

Research paper

## **Alternative art schools**

---

A consideration of the background to alternative arts schools and their current relevance, citing historical ideology and using eight case studies.



In December 2010 student occupations mushroomed across the UK. On the arts front Arts Against Cuts hosted an action-planning Long Weekend at Goldsmiths Student Union and occupied Tate Britain during the Turner Prize award ceremony. Art students from the Slade School of Fine Art were served a legal injunction and taken to court by their university, following their sit-ins.

The student uprising comes at a time when the art world is embracing the value of historical alternative art schools and their ideological successors. The Long Weekend, as a collaborative non-hierarchical educational experience, opens up scrutiny of the prevalent inequalities that permeate the arts and offers alternative ways of working with and around the establishment.

The Alternative Art School model – epitomised by the progressive and experimental learning model of Black Mountain College in the 1930s and Joseph Beuys' democratisation of the art school in the sixties – has in the last decade taken the shape

of both the self-organised groupings of the anti-capitalist movement and the convivial spaces of Relational Aesthetics.

Increasingly, leading art world institutions are positioning themselves as alternative educational spaces and drawing on what Liam Gillick refers to as the increasing demand for “post post graduate working situations”<sup>1</sup>. This is in addition to the explosion of life from artist or student collectives and tutor-led extra-institutional endeavours.

### **Which ideology?**

In the 1950s, French resistance fighter and economist turned Fluxus artist, Robert Filiou co-initiated an ‘un-school’ in France. Moving away from political provocation to pacifism he identified the societal importance of the artist in that “A great deal of artists’ work has to do with un-learning, with anti-brainwashing”<sup>2</sup>.

In recent years there have been concerns about the dumbing down of art education, the over-reliance on assessment and the shift from student as learner to student as consumer. As a student activist in 1999 my concern was with this shift. Today’s debates are about the survival of arts courses beyond a status of luxury service for the few, alongside ongoing social and artworld inequalities: issues of redistribution of wealth, tax avoidance and the over-dependence of our sector on unpaid internships. As with the Long Weekend events, the Independent Art School generated out of my own activities in 1999 and was premised on the importance of art education and the art school. Protest came first, followed quickly by a questioning of educational philosophies.

There are numerous articles circulating in academia that discuss how the hidden curricula of art education systems create different types of artists. Artists David Sweet and Liam Gillick have written with differing perspectives about the ideological changes in art education since the sixties. David Sweet defines the prevalent educational model as one combining an ideas-based emphasis with an identification of – and placing oneself within – new trends<sup>3</sup>. Liam Gillick observes, more positively, that “it is expected that this critical framework be rigorously contemporary in order to ensure that even if the student-artist claims complete disinterest in the critical components of their practice, they still understand this apparent disinterest is merely a component of an earlier critical structure rather than a rejection of critical potential per se.”<sup>4</sup>

Jan Verwoert implies the existence of an “international circuit of marginal artists and academy members”<sup>5</sup>, who are yet still central to the art world.

Tom Holert traces the current emphasis on theory and artistic research methodologies to the radical debates and discussions held during the 1968 Hornsey School of Art protests in North London. In particular he quotes a student calling for art education to redress its pre-occupation with genius through the integration of theory and practice in order to be “real training for work”<sup>6</sup>. Real training that provides the tools for artists to impact beyond the elitism of the art world.

This leads me to ask what current forms of knowledge are produced through student protests? Is the art school a feeder institution for the art world or a place that re-defines its structures and processes?

### **Professional developments in protest**

Alongside political and social insight the protests are a learning experience for art students, and ironically they could be seen as a form of professional development. During the ‘Long Weekend’ at Goldsmiths I sat in on a media-training session led by a journalist who writes for national broadsheets. The insights into newspaper deadlines and newsdesk strategies are things today’s media-savvy activists are keen to learn about as a result of their confrontations with police kettles and the widespread misconceptions about protesters commonly presented in the press.

This session in media manipulation, a by-product of the raw and real desire for political change, reminded me of my own initiation into networking and professional development, which also came unintentionally from my involvement in student activism rather than from any career-orientated decisions. This was not professional development (in a planned sense), rather a series of spontaneous and reciprocal encounters that taught me the importance of making contact with others with shared ideals.

Current student activism is bringing in the question of a sustained ethical code of practice for the visual arts to the forefront of art educational debate. Concurrently it is versing students in strategic thinking and providing forums to question established

professional routes by encouraging an insider understanding that allows the graduate to make more informed and politically conscientious decisions. In contrast to the still pertinent un-learning of the 1950s, it may be an understanding of the current socio-economic climate that allows them to forge their own *alternatives* thereby instigating real innovation and change.

**Pippa Koszerek is an artist and curator based in London. She writes for a-n News and is a-n's staff representative on the AIR Council. Pippa has been involved with artist-led activity since 1999 when, as a student, she founded the Independent Art School in Hull. In 2008 she initiated POST, a uk-wide network for artists and curators involved in site and context responsive practices. Follow her on twitter @pippa\_koszerek.**

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gillick, Liam, *Denial & Function: A history of disengagement in relation to teaching*, in Abu Eldahab, Vidokle and Waldvogel eds. *Notes for an art school*, Dexter Sinister, Nicosia, 2006, p48.

<sup>2</sup> Filiou, Robert, *Teaching and Learning in Performance Arts Part II* quoted in Patrick, Martin, *On the difficulties of "work as play"*, *Afterimage*, Vol. 38, No 4, January/February 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Sweet, David, *Towards a militant academy*, Polytechnic School of Print, Manchester Polytechnic Faculty of Art & Design, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Op cit, p47

<sup>5</sup> Verwoert, Jan, *School's Out!-?* In Abu Eldahab, Vidokle and Waldvogel eds. *Notes for an art school*, Dexter Sinister, Nicosia, 2006, p60.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Nairn, *Notes Towards the Definition of Anti-Culture*, in *The Hornsey Affair*, ed. Students and staff of Hornsey College of Art (Harmondsworth, London: Penguin, 1969), 116-7 quoted in Holert, Tom, *Art in the Knowledge-based Polis*, *e-flux Journal* 3, February 2009 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/03/68537/art-in-the-knowledge-based-polis/>

**Related articles**

['The Cédilla that smiles'](#) by Martin Patrick

['The unnatural order of things'](#) by Terry Smith

['Edu-Factory Conference'](#) by Robyn Minogue

**Alternative art school profiles by Pippa Koszerek**

[Department 21](#)

[Elements MA](#)

[The Free School](#)

[Hedgeschoolproject](#)

[The Islington Mill Art Academy](#)

[The New International School](#)

[The Parallel School of Art](#)

[The Public School](#)

**Independent Art School content**

[Independent Art School conference](#)

[artschool uk](#)

[Direct Weekend](#)

[Tate Teach-in](#)

**Images**

1. The Slade School of Art Occupation, 30 November - 10 December 2010. Courtesy: Slade Occupation
2. Tate Occupation during the Turner Prize, 6 December 2010. Courtesy: arts against cuts
3. The Book Block, 10 December 2010. Courtesy: arts against cuts

**Research paper: Alternative art schools**

© writers, artists and a-n The Artists Information Company 2011

Published by a-n The Artists Information Company

Registered in England Company No 1626331

[www.a-n.co.uk/news](http://www.a-n.co.uk/news)

[info@a-n.co.uk](mailto:info@a-n.co.uk)

Twitter [@an\\_artnews](https://twitter.com/an_artnews)

YouTube [ANartistsinfo](https://www.youtube.com/ANartistsinfo)

Facebook [ANartistsinfo](https://www.facebook.com/ANartistsinfo)

Instagram [ANartistsinfo](https://www.instagram.com/ANartistsinfo)

Issuu [ANartistsinfo](https://www.issuu.com/ANartistsinfo)