

Never Let Me Go

David Cross

Never Let Me Go is the title of a 2005 novel by Kazuo Ishiguro. In an institution that prepares a class of young people for serving others, the process of education cultivates self-expression through creativity and enables students to develop personal qualities of tolerance, courage and empathy. But this is done in a way that forestalls their critical understanding of their situation, so that their unwitting consent is secured for giving with no expectation of receiving. Accepting the limits of their awareness and the brevity of their existence, their insights spring instead from the struggles of loyalty divided between obligation, friendship and love.

Distribution is key to the global financial and ecological crises. Relating the concept of distribution to the principle of equity, I will describe the attempts that I have made with other people to activate resistance to economic and ecological debt in the university where I work. Through cycles of action and reflection, these attempts have drawn attention to the structures and practices in the university that distribute value and risk, authority and power. I propose that the critical manifestation of distribution in my university is the separation of academic activities from executive functions, which compounds the ideological effects and psychological affects of neoliberalism in the academy. I will also outline my idea for an experimental system for redistributing attention, energy and value. But first, let me describe my starting point and rationale.

Since 2007, I have been a Reader in Art and Design at the University of the Arts London (UAL), where I have continued my long engagement with the relationship of visual culture to the contested ideal of 'sustainable development'.¹ Seeing sustainability as a reconciliation of ecological, economic and social justice issues, I view the obstacles to achieving it not as scientific or technological, but ideological and psychological: belief structures, especially individualism, the separation of people and the environment, and the fantasy of cornucopia frame choices that converge on crisis. Conversely, the critical tendencies of art bring a reflexive and emancipatory impulse that could lead beyond passive spectatorship towards active social agency.

So for a long time, you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves that you weren't really like us.²

The ecological aspect of the crisis, like the 'hyperobject' posited by Timothy Morton,³ seems almost unthinkable in its complexity. Scientific models of the anthropogenic transformation of the planet include feedback loops in the ecosystem, such as those accelerating climate damage, which bring risks of uncontrollable losses, from mass extinction to ecocide.⁴ But, despite the existential threat, when causes and effects are so separated by delay and

¹ From 1992 to 1997 I was a Research Fellow at the Royal College of Art. Connecting academic activities with the practical operations of the College, I established energy efficiency measures that cut CO₂ emissions and saved around £50,000 annually in 1993.

² Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 258.

³ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁴ See Polly Higgins, *Eradicating Ecocide*, <http://eradicatingecocide.com> (accessed 27 October 2017).

dispersal that their relationship appears random, most people focus on more immediate concerns. To connect environmental issues to social behaviour, Mathis Wackernagel developed the method of ecological footprint calculation, which applies a spatial analysis to the impacts of consumption, allowing different consumption patterns to be mapped and compared.⁵ Andrew Simms devised the concept of 'Earth Overshoot Day', which applies a temporal analysis, relating ecological footprint (the rate at which resources are consumed and waste is produced) to 'biocapacity' (the rate at which ecosystems renew themselves).⁶ With the New Economics Foundation, Simms also co-authored *The Great Transition*, a comprehensive programme of radical economic and social reform.⁷ Yet the private media avoid such systemic thinking, preferring to frame the symptoms of ecological collapse as separate instances of the manageable degradation of the environment. Meanwhile, countless commercial messages attribute almost supernatural powers of healing and renewal to 'nature', sustaining the fantasy of an eternal place outside consumer culture that can serve as both resource pool and waste sink.⁸

The economic aspect of the crisis is experienced by the vast majority of people as an endless struggle with poverty or lack, while a correspondingly small minority of 'high-net-worth' individuals continually increase their wealth. Yet, extreme inequality is not inevitable. As the Bank of England has shown, the 'logic' of accumulation (and therefore of depletion) is encoded in the way that money is created — as debt to be repaid with interest.⁹ While rent transfers value *to* people who own property, *from* people who use it, interest is a feedback mechanism that compounds inequality by transferring value *to* people who lend, *from* people who borrow. Codifying surplus and deficit, debt articulates the distribution of economic power, which at the global scale involves a net transfer of resources from the poorest people to the richest, and on an unprecedented scale.¹⁰ Because money is created as debt, there can never be enough money to repay the capital and the interest.¹¹ This is why debt drives the endless pursuit of economic growth, despite the finite capacity of the earth.

Historically the most important of all finite resources, fossil fuels form a key intersection between the economic and ecological crises. Since the Industrial Revolution, fossil fuels have powered the material production that has driven social transformation and given rise to the consumer society. With their unique potential to amplify the productivity of labour power, fossil fuels are a prime commodity, a 'meta asset' underlying all other asset classes. Today, the global financial system is so closely connected to the fossil fuel industry that in some respects they function as a single entity.¹² Yet fossil fuels embody a paradox.

⁵ Mathis Wackernagel et al., *Global Footprint Network* www.footprintnetwork.org (accessed 27 October 2017).

⁶ Earth Overshoot Day, <http://www.overshootday.org> (accessed 27 October 2017).

⁷ Stephen Spratt, Andrew Simms, Eva Neizert and Josh Ryan-Collins, *The Great Transition: A Tale of How it Turned Out Right* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2010).

⁸ Sally Weintrobe (ed.), *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2013), 201.

⁹ Michael McLeay, Amar Radia and Ryland Thomas, 'Money Creation in the Modern Economy', Bank of England Monetary Analysis Directorate, *Quarterly Bulletin* (2014), 15.

www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/Pages/quarterlybulletin/2014/qb14q1.aspx (accessed 31 October 2017).

¹⁰ Matthew Salomon and Joseph Spanjers, 'Illicit Financial Flows to and from Developing Countries: 2005–2014' (Washington DC: Global Financial Integrity, May 2017).

¹¹ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 365.

¹² Mark Carney, 'Breaking the Tragedy of the Horizon – climate change and financial stability', speech given at Lloyds, London, 29 September 2015.

Although they have fuelled exponential growth for nearly two centuries, hydrocarbons exemplify the ‘law’ of diminishing returns: as deposits of easily accessible and higher quality fuels are exhausted, more energy is needed to extract the fuel that remains, so even while fuel production rises, the net energy yield declines towards zero.¹³

Fossil fuel finance is a gamble that the ‘logic’ of accumulation will outperform the ‘law’ of diminishing returns. So divesting from fossil fuels is both a prudent act of financial risk management¹⁴ and a practical step towards ending dependency on hydrocarbons. But divesting is about more than self-interest. Reducing the impact on human health and longevity of air pollution from burning fossil fuels,¹⁵ avoiding the destruction of the global climate¹⁶ and easing the pressure for military conflict are vital ways to oppose the inequitable distribution of risk and harm, around the world and between the generations.¹⁷ Divesting from fossil fuels is both a prudential and an ethical imperative.

However, I want to focus on the ideological contradictions of infinite growth on a finite planet and to propose that letting go of fossil fuels is a cultural project.

*My gallery. You must mean my collection. All those paintings, poems, all those things of yours I gathered over the years. It was hard work for me, but I believed in it, we all did in those days. So you think you know what it was for, why we did it. Well, that would be most interesting to hear. Because I have to say, it's a question I ask myself all the time.*¹⁸

To change the channels that money flows through is to redistribute social power. When I was invited in 2012 to give a presentation on sustainability to our university’s community of readers and professors, I summarised UAL’s considerable achievements in sustainability in the curriculum and some areas of the estates. But I showed how these were vastly overshadowed by the environmental impact of our banking relationship. Using research by Mika Minio-Paluello, I proposed that UAL should switch banks from the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), which was heavily invested in extreme fossil fuels.¹⁹ I contrasted RBS with Triodos Bank, which works to avert economic/ecological collapse by only financing organisations that benefit the environment and society.²⁰ Unlike RBS, Triodos is so well capitalised that it avoids exposure to the ‘big three’ credit ratings agencies: Fitch, Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s, which were implicated in the sub-prime mortgage scandal that led to the global financial crisis.

¹³ Nafeez Ahmed, *Failing States, Collapsing Systems: BioPhysical Triggers of Political Violence* (Cham: Springer, 2017).

¹⁴ James Leaton, *Unburnable Carbon – Are the World’s Financial Markets Carrying a Carbon Bubble?* (London: Carbon Tracker Initiative, 2011).

¹⁵ Heather Walton et al., *Understanding the Health Impacts of Air Pollution in London* (London: Kings College, 2015).

¹⁶ ‘Counting down to climate change’, Editorial, *The Lancet*, 390, no. 10107 (4 November 2017).

¹⁷ IPCC, 2014: *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. (Geneva: IPCC, 2014), 13.

¹⁸ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 248.

¹⁹ Mika Minio-Paluello, *The Oil and Gas Bank: RBS and the Financing of Climate Change* (BankTrack, Friends of the Earth Scotland, New Economics Foundation, People & Planet and PLATFORM 2007, 12 March 2007). https://www.banktrack.org/news/the_oil_gas_bank

²⁰ See www.triodos.co.uk/en/about-triodos (accessed 25 October 2017).

I proposed that whichever bank we use, we should critically engage with it through practice-led research into broad themes such as 'Value and Exchange'. Although my colleagues thanked me kindly, they gave no feedback and the meeting moved smoothly down the agenda.

Yet, several months later, I was invited again to speak about sustainability to this group. This time, I proposed that UAL should divest from fossil fuels and reinvest in renewable energy and I was encouraged by my colleagues' positive response. When, in February 2013, UAL Vice Chancellor Nigel Carrington signed the People & Planet Green Education Pledge, I wrote to him and his executives, welcoming the move but advising that UAL should act quickly to avoid opening up a gap between expectations and actuality. I alerted them to the global movement to divest from fossil fuels and advised them of the reputational risks of banking with RBS. Throughout that year, I sent them updates on the public disapproval and government scrutiny²¹ of RBS for its dishonest, irresponsible and predatory banking practices.²² I described research into stranded assets by the University of Oxford's Sustainable Finance Programme showing that the global fossil fuel divestment movement had learned from the campaigns to divest from tobacco companies and apartheid regimes, and was moving faster.²³ I proposed that UAL could be the first university in Britain to divest from fossil fuels. This time, I was called into a meeting to discuss divestment. But in the meeting, I found its only purpose was for the university's Head of Sustainability to tell me to stop contacting the Vice Chancellor and his executives about climate change and fossil fuel divestment.

During 2013 and 2014, I gave lectures across UAL and beyond, connecting art, climate change and finance, explaining why UAL should divest from fossil fuels and reinvest in energy that is not only renewable, but also decentralised, diversified and democratically controlled. Georgia Brown, a BA Sculpture student at Wimbledon College of Arts, came forward, and together we initiated a campaign for UAL to divest from fossil fuels. We were then joined by other students including Amy McDonnell, a PhD candidate, and Ana Oppenheim, Campaigns Officer of the Students' Union, and we had valuable support from academics, especially Kyran Joughin.

The Fossil Free UAL campaign held discussions and displays, launched a petition, staged a performance and submitted a Freedom of Information request. Beyond the university, the global divestment movement started by Bill McKibben and 350.org was an astonishing success, with the total divested from fossil fuels growing exponentially, from millions to billions and then trillions of dollars.²⁴ However, there was still no response from the Vice Chancellor or his executive board.

²¹ Matt Scuffham and Kirstin Ridley, 'RBS fined \$612 million for rate rigging', Reuters, 6 February 2013. www.reuters.com/article/us-rbs-libor/exclusive-rbs-fined-612-million-for-rate-rigging-idUSBRE91500B20130206 (accessed 18 October 2017).

²² *RBS and the Case for a Bad Bank: The Government's Review* (London: HM Treasury, November 2013).

²³ <http://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk/research/sustainable-finance/publications/Stranded-Assets-and-Scenarios-Discussion-Paper.pdf>

²⁴ Damian Carrington and Emma Howard, 'Institutions worth \$2.6 trillion have now pulled investments out of fossil fuels', *Guardian*, 22 September, 2015.

*The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand, and, I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly.*²⁵

A key function of a university is to distribute authority and power. Authority can be understood here as the ability to produce legitimacy by obtaining people's consent, while power is the ability to control their actions.²⁶ A university distributes its authority and power internally by mediating the relationship between its academic activities and its administrative, or management, activities.

As an organisation, UAL comprises six art schools with distinct identities joined by overarching structures of administration, management and governance to form a higher education corporation. The unauthorised formula 'university/art school' could describe UAL, the forward slash connoting a joining but also a fault line potentially vulnerable to the pressure of debt. The formerly autonomous art schools and the university of which they are now parts can be distinguished by the historically different relationships between their structures and their cultures. While the art schools tend towards horizontal networks of material creativity, open discourse and critical enquiry, the university operates as a hierarchy, a centralised system of decision-making, ratification and management within an ostensibly neutral ethos of efficiency and compliance with legislation.

Yet it is impossible to comply with socially divisive laws in a neutral way. Similarly, the value of efficiency depends on whose interest it serves. For example, education can efficiently distribute social opportunity, or efficiently concentrate it: the former purpose can serve the common good; the latter can favour private interests. So although an organisation's internal structure and practices might remain constant, its social function can be transformed by changes in the external political and economic context.

*It never occurred to me that our lives, until then so closely interwoven, could unravel and separate over a thing like that. But the fact was, I suppose, there were powerful tides tugging us apart by then, and it only needed something like that to finish the task.*²⁷

Following the global financial crisis of 2007–8, the UK bank rescue package gave out £500 billion of public money to the private banks that had caused the crisis, in a move that was 'designed to restore confidence in the banking system'.²⁸ This increased the public-sector deficit to the extent that it became possible for politicians to gain popular consent for state funding cuts that instituted an historic redistribution of social power in favour of private

²⁵ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 79.

²⁶ There is a large debate around these issues in political philosophy. I have taken my definition from D.D. Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

²⁷ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 194.

²⁸ 'Darling on Bail-out Measures', BBC News Channel, broadcast 8 October, 2008 bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7659130.stm (accessed 30 October 2017).

interests. As David Graeber has shown, cuts in public spending exactly correspond to the rise in private debt. But it is crucial to recognise that the cuts do not simply shift debt from public to private. The Panama Papers²⁹ and Paradise Papers³⁰ revelations show that vast tax avoidance is *legal*. Thus, by increasing the fiscal deficit to bail out the banks while maintaining a system that enables wealthy individuals and corporations to avoid paying tax, the government shifts the burden of debt onto those least able to pay it.³¹

In the 2010 UK Government Spending Review, the public funding of education was cut from £7.6 billion to £3.4 billion over five years, a reduction of sixty per cent.³² Within this cut, art and design education were especially hard hit. Also in 2010, the Browne Review recommended that state funding for higher education be replaced by undergraduate student fees of up to £9,000 a year.³³ This led to the total withdrawal of public funds for the undergraduate teaching of art and design in Britain. The 2015 UK Government Spending Review pressed further still, aiming to eliminate the fiscal deficit by focusing on economic and military security while protecting core public services, a category that does not include either higher education or the arts and humanities.³⁴

The inequitable and regressive redistribution of wealth formerly branded as ‘austerity’ looks set to continue: following cuts of £12 billion to welfare services, the Government required its departments to identify where a further £20 billion of cuts could be made by 2019–20.³⁵ This wholesale withdrawal of social opportunity increases pressure on universities’ charitable status, while the disproportionate impact of the cuts on black, Asian and minority ethnic people, and on disabled people, conflicts with universities’ ability to deliver on their policies for widening participation. Added to these conflicts are the internal contradictions of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which enshrines universities’ ethos of public service and academic freedoms³⁶ while undermining them through its main purpose of exposing universities to destructive competition from deregulated commercial ‘educational providers’.³⁷ Doing little to oppose the political shift towards a market-oriented conception of education, the executive and management teams of most UK universities may have remained largely unaware of these conflicts and contradictions. But this seems unlikely, given that they seem to have been actively transforming universities from places for the social production and distribution of knowledge into engines of capital accumulation.

²⁹ ‘Panama Papers’, records of financial transactions anonymously leaked to *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2015.

³⁰ ‘Paradise Papers’, confidential electronic documents obtained by the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and shared by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, reported in the *Guardian*, November 2017.

³¹ David Graeber, ‘Britain is Heading for Another 2008 Crash: Here’s Why’, *Guardian*, October 28, 2015.

³² HM Treasury, *Spending Review 2010*, Policy paper (UK Government July 2015), 11.

³³ John Browne et al., *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: an Independent Review of Higher Education Finance*, Independent report (UK Government, 2010). Retrieved from www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-browne-report-higher-education-funding-and-student-finance (accessed 26 October 2017).

³⁴ See HM Treasury, *A Country that Lives Within its Means: Spending Review 2015*, UK Government, July 2015.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁶ *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, UK Government,

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/section/14> (accessed 27 October 2017).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/notes/division/3/index.htm (accessed 25 October 2017) See note 28 on Deregulation of higher education corporations.

*I nodded slowly. 'So that's why they took away our art...'*³⁸

Andrew McGettigan has shown how the marketisation of British higher education redistributes risk and reward.³⁹ While promising to empower students as consumers, marketisation transfers power away from those who value universities as public institutions towards the unaccountable executives and the private banks to which they are indebted. At every level and scale, from student loans to mortgages secured on family homes and institutional property speculation, the debt and financialisation that spring from marketisation produce ideological effects that correspond to psychological affects.

For example, the government's designation of higher education in art, design and the humanities as not worthy of public funding doesn't simply reduce the available resources – it has the ideological effect of lowering the perceived social value of these activities. People whose work is implicitly portrayed as superfluous or irrelevant are likely to feel indignation, resentment, loss of confidence, or a deeper disillusionment. Also, as many practitioners and academics have spent their working lives dedicated to their field, and are more closely associated by name with their 'outputs' and achievements, the psychological affects may be especially intense.

Putting students in debt by making them pay tuition fees perverts the nature of the educational relationship from learning as an inherently social process within a framework of education as a public good to a personal transaction, a private investment in 'cultural capital'⁴⁰ and professional skills.⁴¹ Far from feeling empowered by this, students may find it unbearable to acknowledge the debt as real – I have often heard students speak of their debts as distant or abstract, and joke about escape by declaring themselves bankrupt or assuming a false identity. Ignoring the bleak humour of its 'customers', the university/art school mediates a set of transactions in which students first contribute economic capital by paying fees, and then invest and develop their social capital of interpersonal skills, imagination and creativity. In return, students are awarded the cultural capital of grades and, hopefully, a recognised qualification which may bring advantage in the increasingly competitive employment market.

I'm not saying that everything was fine before the cuts. Even when education was publicly funded there were tensions between the ideal of transformative education, in which staff and students work together in an emancipatory pedagogic relationship, and the actual power dynamic of requiring students to submit work for assessment. Long before the bailout of the banks, the 'audit culture' that aimed to improve accountability in the public sector burdened academics with bureaucracy, including the rigid imposition of flawed assessment criteria. Still, the marketisation of education may never entirely reduce academic employment to a trade of cognitive and affective skills in return for payment. Similarly, although the university may be completely dependent on fees, the pedagogic relationship is unlikely to become a simple exchange of payment for grades.

³⁸ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 173.

³⁹ Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*, (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

⁴¹ See Council for the Defence of British Universities, <http://cdbu.org.uk>, and Timothy Ingold et al., *Reclaiming our University*, <https://reclaimingouruniversity.wordpress.com>.

Nevertheless, there is relentless pressure towards a narrow instrumentalisation of art and design education through measures such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The NSS implicitly invites students to evaluate their course, their tutors and their university from the position of consumers of education as a service, rather than co-producers of, and participants in, the experience of learning. Correspondingly, the TEF combines student satisfaction statistics from the NSS with other factors, including dropout rates and graduate employment rates, in order to calculate ‘bronze’ ‘silver’ or ‘gold’ awards that are used to determine the fees that universities can charge. The National Union of Students staged a boycott of the NSS, challenging its legitimacy. Meanwhile, opposition to the TEF ranged from the Russell Group’s⁴² diplomatically expressed scepticism of the validity of the metrics to a more principled resistance from the Council for the Defence of British Universities, which denounced the exercise as ‘simplistic, arbitrary and inadequately tested’.⁴³

Struggles around the distribution of risk and reward comprise problems that are not ‘closed’ or technical, like those of mathematics or accountancy, but ‘open’, meaning they cannot be reconciled within a single set of preferences. For the university, funding cuts pose ‘wicked problems’⁴⁴ that exacerbate the inequitable distribution of power within its own walls and in its relationship to society. These problems implicate us in decisions which risk irreversible harm to the institution that we inherited from our predecessors, share with others today, and have an obligation to pass on to those who come after us. In a context of heightened anxiety around severe budget cuts, an intellectually incoherent programme of academic restructuring could be rushed through, shielded from legitimate and much-needed critique by the real and perceived threat of redundancy. Clearly, this would impact on people differently depending on whether they were tenured or precarious, homeowners or tenants. The inequitable distribution of risk and reward is an instrument of governance: in a move reminiscent of *The Prince*,⁴⁵ academic staff with relatively secure employment contracts could be divided from their colleagues whose precariousness would be disproportionately increased by such restructuring. This poses a particular danger for universities whose cultural capital is based on a reputation for creativity and risk-taking in a supportive environment of respect, trust and goodwill.

Under the combined influence of funding cuts and debt, academic principles and activities are becoming subordinated to the financial operations of the organisation, limiting the ability of creative and critical thinking to inform the university strategy in relation to a deeply retrograde social transformation. To the extent that the university/art school accepts ‘the deficit’, and the ‘austerity’ that is held to be its corollary, it normalises an instrumental conception of cultural practice. Perhaps more insidiously, the concentration of economic power brought by financialisation is emboldening members of the university executive to go

⁴² The Russell Group is an association representing the interests of 24 leading British research universities www.russellgroup.ac.uk (accessed 17 November 2017).

⁴³ Dorothy Bishop, ‘TEF and the Reputation of UK Higher Education’, Council for the Defence of British Universities, <http://cdbu.org.uk/tef-and-the-reputation-of-uk-higher-education> (accessed 27 October 2017)

⁴⁴ Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, ‘Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning’, *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155–69. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>

⁴⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* [1531–2], trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 2004), 40–5.

beyond their operational control of teaching, learning and research and seek to define the very purpose of art and design education. In a blandly teleological closure, this purpose is described as 'promoting enterprise and employability' in the service of 'the creative industries'.⁴⁶ A forced union of divergent impulses, the very concept of 'creative industries' is conflicted: whereas creativity entails a willingness to break with convention, the 'creative industries' harness such unruly impulses within the established order of economic growth that is almost certainly unsustainable in its processes, and inequitable in its distribution. The notion of the creative industries doesn't explicitly challenge or oppose the critical and emancipatory potential of cultural practice; it simply forgets them.

So I didn't have the head to go into why it mattered so much. And though I did just drop it and carry on with the discussion we'd been having, the atmosphere had gone chilly, and could hardly have helped us get through the difficult matter in hand.⁴⁷

Debt is not a neutral mechanism, but a key part of the value system in which people are figured as human resources, the future is worth less than the present and the biosphere is valued as 'natural capital'.⁴⁸ This barren and stultifying worldview diminishes our sense of what is possible by imposing a gulf between what we are capable of and what we accept. Debt is a power relation of concealment and disguise that brings not only a corrosive anxiety about entrapment and exposure to risk, but also uncertainty at the level of inequity, which affects one's sense of self in social situations.

While the number of wealthy art students grows, chronic financial constraint condemns many others, especially those living and working in London, to an insecure existence of balancing study with underpaid part-time employment. For students and staff alike, the stresses of multiple demands on time, financial uncertainty and vulnerability can test not only their ability to plan and their stamina to deliver, but also their loyalties and friendships. In *Breaking the Silence*, Rosalind Gill has revealed how, in academia, neoliberalism produces divisive competition that prevents colleagues from discussing their anxieties, so that, by unspoken agreement, the structural issues remain beyond the frame of official discourse.⁴⁹ The larger the loan that the institution takes on, the more acceptable becomes the idea that everyone should pursue economic growth. Correspondingly, the deeper that students and staff go into debt, the less time they have to practise the freedoms of academic enquiry and creative expression. In a destructive feedback loop, dissent is marginalised while emancipatory and reflective critique gives way to instrumental innovation, until a regime of compliance based on inequality of access to information and resources is tacitly accepted as rational and inevitable.

⁴⁶ Nigel Carrington, *The Role of Higher Education in Supporting the Creative Economy* (London: Policy Forum, 17 June 2015).

⁴⁷ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 187–8.

⁴⁸ EF Schumacher developed the concept of 'natural capital' in *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973). The concept has since been used to support the monetisation and privatisation of ecological systems.

⁴⁹ Rosalind Gill, 'Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-liberal Academia', in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. R. Flood and Rosalind Gill (London: Routledge, 2010), 228–244.

I've thought about those moments over and over. I should have found something to say. I could have just denied it, though Tommy probably wouldn't have believed me. And to have tried to explain the thing truthfully would have been too complicated. But I could have done something.

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Although debt may not prevent knowledge from being used for the public or common good, it greatly increases the pressures and incentives for knowledge to serve private interests instead.⁵¹ With its promise of financial reward for originality, the concept of intellectual property gains currency in an indebted and financially constrained environment. Because intellectual property is a privatisation of knowledge, it undermines the ideal of a creative community in which influences are shared and ideas are co-produced. As financialisation captures and concentrates value from the public and the commons, the resulting inequality weakens the bonds of community, so people become isolated, and may internalise problems that should be addressed in public. As debt reduces people's freedom to speak out, it increases their complicity, causing a sense of guilt and a habit of denial.⁵²

Today, the student's journey to becoming an artist combines learning as a conscious process of identity formation with the hidden forces of economic inequality under neoliberalism. Within 'the art world', these forces take on a particular psychological intensity. Perhaps to a greater extent than more collaborative forms of cultural production, such as architecture, film-making, music or theatre, contemporary art is especially closely identified with its creators. The focus on names is reinforced by the institutions – the gallery, the biennial, the museum – and their outputs – the art object, the solo exhibition, the artist's monograph – which perpetuate the canon of established artists, usually individuals with a unique 'signature style'. Competition between artists for resources is not simply amplified by public funding cuts, but distorted by the uneven distribution of personal debt. State funding for the arts once redistributed opportunity, providing alternative ways for emerging artists to advance their careers beyond the private gallery network. So the withdrawal of funding erases many of the public co-ordinates of success, causing disorientation that disproportionately impacts on artists with the least social and economic capital. Art school should be a place for encounters with social and cultural differences, in such domains as gender, ethnicity and class. As a symptom of class difference, economic inequality is cloaked in embarrassment, envy and resentment, giving it an invisibility that allows it to escape critical interrogation.

*And when things go badly, of course I'm upset, but at least I can feel I've done all I could and keep things in perspective.*⁵³

⁵⁰ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 192.

⁵¹ See David Cross, 'A Placement for Everyone', in *Transformative Pedagogies and the Environment: Creative Agency Through Contemporary Art*, ed. Marie Sierra and Kit Wise (Champaign, IL: Common Ground, forthcoming).

⁵² See *Bonds: Guilt, Debt and Other Liabilities*, Berlin: Haus Der Kulturen Welt, 2012, hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/projekt_80117.php (accessed 27 October 2017).

⁵³ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 204.

Compounding the problem, a new orthodoxy of positive thinking in the university, the art school and beyond encourages people to suppress negative thoughts and feelings, accept what is being done, and share forward-looking narratives. In 2015, as major ‘budget shortfalls’ in the university became apparent, the idea of ‘resilience’ rose to official prominence at UAL. Unlike sustainability, which entails an ethical obligation to others that both draws on and nurtures a critical and emancipatory impulse, or ecosophy, which offers a model of dynamic interrelationships, ‘resilience’ subordinates critical thinking to practical expediency by focusing on small-scale, local, reactive solutions that address the symptoms rather than the causes of systemic crises. As Mark Neocleous has shown,⁵⁴ this perfectly serves neoliberalism, which draws people into accepting contradictions that enable private interests to benefit from and operate against both public service and the common good. Moreover, in the context of the entrenchment of social inequality, the dismantling of the welfare state and the militarisation of law enforcement, encouraging people to apply their creativity to resilience as a response to ‘austerity’ carries risks. When open problems are misconstrued as closed problems, and public issues are misrecognised as personal issues, they may become intractable, engendering a sense of paralysis and complicity in which mental health issues can proliferate.

The rise of institutional initiatives to support ‘wellbeing’, such as the introduction of ‘Mental Health First Aid’ (MHFA),⁵⁵ doubtless sprang from the best of intentions, and may be of great relief and comfort to many people. Yet, as I have tried to show, the ideological effects of neoliberalism on higher education risk producing a defective relational environment that cognitive behavioural strategies may be unable to address. Moreover, in offering mental health advice to help staff and students cope with a traumatic social transformation in which it is actively participating, the institution may be inadvertently recruiting people to ‘collude in their own repression’.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the Vice Chancellor of UAL has written: ‘Everyone is somewhere on the mental health spectrum, so this is a business productivity issue which should be dealt with alongside other health and safety considerations. Creating a positive environment for mental health demonstrably costs less than failing to do so’.⁵⁷

Anthropologist and systems theorist Gregory Bateson coined the term ‘double bind’⁵⁸ to describe a psychological problem that can occur in family and organisational relationships:

The first proposition from which the hypothesis is derived is that learning occurs always in some context which has formal characteristics. [...] Further, the hypothesis depends on the idea that this structured context also occurs within a wider context—a metacontext if you will—and that this sequence of contexts is an open, and conceivably infinite series.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Mark Neocleous, ‘Resisting Resilience’, *Radical Philosophy* 178 (March/April 2013). www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/resisting-resilience (accessed 27 October 2017)

⁵⁵ See Jay Watts, ‘The Mental Health First Aid Programme is a Pet Project’, *Independent*, July 15 2017. www.independent.co.uk/voices/mental-health-first-aid-theresa-may-depression-anxiety-nhs-underfunded-services-turned-away-a7842571.html (accessed 27 October 2017)

⁵⁶ Victor Burgin, ‘Art, Commonsense and Photography’ [1976], in *The Camerawork Essays*, ed. J. Evans (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997), 76.

⁵⁷ Nigel Carrington [blog] <http://blogs.arts.ac.uk/vice-chancellor/> (accessed 5 November 2017).

⁵⁸ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* [1972] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 271–8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

Here, I am focusing on the interactions between people within a sequence of contexts that includes the art school, the university, UK higher education, the global financial system and the planetary ecosystem. In line with Bateson's assertion that the observer must be included within the focus of observation,⁶⁰ I have described elsewhere how I designated my academic job as an artist's placement, in order to question the arbitrary separation of art and life and to critically situate myself in relation to the institution at a time of systemic change.⁶¹ Collapsing the distinction between my art practice and my paid employment has been a way to engage with the university/art school as a set of interrelated contexts for identity formation and cultural production, especially in relation to the unfolding economic and ecological crisis.

A falling leaf, the greeting of a friend, or a 'primrose by the river's brim' is not 'just that and nothing more.' Exogenous experience may be framed in the contexts of a dream, and internal thought may be projected into the contexts of the external world.⁶²

Could the distribution of power and authority in the university produce the conditions in which double binds might arise? Bateson refers to the 'theory of logical types', which asserts that 'no class can, in formal logical or mathematical discourse, be a member of itself'.⁶³ Academic and executive functions are members of the class 'university', so, following Bateson, we could say that if part of the university acts in a way that implicitly claims it is the whole university, then it has conflated different logical types. The mistake may originate from the external context, in which the category 'society' has been wrongly subordinated to the category 'economy'.

Arising through habitual interactions, rather than traumatic events, double binds form when a primary negative injunction conflicts with a secondary injunction, which may be at the level of metacommunication – nonverbal signals about the type of message. For example, a person may say that they care about someone or something, but their actions and/or the context of power relations in which they are communicating may contradict what they say. A double bind can be completed by a tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim from leaving the field.⁶⁴ If the field is neoliberalism, then debt is the prohibition. That being so, the risk is that

The bind becomes mutual. A stage is reached in the relationship in which neither person can afford to receive or emit metacommunicative messages without distortion.⁶⁵

So, how might double binds in the university/art school be undone? If the executive staff themselves were open to the transformative education they aim to deliver, they might use their power to counter the divisive and contradictory influence of neoliberalism. But that is both unlikely and problematic, as economic power enables those who wield it to exempt

⁶⁰ Ibid., 246.

⁶¹ Cross, 'A Placement for Everyone'.

⁶² Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 272.

⁶³ Ibid., 280.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 206.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 237.

themselves from critique. Instead, we must look to the university's sources of social and cultural value, from which economic value is extracted: the academic networks of practice-based, intellectual and pedagogic interactions. In these, the capacity of art to aestheticise contradiction as paradox resonates with the ability of artists to inhabit divergent tendencies or impulses, both between subject positions and within them. Moving between abstract concept and material form, between action and reflection, academic staff and students posit contributions to knowledge, which are made contingent on articulating particular positions in defined situations. Aiming to tolerate ambiguity and difference, and to support dissensus, artists, designers and educators practise their skills of observation, integrate theory and practice, cultivate critical thinking, disrupt the symbolic order, resist the closure of meaning and hopefully develop a sense of proportion.

These may help to resist 'double binds'. But to reverse the extractive colonisation of art education by finance, action is also needed that connects the internal and external contexts.

Although UAL never acknowledged the divestment campaign run by its own staff and students, in November 2015 the university announced that it would divest its endowments of £3.9 million from fossil fuels and sign the United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment. As campaigners, we were delighted, seeing it as a signal that staff and students could work together and that academic research can have an actual effect. For a brief, exhilarating moment, our campaign overcame the deadening structural separation between the academic and operational aspects of the university. Having glimpsed our organisation's 'operating system', it seemed possible to imagine a redistribution of attention, effort and reward. Divestment from fossil fuels is a 'letting go' that is more than financial: connecting the university's aims of becoming sustainable and delivering transformative education could germinate emancipatory forms of interpersonal and institutional change which can hardly be managed, much less imposed by executive order.

For divestment from fossil fuels to be a meaningful response to global warming, reinvestment must follow in renewable energy that is diversified, decentralised and democratically controlled. Yet, in the two years following UAL's pledge to divest, no information was released about how, or whether, divestment had been carried out. When in October 2016 we asked for evidence that UAL had actually divested, we were told that a long list had been drawn up of fund managers who may be commissioned to handle the divestment and reinvestment. We asked to see the list, but UAL refused, claiming commercial confidentiality. In October 2017, we enquired again and were told that UAL is 'in the process' of appointing fund managers and that it would report on its progress in 2018.

The explicit content of the message – that the divestment process was under way – implied that the university is committed to sustainability. Yet, by rejecting the campaigners' request for transparency and refusing dialogue, at the level of 'metacommunication', UAL signalled that the distribution of information and power remains unchanged. This undermines UAL's strategy of 'delivering transformative education', which promises to involve staff and

students in rigorous critical questioning, working together to challenge orthodoxies and taking creative risks.⁶⁶

Although the case for divestment didn't result in prompt action by our university, our bank has not been slow to act: research by the Rainforest Action Network and others⁶⁷ shows that, between 2014 and 2016, Royal Bank of Scotland cut ninety-five per cent of its financing for extreme fossil fuels. Having previously proclaimed itself as 'The Oil and Gas Bank', and ignored calls to divest, RBS is now getting out of fossil fuels, leaving them as stranded assets in the hands of slower-moving investors, such as universities and public sector pension funds. This repeats a tactic from the US sub-prime mortgage crisis, when banks sold off assets that they knew were becoming worthless.

Moving beyond the impasse around divestment, towards prefiguring a zero-carbon society, I devised a proposal for Visible Energy, a teaching and research project that would connect the academic and operational sides of the university. Linking aesthetic practice to practical action, the idea is to build a new model for collaboration, based on sharing information and power between producers, consumers and investors in renewable energy.

The project aims to move from a centralised to a distributed structure. This might be unimaginable if not for a brilliantly simple diagram, drawn in 1964 by Paul Baran of the RAND Corporation,⁶⁸ in which a single configuration of points or co-ordinates is connected by lines to compare centralised, decentralised and distributed organisational structures. Baran used it to propose a computer network that could maintain communication despite damage from a nuclear attack. This model established the conceptual basis for the development of the Internet, in which computers evolved from being *terminals* in centralised structures to *nodes* in distributed structures. Today, as electricity grids are evolving from centralised to distributed structures, Baran's model offers a conceptual topography of a dynamic system, which brings new risks and opportunities in facing the ecological and economic crises.

To be eligible for UK Energy Catalyst funding, the project had to involve collaboration between a university and a business. I was attracted to this condition, having previously proposed that UAL should critically engage with its providers of finance, insurance and energy.⁶⁹ I was both excited and anxious when UAL suggested collaboration with Bouygues, a multinational corporation with over €14 billion market capitalisation.⁷⁰ In February 2017, Bouygues was awarded a contract of undisclosed value for Facilities Management of UAL's energy systems, electrical, mechanical and fabric maintenance, cleaning, security and project management, including the relocation of London College of Communication and the transfer

⁶⁶ UAL has declared 'delivering transformative education' to be its top strategic area of focus to 2022 See www.arts.ac.uk/media/arts/about-ual/strategy-and-governance/documents/university-strategy/UAL_LTE_Strategy_2015_Web3.pdf (accessed 27 October 2017).

⁶⁷ *Banking on Climate Change*, Rainforest Action Network (June 2017) https://www.ran.org/banking_on_climate_change.

⁶⁸ Paul Baran. *On Distributed Communications* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1964).

⁶⁹ Cross, 'A Placement for Everyone'.

⁷⁰ 'Bouygues', Markets, Bloomberg, www.bloomberg.com/quote/ENT:FP (accessed 27 October 2017).

of London College of Fashion to the Olympic Park in East London.⁷¹ I contacted Bouygues, proposing Visible Energy, a collaboration at the intersection of renewable energy, distributing value (possibly using blockchain technology), and co-operative ownership and control.

Over several months, I engaged in discussions with senior staff at UAL, drafting and revising a project funding bid. In these discussions, the UAL Head of Sustainability identified the reasons why the project couldn't happen: it would require 'sign-off' from the Head of College and UAL Legal; a 'private wire' might be needed; the quantities of electricity and money at stake were so small that the project would only be a game... But the objection raised most often was that a co-operative business model wouldn't fit with the institutional culture of UAL. Nevertheless, with the deadline imminent, a senior executive at Bouygues replied to my email invitation, expressing interest in the project. Within minutes, our dialogue was summarily cut off by UAL, effectively terminating the bid. I couldn't afford conflict, so I interpreted our clash as a misunderstanding of the kind that happens in transformational Action Research, which tests implicit assumptions about how people should act.

*I don't mean I'm going to go round showing everyone exactly. But I was thinking, well, there's no reason why I should keep it all secret any more.*⁷²

I presented the project at a symposium on the Anthropocene, convened by Gene Ray.⁷³ I described how the project would centre on a renewable energy system to visualise its own ecological and economic performance, probably through a mobile application. Given present unsustainable levels of consumption, the system would be unlikely to produce surplus energy. But it would enable members to see beyond the centralised energy corporations and banks and visualise new relationships between energy, ecology and value. I showed NASA satellite images of San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, in the nights before and after Hurricane Maria struck in October 2017, disabling the island's electric power grid and communications network. I cited Chamaala Klinger, Owen Landeg and Virginia Murray at Public Health England, who researched the impact on health of such power cuts from extreme weather events. The researchers listed what communities lose in a power cut: light, obviously, but also clean water, food storage, medication storage, life support devices, temperature control, safety mechanisms, sewage disposal, transport, communications, air quality and mental health.⁷⁴ Underscoring the emancipatory goal of the project I proposed, I asserted: 'Energy is power. As long as others control it, they have power over us. To the extent that we own and control our energy, we increase our ability to transform ourselves, and make the transition towards ecological and social justice'. So, a key aspect of the project is that it would be a co-

⁷¹ University of the Arts London, 'Bouygues Awarded New UAL Facilities Management Contract' blogs.arts.ac.uk/estates/2017/02/13/bouygues-awarded-new-ual-facilities-management-contract (accessed 27 October 2017).

⁷² Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 186.

⁷³ David Cross, 'Beyond Debt and Destruction?' in *The Anthropocene Atlas of Geneva, an International Symposium*, HEAD Geneva, Switzerland, 18 October 2017.

⁷⁴ Chaamala Klinger, Owen Landeg and Virginia Murray, 'Power Outages, Extreme Events and Health: A Systematic Review of the Literature from 2011–2012', *PLoS Currents* 6 (2014). DOI: [10.1371/currents.dis.04eb1dc5e73dd1377e05a10e9edde673](https://doi.org/10.1371/currents.dis.04eb1dc5e73dd1377e05a10e9edde673).

operative: a democratic, member-run organisation that is the common property of its members. In this aim, I am much indebted to the Social Science Centre at Lincoln University in the UK. Joss Winn and Mike Neary, members of this cooperative, write: 'Our research seeks to develop a framework for co-operative higher education that is grounded in the social history of the co-operative movement, the practice of democratic governance and common ownership of social institutions, and the production of knowledge at the level of society'.⁷⁵

A distributed structure may be not only more resilient, but also more resistant than a centralised structure to capture or co-optation. However, the distributed renewable energy co-operative would be both a means to an end and an end in itself: its members would decide together how large it should be, what it should look like, how far it might extend, and what it is ultimately for.

Never Let Me Go is, at one level, a moving account of young people doing their best to understand and care for each other as they grow up in a difficult situation. Facing a bleak future together, they show resilience, develop compassion and achieve a semblance of peace. Although their tenderness is met with indifference and rejection, it never occurs to them to question the limit of their existence, which is bounded by an edge to their world.

⁷⁵ Mike Neary and Joss Winn, 'Beyond Public and Private: A Framework for Co-operative Higher Education', *Open Library of Humanities* 3, no.2 (2017): 2 DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/olh.195>