

Artists & Art Schools: For or against innovation?

A reply to NESTA

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The recently published report from NESTA (National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts) by Kate Oakley, Brooke Sperry and Andy Pratt and Brooke Sperry, entitled 'The Art of Innovation: How Fine Arts Graduates Contribute to Innovation' (2008) provides us with an opportunity to offer a series of reflections on a number of topics. These include: links between the art schools and the 'creative economy'; the nature of cultural policy and the role of consultancy research; the rise of creative labour and its social consequences. The art school sector of higher education – from fine arts right across the spectrum of provision, including graphic design, fashion design, but also all the many courses in ceramics, textiles, film, multi-media, jewellery, theatre design furniture design and so on – has recently attracted attention for the reason that it is claimed to produce not just pathways into employment, but employment itself, and a special kind of employment which is frequently flexible, casualised, (mostly) self-employment. Creativity is a doubly useful concept, not just for its value-producing capacity in production, but also, as Bourdieu argued, because it confers status on its workforce, even when conditions are punitive (1993). The art schools are expected to train, educate and prepare this workforce, but there are very few extended studies of these public-funded institutions. Frith and Horne (1987) provided a cultural history of the relationship between UK art schools from the late 1950s onwards and the remarkable growth of British pop music, and McRobbie (1998), in her study of young fashion designers, most of whom had graduated from Central St Martins School of Art and Design in London, included interviews with heads of department of fashion and/or textiles in the UK in order to gain insight into the different pedagogies which had proved so influential in the training of so many world-leading young designers in the decade from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s. Like Frith and Horne, McRobbie refers to the handful of earlier historical accounts of the art school, but she also acknowledges the paucity of research on the influence of this sector of education in the wider world of art and design. The interviews she carried out were a means of creating a picture of how fashion design came to be established, and the kind of people, usually pioneering women, who set themselves the task of fighting to gain academic recognition for what had been considered a poor relative of fine arts and design, a decorative, trivial, non-academic area of study. The interviewees in that study were, in effect, living archives since so little of that history had been properly assembled. And as McRobbie points out, one of the reasons that fashion design eventually gained recognition inside arts schools like the Royal College of Art was because astute Vice-Chancellors saw that (usually female) heads of fashion and textiles were more willing than others to forge links with fashion retailers and manufacturers. In this respect fashion education has long been at the forefront of what has now become a standard feature of higher education:



knowledge transfer, industry-links, sponsorship, placements and so on.

Given the expansion of numbers of students into the art schools suggested by the NESTA report, and the ways in which these institutions also offer pathways of access to young people, some of them disadvantaged and with non-standard academic qualifications¹, it is easy to understand why they have attracted the attention of educational and cultural policy-makers in recent years. But it was very much a matter of Principals and Vice Chancellors lobbying at the doorsteps of

government office, not the other way round. They saw that practice-based training in newer areas like digital media, game development, and also in media and performance arts, were opening up new occupational pathways and they realised this had a lot to do with the training the students were getting in inevitably under-funded institutions. At the exact same time, academics and policy makers, in particular those involved in urban regeneration, made a similar connection between young people's cultural activities and the so-called 'creative city' (Landry 2000). This latter became the roller coaster we are all now familiar with, culminating in the enormous attention given to Richard Florida's 'The Rise of the Creative Class' (2003). From economic geography to sociology, from cultural studies to philosophy, from media studies to art theory, the rallying cry of the culture or creative industries has drawn academics in Europe and the US to reflect on and analyse these activities. As soon as the UK's Department of Culture Media and Sport 'Mapping Documents' were published, and prior to that in 1996 when the Creative Industries Taskforce was set up, academics found themselves torn between supporting the new agenda which required working closer with government agencies and drafting policy agendas which fitted with the prevailing vocabularies set by these departments, and establishing a more autonomous critical and theoretical language to understand such developments.

Despite these flurries of activity very little was known about how these sectors actually functioned and especially how they gave rise to new working conditions. The Department of Trade and Industry in the 1990s professed little or no interest in tiny micro-outfits of just two or three people working in a 'cottage industry' style, but by the early 2000s there were various roundtables hosted at the DCMS, which had stepped forward as the government department best equipped to deal with the new creative economy. Often these meetings delivered relatively little for academic researchers, since the nature of the discussions was rigidly set within a prevailing political agenda. A resolution of sorts was found in the extent to which the funding councils recognised this as a new area for which research funds could be competitively applied for. Cultural policy studies had of course existed long before this sequence of events, but it gathered pace and momentum as this new sector came to the forefront of political attention, (for a

critical overview see Scullion and Garcia 2005). Nevertheless cultural policy research, connected as it usually is with arts councils, or departments of culture, remains relatively marginal and even one-dimensional in comparison, say, with public policy research which inevitably has a much wider remit in regard to urban issues, housing, poverty, policing, crime, etc. At the European level, the new 'precarity activists', many of whom are artists or new media workers connected to EuroMayDay, do a great job of forging connections between arts, artists and culture, and social global issues, including housing and unemployment (and indeed this frames the ongoing research of Forkert²). And, from the early 2000s, these networks introduced, especially within European cultural policy, a much more animated and theoretically informed agenda – see for example <<http://www.eipcp.net>>, and also curators turned policy-advocates such as Maria Lind and Raimund Minichbauer (2005)³. This work is sharply critical, with a theoretically-informed framework (transculturation, globalisation, network society, neo-nationalism) and a focus on geo-cultural issues, and on regional and sub-regional, urban, local, national and transnational cultural policy in practice (see also Robins 2006).

In contrast, the kind of research undertaken by NESTA is primarily consultative⁴. NESTA is an endowment which was set up in 1998 with the mission of making 'the UK more innovative'⁵. The focus on entrepreneurialism and innovation brings it close to the priorities of the DCMS and it also fits the "general Schumpeterian⁶ vision that now underpins much national and European Union economic policy under the 'information society' label focused on innovation systems and national competition for the comparative advantage that successful innovation supposedly creates" (Garnham 2005:22). The context of NESTA and the focus on innovation have considerable bearing on 'The Art of Innovation', beginning with the suggestion that artists are inherently innovative, that they are resourceful and adapt easily to changing circumstances. The executive summary points out that "artists have attitudes and skills that are conducive to innovation" (Oakley, Sperry and Pratt: 2008: 5), that they are "brokers across disciplines" who continually retrain themselves and that their style of working is project- and portfolio-based. The emphasis on innovation shapes many of the questions put to the respondents, and, as we show below, this actually jars with the artists' chosen way of talking about or analysing their own working practices, suggesting something of a mismatch, as if the term is foisted upon them.

The NESTA study comes under the label of consultancy work, drawing on the expertise of well established academics like Andy Pratt (LSE), Kate Oakley, an independent consultant,⁷ and researcher Brooke Sperry. For this very reason, it provides a good example of the kind of work undertaken under these established guidelines, where it is possible to detect the tensions which arise as the authors juggle with a language and an agenda set by the host organisation. The study is ambitious, given the timescale of just nine months. A questionnaire was sent to 8,000 graduates from the University of the Arts, dating back to the 1950s, using their previously unused alumni association. With a 6.4% success rate the authors contacted 40 of these respondents most of whom lived in or around London, and

were predominantly female and white⁸. These autobiographical interviews actually provide the most significant material in the research. The authors allow the interviewees and the questionnaire respondents to express things in their own words and methodological attention is devoted to justifying this. The outcome of the interviews and the email questionnaire are valuable and interesting; attention is drawn to job juggling, low income, collaborations, and unexpected opportunities which can nevertheless be made good use of.

Our own reading of this report points to three areas for further discussion: the low income of artists; the inappropriateness of language and conceptual vocabulary drawn from business or science and technology; the strengths and limitations of consultancy research.

Jobs without capital

The authors provide information gleaned from the study about the actual levels of income of the respondents. In effect these are tiny. The incomes of these artists and creative people are well below the poverty line, but the word 'poor' does not appear in the considerations of salaries (e.g. gross annual income from all sources 30% £10,000, and 55% under £20,000). This is significant. For a start it corresponds with the findings of McRobbie a decade earlier, who showed that young fashion designers, even those who were well-established and receiving a lot of press support, were actually earning extremely small take home pay, often less than £20,000 per annum. This led McRobbie to argue repeatedly that working in the new creative work was low capital return work. "Jobs without capital" was how she put it, inverting Beck's notion of a new world of "capital without jobs" (Beck: 1997). Following Ulrich Beck she talked about "being poor in work" rather than poor and out of work. For middle class graduates – a high proportion of whom are female – this is a significant and under-acknowledged fact. We can see the field of poverty extending and incorporating the young, well-qualified, ambitious and highly motivated – in other words, those supposedly positioned to succeed within the new economy. But the question of how it is possible to live on less than £15,000 a year in a city like London in 2008 is skirted over or ignored. The word 'poverty' of course would go against the grain of the need of government to promote this sector of work, not just because they wish to promote individuals and invest highly in it through education and training but because the style of working is increasingly being looked to as a model for other sectors to follow. Does this mean the 'working poor' develops as a new norm? Yes it probably does. If effective, there will be a lot more people self-employed and fewer employers faced with the 'burden' of a payroll, pensions and other benefits. This fact is borne out by the references to the expansion of the creative industries (though this is as much to do with how the figures are, highly problematically, calculated) and the 60% increase in art and design graduates in the last ten years⁹. Mention of poverty would detract from the connotations of glamour, aspiration and enthusiasm attached to creativity. And anyway, starting with Thatcherism, 'poverty' has been designated and naturalised as a matter of individual failure rather than a consequence of the re-structuring of manufacture and production, the destruction of the welfare state and various other systemic features of global capitalism. The result is that in a context like this poverty could only be understood, if it was discussed, as a sign of personal poor choices in regard to creative work, or of "individual mismanagement" (Bauman 2000, Brown 2006).

Nowadays for young artists or designers to identify with a self-description as poor, would be synonymous with failure and with stigma. If artists like those interviewed in this study have a degree of pride about their work, and self-confessed enjoyment of it and commitment to it, then they too will most likely shun the word poor. They will instead talk about the hardships they have had to endure in order to carry on with 'the work'. Perhaps it is the job of academic researchers or social scientists to prise open the everyday realities of this 'new poor middle-class', examining

material issues in depth which words like 'bohemian' do not really encompass. Let us at least take this opportunity to flag up the importance of examining in more depth questions of borderline poor income and dependency on state benefits which are the norm among artists for at least some periods. In this report the authors steer well clear of dealing with unpleasanties such as poverty in work, merely referring in passing, for example to the "less desirable" aspects of such work including "[work] that is unpaid" (Oakley, Sperry and Pratt: 2008: 12). The reality of unpaid work or long term internships also cries out for fuller analysis. After all, we are talking about long hours of labour which will often be uncompensated (and thereby also result in unaccrued state benefit entitlements). In his study of internet workers, Andrew Ross's apt but nevertheless under-developed term "net slaves" just opens the door on a sizeable and significant strata of this workforce (Ross 2004). To sum up the degrees of hardship and the experience of what would normally be called poverty require more systematic attention. It may be that these graduates are lifted from the absolutely degrading aspects and connotations of poverty because they possess high cultural capital, and because they can rely, just and no more, on partners, or on extended family, as well as on a trickle of grants, commissions, benefits and other sources of public money so that they can get through from one month to the next. The downside of being an artist is also compensated for by the relatively high value attached to this identity socially, but this means that poverty can remain hidden and unacknowledged by public bodies. This is compounded in a study like this where the conceptual framework is borrowed from science, technology and business; in other words, a high-income world unaccustomed to and hence ill-equipped to deal with or even imagine, economic survival concerns like poverty, 'dole', housing benefits or income support. And likewise when the respondents describe how they have set-up in business it also transpires that this transition into what is presumably self-employment has actually been accomplished thanks to the existence of state benefits (such as tax credits) and other forms of income support lifting them out of being unemployed.



Imposing a vocabulary

The authors also make pervasive use of the words markets and consumers, and on several occasions this leads them to impose on their respondents a vocabulary which appears to be quite at odds with how the artists express themselves. Taking their cue from Lester and Piore (2004), the authors' report comments on how these fine arts graduates and others like them are highly active "consumers" of other art-related work or "cultural products" and this gives them sharp insight into what consumers want (Oakley, Sperry and Pratt: 2008:14). That is, they will have greater insight into how the market will respond to what they produce, and they will also be able to tailor their work to fit with market trends. But what is actually being referred to here is not a matter of markets and consumers but rather that this group of people are constantly engaging with the world of cultural forms, artefacts, and symbolic material which relates to their own interests and their professional expertise (note the word 'professionals' is barely used). Not surprisingly, these people know about new films, or about current exhibitions, they are frequently reading, they are in effect an intellectual social strata. It is a misnomer to categorise them as consumers

of, for example, the Louise Bourgeois exhibition or as consumers of Dostoevsky novels. The fact that the respondents refer to these specific cultural forms is more about the inspiration, ideas and intellectual engagement they derive from this material, than it is about being a consumer of great works of art. This is akin to describing sociologists as 'consumers' of peer-reviewed academic journals. Hardly surprisingly, the authors seem to exhibit some discomfort with their own vocabulary. They explain that perhaps what this kind of consumer-activity does is give the artists ideas and something like a feel, if not for possible markets for their own work, at least for their potential 'audiences'. The artists in turn shy away from the words market and ideal users and reflect instead on how and where the work might be responded to. They are in some ways too truculent a group to allow themselves to be turned into spokespersons for innovation. One even says that her work might be too innovative for the market, i.e. non-commercial (Oakley, Sperry and Pratt: 2008:27), another says it is "just art work" (Oakley, Sperry and Pratt: 2008:7). In a sense the survey seems to be pushing respondents into a box they have never really considered inhabiting voluntarily. If there is a degree of misfit here, we might wonder why? It could be that artists of the sort who responded to this survey questionnaire, male and female, although they are mostly female, attribute to their work an entirely different set of social values. And this may be generally true for fine artists. Anyone who has actually taught in an art school will know that fine art students have tended to define themselves in opposition to commercial or market values, even if what they produce in many cases are saleable objects. Indeed they are probably taught to reject the idea of producing for a market. Their commitment to the 'work itself' takes precedence, they will concentrate on this and then hope that it gets taken up by the wider art world. Of course some will, especially these days, have learnt skills of self-promotion and might have developed entrepreneurial strategies. But even here, the emphasis remains on the work itself. The question in the years following graduation is how to retain time and commitment to the work in the hope that it is successful; success meaning shows, reviews, commissions, and possibly sales. Since this is an ideal scenario, realistic for only a handful, the alternative strategy involves taking on other jobs as the authors of the report confirm, this being in any case a well established fact (Menger: 1999; Throsby and Hollister: 2003). But this career trajectory is quite different from, let us say, graphic designers, who again if one has taught them one knows that from the start of their education they are working almost consistently to briefs set by industry. The studio atmosphere in the graphic design spaces is quite different from that of the fine art department. Graphic design students will surround themselves with images from advertising, comics and magazines, they will have work placements and internships. They will hope that their design work will attract the attention of commercial design agencies, eventually winning them employment. In short, from the start graphic design students are oriented to the commercial world of advertising, while their fine art counterparts will at least feign disinterest, with some privately hoping for 'commercial success' which is something quite different. To sum up, it could be suggested that what this report shows is how degrees of realism kick in not so long after graduation when the artists begin to see clearly that they will have to develop skills which will get them more regular and better paid work. The jobs they will gravitate towards, or which they will embark on some additional training to prepare themselves for, will be commensurate with their qualifications and expertise, and as the survey shows they are well placed to get jobs in the cultural sector, in education, in public services like health, education and art therapy. The role played by the distinctive training they have had at art school, the unstructured studio time, the one-to-one sessions with both tutors and technicians, will have given them a sense of the value of learning, for example, new technical skills based on the needs of each project. And the impact which tutors can have in pointing students in the direction of relevant work, articles, other artists, writers and philosophers whose work might help

them engage with the issues they are struggling with in their own practice, might well produce an openness to and awareness of this as an important way of refining their 'own work'. Thus we might say that pedagogy prepares them not so much for the market or to keep their eyes on consumer trends as to give them ideas about what kind of jobs would be interesting or rewarding and how to pick up the necessary skills and experience, if it proves impossible to make a living from art itself.



Researching the researchers

Finally, there is the point about the strengths and limitations of consultancy research. A study like this is able to draw on a wide range of academic studies which provide, if not the intellectual framework at least a field of references which feed into the authors' discussion of their findings. Our aim in the foregoing text has not been to devalue this kind of consultancy undertaking (although we do detect a tendency to avoid the 'bad news' regarding low levels of income and dependency on benefits). As Scullion and Garcia point out, although this kind of research "makes it difficult to develop a coherent body of research and near impossible to develop longitudinal projects", nevertheless it does allow social and cultural researchers to access to "the processes of decision-making and policy evaluation" (Scullion and Garcia: 2005: 122). Indeed we could argue that think tanks and consultancies play a key role in the new creative economies, insofar as they pick up on government thinking by virtue of being close at hand, they tender for and often win contracts to carry out research which will in one way or another further the agendas set by government, and depending themselves on this kind of revenue they will also then promote themselves as offering high degrees of expertise which can combine and draw on leading academic research with the pragmatics of working close to government. This puts agencies like NESTA at the forefront of the knowledge economy. And as Garnham argues, it has been the association of culture with IT that has allowed the term 'creative industries' to emerge as a government favourite in the contribution this sector makes to economic development (Garnham 2005). The picture does not look quite so favourable if, as McRobbie points out, IT and new media are subtracted from the more recent DCMS 'Mapping Document'; without these areas of activity, the remaining culture industries produce much more modest returns (McRobbie 2004). If consultancies do indeed have this important role to play in effect formulating the terms in which creative industries and the knowledge economy come to be spoken about then the idea of researching the researchers, as Pierre Bourdieu might put it, would be a timely undertaking. These organisations differ enormously, from those which literally speak to government (such as Demos or NESTA) to others which tender for grants for social and cultural projects in competition with better funded and prestigious universities, to whom they feel themselves to be poorer relatives.

The NESTA report confirms the fact that in the last decades artists have become people who are working across a range of sectors. When they're working in non-arts related jobs, they are more likely to work in education or health care, and this suggests a close connection with education and the public sector. Overall we might even say that artists make a contribution, not primarily through innovation for the commercial sector, but through the value their input brings to the social field. This has also been the case for many years, especially for the majority of artists who do not make the 'big time'. Artists, photographers and film makers have

since the 1960s been drafted into public art and community projects, hence the term 'community arts'. The point is that now this has become massively enlarged¹⁰. Our reading of NESTA finds an unofficial picture which underpins these working lives which includes poverty and hardship, tolerated perhaps because of the availability of unspecified cushions. There is a close proximity to or experience of receiving benefits and income support, from the state or through family ties. We also see a vigorous denial of the language of markets and consumers, and a rather awkward or at least reflective response to the word 'innovation', as though it suggests something quite different from the way in which artists typically think about or talk about their work. Overall we see the role of not just the state in the form of benefits and subsidy, but also the state as educator, and the public sector as a frequent point to which the graduates gravitate for work. We might even propose that artists have become a new form of non-bureaucratic civil servants. However, unlike Claire Bishop and others who have decried this as art turning into social work (Bishop: 2006), we are calling for greater examination of the conditions under which this takes place. What in our own research we perceive are, again, part-time contracts, artists indeed inserted into the field of social problems, such as tackling bullying in schools, and inevitably more and more 'projects'¹¹ – the irony being, of course, that artists themselves are likely to suffer, in some form, from the multiple effects of deprivation. We finish then with some further questions, the first being what role does the art work itself play as it leaves the studios and circulates across so many different locations, from galleries and exhibition spaces, to community centres, to schools, to hospitals, to board rooms, corridors, perhaps even streets and other public spaces? Can the simple presence of art be considered as innovation? If so, then what is really meant by 'innovation' (the authors of the report do not define this)? Innovation to the landscape? Or innovation in public transport for the values other than those of advertising which it introduces? And finally, if one of the decisive features which shapes the inventive and energetic ways in which these artists carry on working throughout their lives is the experience they got from attending art school, then what would be the dire consequence of these being run down, or subjected to further financial constraints?

The important role of the art schools as state institutions with public funding is again underplayed in this report. Most UK art schools are now also part of large universities, and with government interest in creative industries this means that the changing world of the corporate university impinges particularly in these departments. One priority then might be to safeguard good practice in these historic institutions without romanticising them. Another might be to acknowledge the important role played by access routes into art schools for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds; it is also to pay attention to the role of rising fees (and by consequence, increasing student debt) in making this access much more difficult. Frith and Horne make the connection between the opportunity for working class, mostly male, youth in '60s Britain to get to art school and the way in which that experience and the unstructured fine art pedagogy permitted a cross-over between the external world of pop music, and the development of new forms of pop from inside those art school spaces. If then it is the art schools which are the key sites for the production of culture (fashion, music, art, etc.) it is not just then a question of defending their existence but dissecting what it is that has made them important to national cultural life and beyond. We want to end by emphasising a pedagogy which critically challenges the divide between high and low culture and which contests the isolated status of the fine arts. Fine art students might well seek to define themselves against commerce, but they are theoretically aware of the intersections of art with media and popular culture. They know how frequently the shock effects of art can give rise to media 'moral panics'. In short, art school graduates, by virtue of the cultural and social theory courses which have been a set part of the curriculum, have a keen understanding of how social cultural and media

worlds work, including their own role as artists within these realms. This reflexivity is perhaps overlooked by the authors of the NESTA Report, even though there are clear signs of such critical self-awareness in the responses. Might government then be persuaded of the art schools as the source of social, cultural and economic value and of livelihoods? Our argument in relation to NESTA is that the vocabulary of innovation is something of a discursive imposition. Where this might be applicable with graduates in design, in particular industrial or product design, in this current context there is a mismatch between the working lives of fine art graduates, and the economic presumptions of innovation.

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Notes

- At this point in time, application to some undergraduate art design programs do not require A-Levels and can be accessed through the BTEC or other equivalent qualifications.
- Forkert, Kirsten. *Artistic Labour, and the Changing Nature of Work and Cities*. PhD Thesis, Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths. Forthcoming 2010.
- See *A Critique of Creative Industries*, organised by EIPCP and FRAME, which took place in Helsinki 31.8-2.9.2006. <http://eipcp.net/dlfiles/prog>
- Comedia used to undertake this kind of work, particularly with an emphasis on urban culture, regeneration, employment etc but with less focus on technology and industry, see Landry 2000.
- See NESTA's website at <http://www.nesta.org.uk/about-us/>.
- Joseph Alois Schumpeter was an economist and political scientist who popularised the term "creative destruction" in economics, using it to describe a process in which the old ways of doing things are endogenously destroyed and replaced by new ways.
- Oakley worked with Charles Leadbeater whose book *Living on Thin Air* (2000) won the praise of the then PM Tony Blair, celebrated the entrepreneurial culture and talent led economy, citing figures like celebrity cooks as exemplars.
- They also post a survey questionnaire on the website for NESTA, Artquest and the Artists Information Company (A-N).
- Oakley, Sperry and Pratt: 2008: 12.
- In *Art Work in 2007*, Susan Jones notes the growing role of public art commissions as an income source for artists. See http://www.a-n.co.uk/jobs_and_opps/article/414458
- See Jane Simpson's contribution to the 2001 EU report *The Conditions of Creative Artists in Europe* available at: http://www.eu2001.se/culture/eng/docs/report_visby.pdf#search=%22Conditions%20for%20Creative%20Artists%20in%20Europe%22