement of critical mass, triggering positive feedback can lead to almost monopolistic positions with the inevitable consequence of informally creating reputational barriers to entry.' From this point of view the young artist will therefore make a strategic decision about how to divide her time 'between artistic research and relational capital,' choosing either 'to invest more in self-promotion activities, or to favour experimentation and spend less time in public relations' (99-100). Between the demands of professional strategizing and artistic production, something must give.

On a more directly political level, there is a way in which an employment and enterprise focus on market adaptation and creative self-reliance sets out to destroy critical culture as such, to nip it in the bud in the form of the individualized student, compelled by competition to make a good impression and 'fit in' whilst 'standing out' from the crowd. McRobbie (2015) describes how the entrepreneurial approach gears students towards certain 'ways of speaking, ways of engaging, ways of comporting the self, expressing enthusiasm, withholding a critical disposition' (39). One example of the way in which a realist adaptation to the network logic operative in the art world has a conservative impact on art culture is given by Isabelle Graw (2010). Drawing on her experience as an editor of a contemporary art magazine, she points to the decline of well argued negative reviews in the art press: 'people are unwilling to make unnecessary enemies, especially as their support might one day be needed [...] hardly anyone today fights out in the open' (107). 'If you criticize someone in network capitalism you risk social death' (231). It is clear to see how caution about speaking out and potentially upsetting important people whose opinion may at some point affect one's career might be even stronger amongst artists.

The second major problem confronting the teaching of professional strategies is something perhaps even more disconcerting in terms of the latter's own self-justification. If professional practice on the one hand threatens to erode those critical points of intervention, resistance and the collective imagination which form a crucial part of fine art education, then on the other hand, and despite all the time and effort, it is far from clear that it offers *any more economically viable opportunities for graduates overall*. Frank and Cook's (1995) theory of 'winner-take-all' markets highlights this problem. The contemporary art market is just such a winner's market, money and resources being disproportionately skewed towards a few players at the top. As we have already seen with Zorloni's discussion of network effects, this is due to the way positive feedback operates to accelerate the promotion of those who already appear to be successful, therefore providing the incentive for the individual to achieve success quickly, whatever sacrifice this entails, either in artistic or personal terms. Because art market competition (expressed through prices and/or other forms of art world capital) remains a zero-sum game, a 'positional arms race' (11) ensues, with every competitor having to take ever more costly steps to enhance their own prospects of winning, but without the number of 'winners' increasing overall. Frank and Cook's warning is that, because it is the relative rather than the absolute effort that counts (the amount above and beyond what your rival invests), the rise of winner-take-all markets represent an enormous and (at the individual level) increasingly stressful and expensive waste of resources. People are having to put more and more time, money and effort into competing with their colleagues just to stay level and not fall behind.

The question as to whether fine art professional practice methods can expand opportunities overall, rather than simply intensify the competitive field, must be considered with a critical eye focused both on general neoliberal hegemony, with its aim of fabricating self-optimising, self-responsible entrepreneurial subjects (Brockling 2016), and more specifically on how artistic value is produced and maintained within the contemporary art system, with its obvious hierarchies and disparities and its many and varied barriers and 'unpaid opportunities'. It is precisely with a view to enabling a

more informed and communal articulation of negative feelings with regard to market reality, and collective proposals as to how market power can be constructively challenged, that we can envision, not an end to professional practice, but an expanded critical professional practice as a necessary component of the fine art course.

Conclusion: Politics and Ethics

Despite its ‘professionalisation’, contemporary art still derives much of its force and appeal from the idea that it can sustain an aesthetic and symbolic estrangement from present ‘reality’ and act in ways which may appear socially eccentric, subversive, or antagonistic, whilst simultaneously contributing to the imaginings of new ways of being. Such negation need not result in a withdrawal from the material conditions of life – a Romantic ideal which serves both the art market (art is a special and therefore ‘priceless’ commodity beyond commercial imperatives), and those more privileged individuals who do not have to earn money to sustain their existence. As an avant-gardist project, Roberts (n.d.) views negating subjectivity as directly related to a critique of social and cultural division. Mouffe (2008, 156-8) argues that negative critiques are a first stage only, and that a second step of ‘re-individualisation’ is necessary in order to undermine the frameworks through which dominant processes of identification occur. For her, cultural practices occupy a politically strategic position today precisely insofar as they can foster multiple new forms of counter-hegemonic subjectivity in the public realm. Clorinde Peters (2015), also concerned with the production of subjectivity, suggests how collectivist art practices can reinvigorate a ‘social imagination’ (153) against the individualizing tendencies of neoliberalism.

All of this points to a wider social function for art and a responsibility which educators involved with the reproduction of artists have for thinking beyond the confines of the art market. McGettigan

(2015) points out that the statistically informed student-investor model of HE ‘presents itself as a progressive theory in support of social mobility’ and that if objections by academics to the further marketization and privatisation of knowledge are not to be seen in terms of vested interests, then a more radical vision of the university is required to generate wider support, one where the ideal of the production of public knowledge is civically rooted and accessible to populations over a lifetime. Art schools, for the most part firmly embedded in university systems, maintain their own traditions of socially oriented practices and local influence which could align with these wider desires for knowledge and intellectual production as democratically accessible, public goods. Madoff (2009), writing from a US perspective where student debt and the human capital model of education, as well as the depletion of public arts funding, have a much longer history, proposes that art schools can counter the more deleterious effects that art market authority enforces upon them by assuming a public and community based role as distributors of knowledge. McRobbie (2015) laments what she sees as the governmentally engineered de-socialisation of a graduate class, ‘cut off from its earlier association with municipal socialism, public-mindedness and civic consciousness [...] persuaded to think and act only on its own behalf’ (59).

Fine art education’s role in facilitating a more democratic conception of art as counter-hegemonic culture cannot succeed if it limits itself purely to matters of pedagogy and curriculum whilst paying no attention to locality (Beck & Cornford 2012, 2014) and intake (Beagles 2010). But professional practice could also play a vital role as a platform where the material conditions and real social relations which underpin cultural and artistic labour at the most practical level, can be addressed. This can occur *against* a policy framework of enterprise and employability which, in the name of the student, serves to maintain social inequality and economic exploitation through pedagogies of self-marketing, competition, profit seeking and privatization. What I am proposing here goes against the usual course of things whereby, as the Precarious Workers Brigade (n.d.) astutely observe, ‘students are expected to turn off their critical faculties when they enter a “professional

practice” seminar’ whilst ‘[at] the same time, students’ “critical studies” and readings of Adorno et al, may be taught as abstract theory with little connection to their practices and how they might go about making a living’. Crucially, what must be directly challenged is the idea that the cultivation of a politically aware, socially active and experimental visual culture somehow clashes with the responsibility tutors have to equip students with an education conducive to survival and success in the (art) world beyond college. What becomes obvious from the strategic market rhetoric I have outlined is that, whilst speaking to individual ambitions, designating a plan of action, and promising ‘opportunities’, the entrepreneurial mindset and behavioural rule book in fact set strict limits on an individual’s imagination and desires, constraining the development of subjectivity within the framework of a neoliberal order, and, in that very process, accelerating the sacrifices the individual is required to make in order just to keep up. Most of all it is the student’s desires and capacities for solidarity and justice, as these may enter into artistic and social practices, that are suppressed and foreclosed in the invocation of entrepreneurial habits and modes of thought.

Collective action is not opposed to, but enables individual possibilities, a point both McRobbie (2012, 32-3) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, 468-70) are keen to emphasize through their appeals to free time, stability and security in the world of (creative) work. With respect to student debt, contemporary working practices (often ‘self-employed’, ‘flexible’ and unpaid), housing costs, etc., graduates are intimately connected to a market dogma now being challenged politically from both left and right. The question is whether professional practice can help provide art students with a discursive space to actively address these social issues and so contribute to political debates and struggles within the context of their own present and future working lives and within a cultural tradition of critical art and radical art education; or whether, instead, professional practice operates to reinforce and reproduce elite power and social and cultural inequality through the production of neoliberal subjects.

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ⁱ In searching for the 'core' principles that underpin fine art teaching, Frances Corner (2005) emphasizes, alongside material and conceptual skills and methods, precisely the public context by means of which inherited cultural traditions are subjectively extended by students. However, the rather generic and 'transferrable' set of personal skills upon which she concludes (in the context of subject 'benchmarks') – 'boundary pushing, problem solving and learning through failure' (341) – points to the production of adaptable, 'flexible' capitalist subjects once fine art education floats free from its more antagonistic cultural inheritance.

ⁱⁱ Young, a businessman and David Cameron's 'enterprise Tsar', began his political career in 1979 as advisor to Keith Joseph working on the implementation of the Thatcher government's privatisation programme. It was in this 2014 report that an explicit recommendation was first made to publish detailed graduate employment and earnings data as a way to shake up the culture of HE.

ⁱⁱⁱ Examples from places where I have taught: 1. Students can attend extra-curricula classes to learn about 'workplace etiquette'; 2. Students are assessed for studio and critical studies units according to how well their work 'displays appropriate behavior [for a] professional context.'

^{iv} I will return to the concept of 'winner-take-all' markets in a later section.

^v Surprisingly perhaps, given the quasi-democratic and 'disruptive' claims around entrepreneurial start-ups, Thom does not mention possibilities new technologies offer for direct selling of art, e.g.

through web-based platforms. The traditional gatekeepers prevail. For an indication, however, see Vebrist (2017).

^{vi} Thom at one point does seem to entirely collapse the distinction between artistic and business ideas: ‘The prerequisite for a successful entrepreneurial development is [...] to work out an outstanding art concept or business model’ (71).