

Something For Nothing is a personal account of how recent changes in the funding of Art Schools are invoking a culture of academic research that is in turn having a forcible effect on individual artists' practices.

Originally *Something For Nothing?* was given as a paper at the *Research and the Artist: Considering the Role of the Art School* conference at The Laboratory—the separate research arm of the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art—on 28.5.99.

One purpose of this conference was to look at how what constitutes 'research' within Art Schools might be fashioned to be seen to formally ratify practicing artists' work.

Changes to the way government establishes and distributes funding for higher educational institutions, through what are termed Research Assessment Exercises, have resulted in conspicuous attempts by Art Schools to associate themselves with particular practicing artists.

A central element of the Research Assessment Exercise is peer review. An Assessment Panel, consisting of staff members from across the institutions, rate the research excellence of each institution in turn through an appraisal of the staffs' artistic activity using criteria set by government.

In general these criteria have been based upon a practising artist

employed by the institution having a visible presence within the international commercial marketplace, the more prolific the better. In this version of the generation game research points accredited to the institution via its employees are then translated into stratified levels of funding. Those with the most points get the most money—or rather, those who have been best able to comply with the government's directives receive their incentive payment. Here points really do mean prizes.

Brighid Lowe

Something for nothing?

At 34, I am an artist who is technically part of the Young British Artist generation but not of its phenomenon. As a result my perspectives are bound up inside the history of this period whilst, like many of my contemporaries, also feeling outside of it. I have managed to support myself and my practice by part-time teaching on BTEC and then on degree courses. However, my work as an artist which, because I teach, is currently classified by the higher education system as my research, has had to situate itself and survive in the current art world. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has now institutionalised this fact and I now have to be validated as active in the professional art world in order to, as a part-time lecturer, keep a toehold in the art school.

In many respects this is the way it should be; the academic world should be neither inside or outside the art world but in an engaged, yet ambivalent space. Why then does it feel that art schools (and their respective research policy) are being held hostage by this funding shift and are warping internally in order to accommodate their captivity rather than their creativity? And why do many of my generation feel a sense of closure in all of this, of a diminishing of possibilities which seems to us to characterise both the art school and the Brit Art world?

Of course, the entrepreneurial Brit Art phenomena is as much manufactured as it is real. However, myths feed off their cultural and political context, either fattening themselves or being starved according to conditions. It might seem perverse, then, that in the hostile environment of cuts, cuts, and more cuts certain myths can thrive and that the Contemporary Art world is actually perceived as a British success story.

But whose success story is it, and who defines success?

I want to give you two very current models of success within the contemporary art scene. The first model could be termed a Careerist Model, and the second could be termed a Purist Model. These two models are crude and familiar but nevertheless I think they are worth repeating.

A Careerist Model of success: on leaving college the artist is included in the graduate New Contemporaries exhibition and participates in self-curated group shows; work is bought by Charles Saatchi and shown in highly profiled exhibitions; the artist is featured in magazines such as *Frieze* and *Art Monthly* and signs to a commercial gallery; work is exhibited widely within the contemporary art world and purchased by private collectors and the Arts Councils; the work also circulates internationally, aided in part by the British Council. The result is that a national and international reputation is generated, often occurring over a relatively short time of a few years.

A Purist Model of success: on leaving college the artist is included in group shows of varying significance, the work continues to develop and change; whilst maintaining the momentum of the work the option to make uneven or challenging pieces still exists; the artist manages to be intellectually speculative in an environment of financial speculation. The result is that a national and international reputation might be generated over a variable and unpredictable period of time.

It is necessary to point out that these two rather crude models of success within the contemporary art scene do not by definition exclude each other: they could, in principle, apply to the same work and the same artist. That they often do not, provokes several questions: which model, or models, of success do the art schools and their research policies desire and/or encourage? And to what extent do these two models of success militate against each other or, to put it another way, how does the artist reconcile internal and external pressures in order to pursue his/ her work?

Firstly, it has to be openly acknowledged that the art world and the art schools are operating within a neo-liberal capitalist agenda which promotes immediacy, bureaucracy, and populism. The pivots are money and sponsorship, lavishly lubricated by the oils of marketing and PR. This fact should not be tiptoed around any longer. I am not

gazing back at some notion of a '70s idyll of untainted public funding; but nor, I believe, does there have to be such an absence of debate or such a passive acceptance of the implications of this cultural context.

The result is that competition, rather than cooperation, threatens to consume artists, colleges, galleries, and curators as everyone struggles to survive in this neo-Darwinian careerist world. Competition and rivalries have always existed but have rarely been enforced as cultural ideology and public policy. Strangely, however, intellectual rivalry is not considered as part of this competitive culture. Instead it is seen as negative and as divisive sour grapes threatening the consensus culture.

The Universities have to be more vocal in this critical and intellectual vacuum and their research policies should be aiming to support initiatives which challenge this consensus. Instead the fear of dissent, taking risks or asserting independence in case it jeopardises funding, or puts off private commercial patronage, or fails to maximise the RAE funding outcomes, or fails to attract sponsors, or fails to bring in larger audiences, and so on, too often infects Fine Art both inside and outside the art school.

Art schools ought to be able to provide a powerbase from which to remind the art world of the difficult, the different, the unknown, and the historical. Curators, public galleries, and funding bodies seem to have difficulty in locating and considering artists that are obscure, time-consuming or complex, or worse all three at once. It is as if there is an attitude that there are too many artists and far too much art, and being more aware will somehow make selecting work even more confusing and time-consuming. So it seems much safer then, to rely on information from private galleries or catalogues, contacts, collectors or any Goldsmith's show around, to cut down the workload and make it 'manageable'.

This is perhaps a harsh caricature but one that nevertheless illustrates the laziness that can become standard when programming is determined by external factors rather than internal dialogue. This potential for laziness is exacerbated by

the 'Cult of Visibility', a cult which operates with almost absolute power, in which visibility is synonymous with critical and professional success. This is an intellectual abdication: status and visibility should never be confused with a work's or artist's critical or creative value. The deforming pressures that this 'Cult of Visibility' induces have profound effects on artists and their work but also on the curators, funders, universities and public galleries desperate to maintain their own visibility and to align themselves with success. In this myopic world it is only 'success' that breeds 'success'.

The result is that everyone colludes in the relentless pursuit of the same, of the middle ground, of the recognisable. Small ideas are given enormous funding while many artists of different generations are invisibly cut out of the cultural debate. Artists' work which is deemed commodifiable, reliable (in terms of a linear notion of progression), or that fits a familiar frame of reference becomes a guarantee in an uncertain world.

University research policies could provide credible alternatives, something particularly useful to artists who wish to maintain an independent position or a space in which to reappraise their practice. Ironically, given the institutions' singular ambition, there is no consensus within the Universities on what ought to be their intellectual philosophy i.e. research policy. The new and old Universities at which I have regularly taught have wildly different approaches: either top-slicing all the research monies, or initiating ambitious exhibition programmes, or inviting single-sentence applications for potentially huge funds. All of these approaches are open to distortion from internal favouritism and discrimination. Research policies have to be transparent and accountable in order to side step the complacency and cronyism of the institution. Many Universities have a policy which matches University funds to those projects that have already secured external funding, a policy which prioritises projects with funds from other sources. This fails to acknowledge the limitations and censorship inherent within these external contexts. Research has to be considered in terms of intellectual value rather than cash value or the academic space will simply perpetuate the problems that it is supposed to address and, ultimately, will be defeated by them.

Why is it that most Universities currently provide little or no alternative to these problems?

It is because they too need highly visible artists with international profiles for their RAE returns. Fellowship appointments which attempt to buy artists such as Louise Bourgeois (that's the Louise Bourgeois who is 88 and never leaves New York) are blatant transactions. Soon Universities will want to appoint dead artists purely because their research and cash value can be fully guaranteed.

In the past, to be employed as a young artist by art schools provided a feasible income and some security and independence from the commercial art market. This is actually the simplest, and the most effective way for universities to support artists' research: give them proper teaching opportunities, improved pay levels, decent terms and conditions, and research provision written into the contract. Instead part-time teaching for all generations is now characterised by serial redundancies, no time or resources to develop rewarding teaching, pressure to deliver an international research profile coupled with levels of responsibility more

suited to full-time positions, all in the context of some of the worst employment practices in the UK; and this is available only to the lucky few. No wonder, then, that there is an increasing divide, even hostility, between those artists of my generation who try to teach in order to survive and the artists of my generation whose international status ensures they can't or won't teach. This has clear implications for art schools, and is mutually victimising for all artists in that it reinforces the false polarities between the Careerist and Purist models that I initially outlined. Even more significant, it seems to me, is that the whole scenario is regarded as inevitable.

Except that I do not agree that it is inevitable. It is only in the absence of resistance that inevitability becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When under siege or held in captivity, it is necessary for the captives to understand the psychology of their captors. However, this understanding must never define you or prevent the internal independence required for genuine survival. The same logic applies to the art schools: they need to build an innovative, autonomous space to act as a critical balance to the consensus culture which drowns them. Art schools should be ambitious and approach external agencies with ideas and projects, but these collaborative projects need to be undertaken without sacrificing critical debate or rigour. In short art schools need to have ambitions beyond the art school.

I believe we require a radical pragmatism—a combative energy which engages with the current world, rather than capitulating or becoming ghettoised. 'Radical pragmatism' sounds suspiciously Blairite, but should not be rejected for that reason alone. My generation was raised under the value system of the '60s and '70s but we became adult in a world which was, and is, dismantling this value system beneath our feet. Straddling this process, with one foot always on each side of the rift, has become increasingly difficult as the crack has widened into a chasm. The past political positions of Left and Right have been overwritten. Given this situation we do need new (but definitely not third) ways to reinvigorate art schools.

From an artist's point of view (which, given their remit of support, should by implication also be the funders' point of view) funding for work/research should allow artists to advance their ideas, aspirations and creativity. This means allowing artists to create their own impossibilities and thereby create possibilities. This takes time and involves making and taking the time throughout every aspect of the funding process in order to get things right: time to include practitioners in the policies and procedures of funders, time to select the selectors, time for the selectors to consider the artists (all the artists) and time for the artists to generate the work. Funding should enable an artist to position their work for themselves, rather than being positioned by the funding criteria or the agenda of the funder. Replication, duplication and regurgitation are all outcomes of funding policies which are market-led. There are many more artists out there some of whom inhabit a world of rejections and frustrations, not because their work is invalid, but simply because their status is regarded as too low.

There are, of course, some precedents and exceptions to this analysis. Perhaps I should be considered as one: in the last year my personal situation has been transformed by a £30,000 award

from The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, a job at the Slade School of Art (on a proper salary and with very good research provision), and a Rome Scholarship. So, does my current position totally undermine my prior arguments? After all, the financial anxieties have gone and many of the associated emotional anxieties have gone too. Why then does my intellectual anxiety still remain?

What is of concern to me are the collective conditions; the contexts in which I have to make work and have it exhibited, collaborate with colleagues, and teach. Tony Blair is very fond of saying that his government is determined to end the 'something-for-nothing culture'. Ironically, at some point all artists have to make something for nothing, while the art schools and the artists that teach in them all too often have to make something out of next-to-nothing. Making art can involve imagining something from nothing but it rarely takes nothing (in resource terms) to produce that something. Perhaps funding-bodies ought to reconsider the relationship of their 'something' to the artists' 'nothing', and imagine that they might need us as much as we might need them.