

6 The Alternative Art School and the History of the Social Reproduction of Artistic Labour

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Alternative art schools appeared during a global crisis of university education and the specific crisis of art education in Europe. In his survey of the ‘small scale and self-organised art schools’, mostly set up by artists, Sam Thorne (2017) describes the circumstances in which the alternative art school was born.

Across Europe and the United States, universities are being reimagined as businesses, with students recast as paying customers. Tuition fees have escalated exponentially, offsetting bloated university administrations, new buildings, and vast salaries for top-ranking staff. All of this has led to untold levels of student debt. At a moment when the institutions of art education have become more numerous, expensive, and professionalized than ever before, there is a collective feeling that something must change.

(Thorne 2017, 30)

My main concern in this essay is to determine whether the alternative art school is a symptom of the crisis or a remedy for it.

Some early examples show that a distinctive pattern was established from the start. The Copenhagen Free University is a case in point. Founded by Henrietta Heise and Jakob Jacobsen in 2001 as an artist-run collective in the tradition of Situationism, it set a new agenda for art education outside of the university system. It closed at the end of 2007, but in 2010, Heise and Jakobsen received formal notification from the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation that all self-organised and free universities in Denmark had been outlawed. In 2011, Nils Norman wrote an article about the Copenhagen Free University in *Artforum*, concluding

the call for more free universities seems ever more urgent. Students and teachers can actively question the neoliberal turn in their places of learning and work – but so can artists. If they don’t, the future for education looks very bleak, and very expensive.

(Norman 2011)

Drawing on different legacies and having a different agenda, Islington Mill Art Academy, which was set up in Salford in 2007 by a group of local art foundation students, follows a similar logic insofar as it was conceived specifically as an alternative to the neoliberal university sector and its extortionate tuition fees. Not long after, the Free University of Liverpool, which ran from 2010 to 2013, was ‘united in our disgust and revolt against neoliberal marketised education’ (The Free University of Liverpool, n.d.). The same rationale was invoked by subsequent alternative art schools. Open School East was founded in East London in 2013 primarily in response to rising tuition fees and, in the following year, the School of the Damned was set up as a postgraduate course formed by art students and recent graduates who could not afford rising course fees and were dissatisfied with the structure, ethos, and curricula of university art courses that had been systematically depleted by the increasing financialisation of Higher Education in the UK. This pattern was confirmed by *Art Review*, the British art magazine, which provided a ‘guide to alternative art schools in Europe’ in 2023, describing them as ‘projects seeking to sidestep, subvert or altogether evade the structures of the [university] art school’ (Art Review 2023).

What I am calling the *alternative art school*, Thorne calls ‘self-organised art education’. In one sense, they describe the same thing but whereas Thorne refers to a common characteristic (self-organisation) that singles out a type of activity (art education), I refer more specifically to institutions (art schools) and more generally to an unspecified relationship to the official university sector (alternative). Richard Hudson-Miles, who has published the most radical assessment of the history of what he calls ‘experiments in autonomous art education’ (Hudson-Miles 2022), uses the phrase ‘alternative art schools’ but also ‘autonomous art schools’ and ‘polyphonic art schools’. Here, differences of terminology are emphatically connected to political differences. Hudson-Miles theorises the alternative art schools through the lens of, and in proximity to, the autonomist Marxist project of the broader development of the ‘autonomous university’, especially as this is articulated and embodied by the Edu-Factory Collective.

Insofar as most alternative art schools are not autonomous in this radical sense but might become more radical by learning the autonomous university, I regard the terminology adopted by Hudson-Miles as speculative. Pointing in the opposite direction, so to speak, I approach the politics of the alternative art school historically by comparing the alternative art school with a range of precedents. These are not difficult to find in a history of art’s institutions peppered with start-ups, counter-cultural organisations, anti-institutional associations, and successive generations of critical pedagogy. From the perspective of the alternative art school, the history of art is replete with models, blueprints, and prototypes. But how exactly do earlier struggles over the social reproduction of art shed light on current developments? And how do new practices open up new lines of inquiry into neglected, disregarded, and suppressed histories?

But which precedents? The selection of precedents is already to load the dice in favour of one conclusion or another. If we say, for instance, that the alternative art schools are a continuation of the anti-academic communities of secessionism,

avant-gardism, and modernism in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century within what David Cottington (2022) calls art's 'alternative professionalism', then the new self-organised art schools are located within the history of radicalism and rupture. If, on the other hand, we say that they resemble the temporary, pop-up academies¹ that British painters, printmakers, and sculptors formed in the eighteenth century in the interregnum between the demise of the guilds and the founding of the Royal Academy, then the alternative art schools are placed within an older tradition of private clubs, salons, and associations that elevated art above craft, industry, and commerce. Or, given that the modernist critique of the academy 'strongly resembled the critiques levelled by the Académie against the guild' (Michel 2018, 200), is the alternative art school indebted to both?

There is a much longer history of independent education in the UK. The Workers Educational Association (WEA) was founded in 1903 and the Plebs League, which established itself as a radical alternative to the WEA, was founded in 1908 to bring about a more radical connection between education and political radicalism. These institutions extended the independence of working class adult education which, in the nineteenth century, had been provided by 'dissenting sects' (Anglicans, Methodists, Quakers, and the like) in working men's clubs and other temporarily commandeered spaces (Thompson 1991, 28). The Open University, which broadcast lectures for free on TV and radio, introduced a new model of mass adult education in 1969 that occupied the wavelengths of news and popular culture which Raymond Williams described as 'a remarkable demonstration of some of the true possibilities of television' (Williams 2002, 51). In one sense, the Open University returned to the radical education tradition of the nineteenth century, which Richard Johnson describes as breaching the distinction between the school and the home. However, it is unclear whether the schedule of programmes thereby are added to the 'indigenous educational resources' (Johnson 1979, 80) of the household and the community or serve to abolish the basis of collective self-education.

The alternative art school may owe something to the legacy of radical education, but it also belongs to the more recent tradition of the artist-led. If this is true, however, where does it sit within a field of the artist-led that includes a strong and unbroken tradition of grassroots, anti-commercial culture of independence, on the one hand, and the self-organisation of artists as business-minded, self-interested, and privilege-protecting professionals, on the other hand? Does it bundle together the 1970s values of the artist-led with the 1980s values of entrepreneurialism and the 1990s values of institutional critique? Or does it show the limits of all three by turning to them not as a response to the opposition between Keynesianism and monetarism but under new conditions characterised by a disorganised Left and the rise of neo-Fascism?

Culturally speaking, the alternative art school combines shades of the politics of punk and 'Indie' music's recalcitrant relationship to the music industry, with the conservative attempt to claw back lost privilege typical of the Hipster affirmation of folk and craft. Since the alternative art school set itself up against the neoliberal capture of the old art schools that had already been captured by the polytechnic and university, the question that must be raised, from my point of view, is whether it

is thereby opposed to neoliberalism or is another expression of it. One precedent suggests itself in this regard. The alternative art school resembles the concept of DIY in British art in the 1990s which simultaneously embraced the Left-wing tradition of the artist-led and Thatcherite entrepreneurialism. As such, it is both like a punk squat and a craft beer start-up. Or rather, it is perhaps the art school of an era in which niche beer brands exemplify what punk has become. Maybe the meaning of alternative has changed. No doubt, the alternative art school is closer to alt-folk and alt-country rather than alt-truth and the alt-right. And yet, if it is alternative to the mainstream, the state system, the official, and the established, then it belongs to a broader tendency. In the 1980s 'alternative' meant setting up an Indie label, but today it means taking out private medical insurance as a protest against the neoliberal decimation of the NHS.

This political indeterminacy is something very familiar to me in my engagement with the politics of art since the 1980s. Speaking at a symposium on art activism in 2015 organised by the art-activist group Platform, I said:

Marxists like me find themselves supporting political movements that we also criticise. What's more, we tend to find ourselves among political activists who are far more enthusiastic about a particular protest than we are because they do not share the nagging feeling that this protest, equivalent to the struggle over 'fair wages' in Marx's time, is both an expression of genuine political antagonisms and a mechanism for containing those antagonisms within the system itself.

While acknowledging that workers would benefit from the small increase in wages determined to be 'fair' and recognising that the struggle for wage increases contributes to the strength of the workers' movement, Marx advised the rejection of the policy of 'fair wages' and advocated nothing short of the abolition of the wage system. He compared the campaign for fair wages to a hypothetical campaign to reform slavery rather than abolish it. The question, then, is how the alternative art school responds to the conditions that give rise to it.

Alternative art schools arose in the UK in response to neoliberal attacks on the welfare state, public subsidy, and the infrastructures of dissent. Pushing through this unpopular bundle of policies, Margaret Thatcher famously announced, 'there is no alternative' (TINA). This was a successful component of the neoliberal delegitimation of socialism. It was so successful in fact that in the long run it appears that TINA didn't go far enough. In retrospect, it would have been more accurate for Thatcher to have said 'conservatism is the alternative'. Deregulation and privatisation became the models of renewal and experimentation in contrast with the alleged inertia of the public sector. Stuart Hall (1983) quickly diagnosed the neoliberal project as an attack on Keynesianism that had at its heart the aim to 'roll back the welfare state'.² David Harvey calls this the 'accumulation by dispossession' (2006, xvii) and Peter Linebaugh (2014) sees it as the new enclosure of the commons through 'the theft of our pensions, houses, universities, and land'. We can add education to the list.

If the crisis of the British art school is an effect of the global tendency of accumulation by dispossession and the new enclosure of the commons, it is not at the

brutal centre of the systemic dismantling of customary rights and the privatisation of collective resources. Sales of commonly held natural resources as stock to private companies in India during this period is ‘a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history’, as Arundhati Roy put it in 2002. Nevertheless, the decline of the art school is an effect of the palpable ‘trickle up’ from the ‘structural adjustment’, military interventions, and attacks on public expenditure in Latin America and Africa to austerity programmes first in Greece, Spain, Iceland, Portugal, Ireland, and Italy followed by policies designed to lower wages, extend privatisation, and reduce public spending in the UK and elsewhere, leading, in 2022, to the cost of living crisis. So, while artists and teachers are right to regard the predicament of art education as a serious and urgent matter, it is essential to reconnect this particular issue to the global struggles that arise out of this shared but unevenly distributed global crisis. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) provides one model for doing this. How many of the alternative art schools are committed to epistemologies of the south or to the decolonisation of the university?

Neoliberalism is the political, economic, and cultural driving force within the dominant historical tendency of capitalist retrenchment that brought about the twenty-first crisis of art education, but it did not determine the particular form of the alternative art school. To understand this we need to reflect on the counter-tendencies of Black Lives Matter, MeToo, Occupy, the indignados, and the Arab Spring. Mike Davis (2011, 7) observed that the Arab Spring was ‘a historical surprise comparable to 1848 or 1989’. Like them, it acted like a beacon for emancipatory movements around the world, spurring on others to take to the streets, develop collective counter-powers through place-based activism, organise themselves through digital ‘networks of outrage and hope’ (Castells 2012) and to use social media to cultivate affective counter-publics and communities of care. However, for Žižek, the ‘year of dreaming dangerously’ (2011) consisted of protests and political movements (Arab Spring, UK riots, Occupy, and so on) that were concerned primarily with the imminent loss of privilege, not the emancipatory project of building a new equitable society. In Christian Lotz’s phrase, ‘these movements are internal to Capitalism’ (Lotz 2012). Like the Sandanistas before them, however, the occupiers of Tahrir Square not only inspired protestors into action but supplied them with a toolkit of twenty-first century insurgency.

Spawning new movements and spurring on and transforming established ones, the Arab Spring and Occupy revitalised the contemporary Left and rekindled the politicisation of art. Boycotts and public displays of discontent were the principal techniques of this new militant vitalism in art, including boycotts of the 19th Biennale of Sydney in 2014 and Manifesta 10 in St Petersburg in 2014, the Whitney Biennial in 2019. In 2014, the No Wave Performance Task Force left blood and guts in front of the Dia Art Foundation’s retrospective of Carl Andre in honour of the late Ana Mendieta and protests were staged against a kimono ‘try-on’ event at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and against the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, in 2015 and 2022. Although Liberate Tate’s protests against Tate’s sponsorship by BP began just prior to the Arab Spring, it succeeded six years later

I would say at least in part because of widespread changes that rippled through political culture after the Arab Spring and Occupy.

This same ripple effect gave a new significance, a new impetus, and a new toolkit to the tradition of self-organised art institutions. But, as Jason Bowman (2015) has highlighted, this smudged the difference between the self-institutionalisation of grassroots collectivity, on the one hand, and managerial and commercial models of the artist-run and the artist-led and entrepreneurial forms of artistic 'DIY', on the other hand. As if tracking this transition, London's *Time Out* magazine listed non-commercial galleries under the heading 'Fringe' in the 1980s, switched to the term 'alternative spaces' from 1993, then in 1996 turned to the phrase 'Upcoming'. The narrative implied by this sequence of terms is that art's independent counter-culture adjusted itself to the loss of public funding to take up a place at the gates of the established art market. At exactly the same time, as David Hesmondhalgh (1999, 39) puts it, a version of indie music 'had come to occupy the centre ground of British pop music in the shape of bands such as Blur, Oasis and Pulp', noting that 'many of the key bands were on, or had been on, labels that were fostered by the 1980s independent networks', mostly 'companies which had survived the bankruptcies of the early 1990s to form much closer ties with the corporations'.

The book *Technique Anglaise*, published in 1991, is symptomatic of this transformation of the London art scene and its changing values. Heroically contrasting the new generation with artists of the 1970s, the contributors to *Technique Anglaise* rejected the image of 'art with a social purpose [that] didn't enter into the commercial galleries [but] was seen very much in public spaces, in alternative spaces'. In its place they proposed that young British art of the 1990s should learn from 'the early Eighties ... that there was a market for art' (Renton and Gillick 1991). The image of a new generation of artists who hustle, sending a limousine to fetch art collectors to attend a private view and behave 'professionally', is contrasted with the image of an older generation of British artists who, at their own private view, 'would be in a little huddle, in their corner, around their work, with their backs to people, pouring each other wine in plastic containers'. This myth of a new generation of artists who reject idealism for realism – that is, 'capitalist realism' – consists, largely, of the replacement of 'romantic anti-capitalism' with the romance of the market itself.

The preconditions for the birth of the new alternative art schools is rooted in this historical moment. The fact that Open School East established itself as a free, independent, self-organised art school that originally occupied the space of a former public library, following a period of unprecedented cuts, is a reminder of the austere political and economic condition that set the ball rolling. Sam Thorne, a cofounder of Open School East and now the Director General of Japan House, said the alternative art schools have been prompted by the rise in fees and a growing disillusionment with university art education. Artist Matthew Darbyshire says, 'Hopefully they'll lead by example and up the standards. The problem is [art courses in universities] continue to get worse as they lose sight of what an art school needs to be' (Batty 2013).

As a new type of institution, the alternative art school is nostalgic for a golden age of the art school before the economic basis of it was vapourised. It is nostalgic because it revives a model of the art school prior to neoliberalism, managerialism, corporatisation, ballooning student numbers, the degradation of academia, and the rise of research over pedagogy. It also longs for the days before the post-68 critique of art education. These are not the art school based on student revolt, sit-ins, protest, and the rejection of the post-war educational settlement. As one student pamphlet in the 1970s put it, 'with one foot in the Atlantic, one in a country estate, its head in the boardroom and its heart in the attic, art, and design education since the war mirrors the gamut of forces operating on British capitalism' (Rushton and Wood 1978, 7). There is an explicit continuity between this post-68 student revolt and the claims made by the Edu-Factory Collective on behalf of an insurgent autonomous university or Harney and Moten (2013) on behalf of a lumpen animosity to the university, but this should not hide the fact that so many examples of the new alternative self-organised art school are utopian in the strict sense of responding to an objectionable situation by establishing a colony set apart from the situation that it criticises. Many of the alternative art schools provide their staff and students with *individual* solutions to *structural* problems, which is to say that it is a form of 'romantic anti-capitalism'. The art school, by and large, has become a reformists' paradise.³

Grizedale Arts in Coniston in the Lake District is developing 'a quasi-art school' in which artists make something useful for the local community. Ryan Gander, who previously served on the board of Open School East, has drawn up plans for a post-graduate art academy in a former Victorian school in Saxmundham in Suffolk that would give preferential consideration to poorer applicants, free studio space, and accommodation for 12 students a year that would benefit from tuition by renowned artists. Other artists who have recently opened their own independent art schools include Tania Bruguera, Olafur Eliasson, Tracey Emin, and Mark Leckey. In one sense, the independent art school built around the reputation of an individual artist follows a familiar pattern that goes back to the *écoles* of the nineteenth century, the atelier system of the seventeenth century academy, and to the guild workshop before that. Understanding the new art schools, therefore, calls for a longer historical investigation into art's pedagogical institutions. Historically, the self-image of the alternative art school's independence from the university art department is modelled on modernism's anti-academicism, but it also resembles the Academy's original rejection of the guild system of the arts within a longer history of the transformation of the infrastructures, economies, and social relations of the production of art and the social reproduction of artistic labour.

The guild was a massive social organisation, but its knowledge, skills, and customs were reproduced within the household. That is to say, the apprentice system, which provided new generations of artisans, was conducted within single workshops that doubled as households. Apprentices lived with the master and were provided with food, lodgings, and even clothes, as well as an education. When the great proportion of the population was illiterate, apprentices were taught to read and write. Numbers were limited to very few apprentices per master, so that each

new generation was taught mostly in one-to-one encounters in the workplace. It was syndicalism that characterised the guilds. Artisans talked about 'brotherhood', quality, and shared interests. Ideas around independence and being alternative to the establishment were almost entirely unheard of.

The academies were the first art schools because they rejected the master-apprentice system and replaced it with a professor-pupil system. The academies were certainly 'alternative' to the guild system and thought of themselves as independent and free, but they were also meant to be socially superior because of their royal status and therefore institutionalised privilege. However, modernism's concept of independence was more individualist than the academy system's independence from the guild. Courbet, for instance, famously refused to teach and advised prospective students to make their own way. Are the alternative art schools the latest iteration of anti-academicism or the revival of the spirit of the first academies disguised as modernism's radicalism?

The academies have been disparaged in modern art history because of their doctrinaire content, but their greatest significance, in my view, is that they contributed enormously to the modern division of labour between the artist and the teacher, as well as the spatial division between the studio and the art school which had previously been indistinguishable within the guild workshop. The founding of the first establishments of art education outside the workshop was part of a profound spatial dispersal of the activities of artistic production, reproduction, circulation, and consumption. The significance of the art school, and of the relationship between students and artist-teachers, cannot be adequately understood by isolating the art school from the art gallery, art museum, art market, and the institutions of art publishing.

The dissolution of the workshop did not simply produce the artist's studio but also the art school, gallery, art supplies factories, art supplies shops, the museum, and so on. This is because the long transition from the artisan to the artist was dependent on the social division of artistic production that had previously been divided within the artisanal workshop between the 'master', apprentices, day labourers, and the artisan's household. As more and more workshop activities took place in other specialised places, a social division of artistic labour emerged, creating the specialisms of the tutor, art dealer, various art supplies manufacturers, the art supplies retailer, the critic, and curator. The changing meaning of the art school, including the politics of different models of the art school, must be analysed alongside and in relation to the whole system of the artistic division of labour insofar as this operates within the wider social division of labour.

Taking the long view, all art schools presuppose the abolition of the apprentice system. Economically speaking, the art school is based on the rejection of the idea that artists are produced within the small community of the workshop attached to the large community of artisan members of the guild. Every new art school reiterates the repression of the apprentice system and its replacement with the scholar system that is integral to the professions. Not only does the scholarly art school credentialise the artist as a professional but it also relies on teaching being conducted by a specialist profession of tutors and professors syphoned off,

temporarily or permanently, from direct production. Since art tutors are more often than not artists themselves, the social identity of artists and teachers suppresses the economic difference between the relationship between the artisan and the apprentice, on the one hand, and the tutor and the student, on the other. Economically, the apprentice and the scholar, and therefore the artisan and the tutor, belong to different worlds.

Within the history of work, the difference between the apprentice and the scholar survived the transition from the guild system to modern manufacture through the distinction between the reproduction of skilled manual labour and the training and education of intellectual labour. Initially, painters and sculptors founded academies and turned apprentices into scholars to emulate the liberal arts of the aristocracy, but eventually this emphasis on scholarship metamorphosed into a technique of differentiation pivotal to the rise of the professions. Artists were not one of the 'four 'true' professions – the Church, the army, medicine, and law', but art adopted the professional system of social reproduction in the seventeenth century, long before the 'rise of professionalism' in the second half of the nineteenth century.

One early effect of the professionalisation of art during the rise of professionalism was the proliferation of 'isms', which in Paris were originally called 'écoles'. Under the spell of commodification theory, isms were interpreted from the perspective of consumption as a marketing strategy to differentiate products for sale. From the point of view of production, however, the 'isms' of modern art correspond to the professional division of a field of practice into smaller and smaller specialisms. As Magali Sarfatti Larson points out (1977),

the constitution of professional markets which began in the nineteenth century inaugurated a new form of structured inequality: it was different from the earlier model of aristocratic patronage ... the professionalization movements of the nineteenth century prefigure the general restructuring of social inequality in contemporary capitalist societies: the 'backbone' is the occupational hierarchy, that is, a differential system of competences and rewards; the central principle of legitimacy is founded on the achievement of socially recognized expertise, or, more simply, on a system of education and credentialing.

As a result, 'it was in the nature of professional society to set up rivalries between different occupations competing for power and resources'. Art had begun to organise itself around a system of education and credentialing with the establishment of the academies; the modern art school and the creation of art departments within universities were extensions of the process of art's professionalism that is essential to the artist's differentiation from the manual labourer, skilled worker, craftsperson, and hobbyist. Helen Charman, in her account of *Professionalism in the Art Museum* in a 2012 edition of Tate Papers, describes art's professions as the result of 'strategies of closure'. More generally, professionalisation was a technique invented by the educated middle class who 'sought to carve out an occupational niche that would be closed both to the poor and to those who were merely rich' (Ehrenreich 1989, 78). The university was, from the outset, 'the core institution of

the professional middle class – employer of its intellectual elite and producer of the next generation of the middle-class, professional personnel’ (Ehrenreich 1989, 58). The intellectual critique of the university, therefore, becomes an essential part of the collective self-defence of the middle class from proletarianisation.

The rise of the professions was a very successful strategy between the 1870s and the 1930s but took a different path afterwards, first because the professions were no longer working for themselves but were employed within large firms and organisations, and second, because their ‘strategies of closure’ were attacked by powerful fanatics of free market dogma.

As early as the 1930s, Siegfried Kracauer observed that middle-class employees were suffering a systemic reduction in status, pay, and control over their own working processes. He called this the rise of the ‘salaried masses’, and it was characterised by a process of proletarianisation. Tracing the same epochal shift in middle-class work, C. Wright Mills (1951) distinguished between the old middle class and the new middle class by estimating that between 1870 and 1940 white-collar workers, as distinct from shopkeepers, farmers, and the owners of small enterprises, ‘rose from 15 to 56 per cent of the middle brackets, while the old middle class declined from 85 to 44 percent’. One example of the difference he observed was the changed circumstances of the young doctor.

As hospitals replace the doctor’s office as the center of the medical world, the young doctor ... is no longer apprenticed to another physician, as was the case up to the 1840s, but becomes an intern, an apprentice to the institution of the hospital.

Richard Hoggart commented on the same process in 1959:

You could say, objectively, that in fact the middle-class has become working-class: that many more people who feel themselves middle-class are in fact selling their labour than in the nineteenth century, when, outside the professions, it meant having a bit of property, or working on your own, the small farmer or shopkeeper, or of course small businessman.

At the same time, in the US, Franklin Frazier published *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1997), tracking the path of middle-class black people who, he argues, lost their roots to the traditional black world while never achieving acknowledgment from the white sector. The result, concluded Frazier, is an anomalous section of the bourgeois class at a time when the middle class was undergoing an epochal shift from ownership to professionalisation.

The organisation of the professions is also important for understanding the value of remaining independent that is nurtured both within the art school and in the alternatives to the art school. In Harry Braverman’s (1974) classic study of how Fordism and Taylorism converted skilled workers into unskilled workers and transferred all decision-making, choice, thought, and control to the planning office, there was a split between the autonomy of intellectual work and the lack of control experienced by manual workers. Professionals, who had traditionally enjoyed

autonomy, control, and independence, as the twentieth century developed, found themselves working in departments run according to bureaucratic protocols and therefore forced to defend their diminishing autonomy.

During this period of transition from the liberal professions to the salaried professions, art education underwent several waves of professionalisation itself. It began, as all professionalisation does, with a revolutionary confrontation with tradition or, as Talcott Parsons (1954) put it, with the rejection of 'the merely traditional way of doing it as 'the fathers' have done it'. In art this took the form of rejecting the academic and romantic art schools and introducing various forms of scientific, rational, and critical practices, including engineering and architecture (Vkhutemas) and design (Bauhaus). In the UK, the milestones of art education's incremental professionalisation were as follows: the upgrading of art education from the Fine Art Diploma to the BA, MA, and PhD; the transformation of contemporary art that decentred skills, figuration, making, and art objects in the art school, in favour of a series of new approaches to art that required new methods of teaching: semiotics, dialogue, administration, social engagement, participation, project management, the pedagogical turn, activism, and so on; the addition of art history and complementary studies (Coldstream), abstraction and the downgrading of life drawing, and the introduction of Bauhaus principles to the UK (Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton); the interrogation of students' rationale (Peter Kardia), the rise of theory (Art & Language), and cybernetics (Ascott); the premature death of the Polytechnics; the Bologna process; modularisation; the elevation of research over pedagogy; the well-documented shift of the student demographic in favour of the elite.

Modularisation is an interesting case study. Some of the old guard hated it. New radicals like David Bainbridge, who had taken posts in art schools to change it, welcomed it. After participating in the radical experiment of the 'art theory' course at Coventry with Terry Atkinson and Mike Baldwin, Bainbridge embraced modularisation for its potential to undermine the tyranny of subjective judgements that characterised the student-tutor relationship as a relationship of arbitrary and unchecked authority concealed behind the 'sensitivity' to 'intangibles'. The danger, of course, is that it was the thin end of the wedge in which all subjectivity and all judgement would be drained from teaching in the art school. What was decisive, in the end, was the rise of the populist Right. The professional class was re-categorised in the late 1980s by the new Right as the 'liberal elite', particularly 'what Margaret Thatcher was to call traditionally "immune targets", including the three ancient professions of law, medicine and the clergy' (Perkin 1989, 476), and their status was undermined. Professional organisation was, after all, as Magali Larson (1977) has shown, the antithesis of the free market. Teachers at art schools, like professionals in corporations and big organisations more generally, which had already experienced 'bureaucratization, loss of control over the content and pace of work, subordination, overspecialization, obsolescence of their skills, erosion of the market value of their technical competence, and blocked mobility' (Abel 1979, 95), were now identified as the next target in the neoliberal project. Modularisation was not going to be a technique for the Left's dismantling of privilege but the Right's dismantling of the 'liberal elite'.

While neoliberalism was razing the customs and strategies of professionalism to the ground in the public sector and in the larger corporations, other sectors were rediscovering the norms of professionalism, especially the value of the autonomy and self-realisation of the worker in their work. This is detectable in Andrew Ross's book *No Collar* (2004), which documents the rise and fall of the 'humane workplace' in small high-tech companies in the 1990s, and in Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2018), which argues for flexible labour systems, sub-contracting, team-working, multi-tasking and multi-skilling, 'flat' management, and the treatment of workers as creative individuals. Nancy Fraser had commented on this literature brilliantly saying: 'it is gender-blind'. The humane workplace and the new spirit of capitalism 'include a masculinist romance of the free, unencumbered, self-fashioning individual', but 'neoliberal capitalism has as much to do with Walmart, maquiladoras, and microcredit as with Silicon Valley and Google. And its indispensable workers are disproportionately women, not only young single women but also married women and women with children, not only racialised women but also women of virtually all nationalities and ethnicities'.

I want to add that both the idea of the humane workplace and the utopian promise of the new spirit in management depend largely on a superficial understanding of the relationship between the artist and the professional. Although both books explain the new forms of work as arising from ideas developed within the artistic avant-garde and in the 'cultural revolution' at the heart of the politics of 1968, it is the prior professionalisation of artistic production that made it possible for artistic autonomy to be taken as a model for the autonomous professional during the decline of professionalism in general. The irony is all the more painful for an art sector that has become increasingly aware and increasingly militant in its insistence that artists and other cultural workers are being ripped off.

Artists are professionals or have a history that is bound up with the history of the professions, but this is a diverse category. What Barbara and John Ehrenreich (2013) called the 'Professional Managerial Class' can be divided into a spectrum of positions. 'At its wealthier end', they say,

skilled professionals continue to jump ship for more lucrative posts in direct service to capital: scientists give up their research to become 'quants' on Wall Street; physicians can double their incomes by finding work as investment analysts for the finance industry or by setting up 'concierge' practices serving the wealthy. At the less fortunate end of the spectrum, journalists and PhDs in sociology or literature spiral down into the retail workforce. In between, health workers and lawyers and professors find their work lives more and more hemmed in and regulated by corporation-like enterprises.

(10)

Anyone who has spent a considerable amount of time in the art school and in the artworld generally will recognise this picture of the spread of professional occupations from the star system to precarity.

The art school was protected for a long time from the full impact of proletarianisation of intellectual work for art tutors. In recent years, though, the art school and the university more generally have been the site first of neoliberal attack and subsequently of a brutal and sustained corporatisation. How did this take place given that the art school, as well as being a conservative and elite institution, is home to and sustains a liberal left imaginary, is a seedbed for diverse communities of romantic anti-capitalism, and has embraced countless radicals who have resisted neoliberalism all along? The art school perhaps never belonged to the Left, but over recent years the spaces within the art school that had previously allowed Left-leaning thought and action have been systematically reduced or withdrawn. This was achieved not simply by government fiat or by introducing fees and loans that transformed the university into an institution governed by a bastardised form of consumer-sovereignty, although this didn't help. The most effective strategy of the university high command was, in fact, to insert a large professional layer of managers and administrators between what had previously been a small group of senior management and a large, vocal, powerful, and organised body of academic and technical staff who had previously had control of the university. Senior managers had historically emerged from the academic staff and therefore shared most of its values and aims. When neoliberal individuals were put in charge, they were frustrated at every turn by the staff who protected the traditions of the art school. By appointing a new layer of managers and administrators between senior management and academic staff, a new dynamic was formed in which top-down visions could be effectively imposed and orchestrated.

This is the historical background to Hardt and Negri's recent call for university staff to think of their work as 'alienated labour' rather than, as they traditionally have, as the fulfilling, rewarding activity of intellectual inquiry with inherent value and a bundle of concomitant moral and social values. Academics, artists, and cultural workers are chronically at risk of exploiting themselves, Sarah Brouillette argues, because, in a pattern typical of the professional class, these values of the field typically override workplace politics so that tutors compensate for the lack of provision rather than let standards slip. What needs to be added to this contemporary politics of academic work is that professionals, even as salaried workers, depend for their privileges and above-average income, upon a strict division from the working class. Hence, 'by contrast with the efforts of workers to organise into and assert their claims through unions, the status aspirations of professionals respected class relationships: individuals sought to enter the professional hierarchy and rise within it; professions competed collectively with other occupations, often by securing the patronage of powerful elites within the state. Therefore, whereas militant unionism challenged the established hierarchy, militant professionalism affirmed it' (Abel 1979, 90).

Sam Thorne (2017, 32) suggests that 'the twentieth century could be characterised as shifting from experimentation to professionalisation, the first two decades of the twenty-first could be characterised by corporatization and student debt'. Considered structurally, art's changing modes of social reproduction are realigned within a broader unity of the successes and failures of what David Cottington has

called art's 'alternative professionalism' (Cottington 2022, 129–149). That is to say, the alternative art school makes its entry onto the historical stage not only when neoliberalism had begun to exclude students from Higher Education through unaffordable tuition fees and a lifetime of debt but also when the profession of the art tutor had been reduced to unprecedented levels of overwork and underpay.

Notes

- 1 Although, today, the academy is generally considered to be an institution that occupies a building, initially academies were events. Like symposia, seminars and lectures, academies were a certain kind of assembly rather than a place in which groups assembled. These were more like a series of itinerant members' clubs or salons than the received definition of the academy as a Leviathan derived from modernism's antagonism towards it.
- 2 The rolling back of the welfare state was not completed in the 1980s but remains an ongoing process evident in the ever-deepening cuts to public provision, including arts funding and art education.
- 3 For an argument that the alternative art schools belong to a more radical tendency, see Richard Hudson-Miles, 'Experiments in Autonomous Art Education in the UK, 2010–Present'.

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