A different take...on a hidden curriculum 'hidden in plain sight' ...fine art in the university and alternative art schools Dr Jenny Walden University of Portsmouth

More than ten years ago now I presented a paper at an internal conference in my institution which focussed upon a re-thinking of the notion of the studio as a learning environment.

We were even then fighting to keep our studios and I wanted to show that we were capable of both seeing what the ‘problems’ were and of articulating positive change but still making the case for the studio as a learning environment.

I presented a critical appraisal of the studio setting as sustaining a potential ‘conservatism’ in both its senses, of conserving something important and of cultural significance but also potentially conservative in not always being open to change and indeed suppressing certain questionings of what had become enshrined ‘orthodoxies’ of pedagogy, such as the ‘double act of presentation’¹ that is the group ‘crit’ for example.

Ten years ago, drawing upon a mixture of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida I posed the ‘studio’ as something of a lacunae and a blind spot or to mix up the metaphor, an irritant in the ‘eye’ of principle of Reason (with a capital R) which founds and assures the institution of the university of itself.

The art studio can often appear as, to be metaphorical again and Lacanian for the moment, that irretrievable ‘lack’ or ‘gaping hole’ in the edifice of reason that the university has to believe founds and grounds a University.

“As far as I know” says Jacques Derrida, “nobody has ever founded a University against reason.”² Reason is the principle of the University and thereby that which governs its learning and teaching. So where does art and the studio lie?

Well, Derrida cogitates upon the university founded upon the principle of reason and subtly subtitles his essay: ‘the university in the eyes of its pupils’. He then makes a ‘play upon’ the structure and function of the human eye and meditates upon the relationship between sight and knowledge; how do we know? Do we know by means of a [fixed] sclerotic eye? “What is terrifying about an animal with hard eyes and a dry glance is that it always [only] sees”, ³ says Derrida. Human beings can lower the sheath, adjust the ‘diaphragm’, and narrow [their] sight the better to listen, remember and learn.

What might the University’s diaphragm be?” “I am not proposing an art of blinking”, says Derrida.⁴ but it is to say, reason always needs its ‘blinking’, its motivation to look and not just see.

The fine art studio can be something of an irritant in the eye of the university or perhaps that little hole in the corner that both stimulates but potentially undoes its rational edifice or as Peggy Kamuf


3 Derrida, J (1983) op.cit.

says, “its formidable heresy...it is a question posed to the very limit of the institution, that is [a question posed] to the definition of what is and what is not comprehended within the institution’s determination of itself”.

Is fine art and its studio that limit point? It is so in as much as “art” as a “subject” continually “institutes” itself. Its borders are constantly changing. It is both instituted and institutes in its shifting definition. In that sense it is always liable to trouble the border and limits of the university.

One of the ways in which modern education as universal reason, as part of the “university” attempts to contain that which is always liable to be in excess of its borders as it divides itself from itself continually, is by way of the studio.

Ten years ago, I argued that not only does the studio conserve, but that it is itself as an environment for learning and teaching that can become ‘too’ profoundly conservative both ‘conservative’ and actually disempowering by way of its ‘modelling’ of a certain version of an existential freedom of expression which ultimately was restricted and limited by the ‘distributions’ of power dynamics in the studio setting. This was the operation of a ‘hidden curriculum’ in a negative sense.

In the ten years since I first meditated in writing on the subject of the fine art studio, it subsequently has met its complete demise. Arguably, this is the extreme end of various transformations and reconfigurations that fine art education has undergone especially in multi-subject post 92 universities in recent years.

At that time I had not quite foreseen the impending affliction. It has become customary to suggest that what ‘kills’ creativity is quality assurance and the obsessional audit culture that has prevailed over mass higher education and the ‘performance measures’ of research. I would suggest that the onslaught that has come to ‘kill’ creativity is actually that of the discourse of the ‘creative industries’ and the ensuing panoply of ‘responses’ to the short-circuiting of creativity the ‘CIs’ produce.

This phenomenon has been largely discussed (through the pages of Art Monthly quite often, as a populist-facing critical journal) in the context of the ‘marketization’ of Higher Education with both external and internal competitive market forces, the impact of student fees and the significant foregrounding since the Browne review in particular but already ‘in preparation’ earlier of ‘the business model’ compelling courses to demonstrate a ‘return’ on the investment of resource.

Rather than straightforwardly repeat those arguments which are indeed important and not to be cast aside which is not my intention here I want to look at them with a slightly ’different take’.

The philosopher Bernard Stiegler, a Derrida watcher to some extent and also part of what I’d call an ‘after-Derrida’ group of thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Zizek addressed the ELIA conference back in 2010 and his paper seems to me to have not got the wider circulation it deserved.

Called ‘The Age of De-proletarianisation’ it spoke saliently about the future of higher education by making a connection between an experience of the psyche with a politics and culture of

5 Kamuf, P (1987) The Division of Literature, or the University in Deconstruction, Chicago, University of Chicago Press

consumerism within which universities and ‘art in universities’, as hand-maiden to the creative economy becomes enmeshed.

As Stiegler presents, the creative economy has been posited as ‘the new age of the industrial world’, whereby value and wealth are generated ‘more than anything from ideas and their ‘creative’ application’. These are often understood to be supported by the exploitation of new and ever developing digital networks.

I suggest that a huge allure and ‘lure’ for art and design has been in turn generated by this idea.

Fairly recently (28th June 2015) there was an opinion piece by Rachel Cooke in the Observer entitled “If only I could find my inner Grayson Perry”, 7 which referred to the importance of yes Grayson Perry, in the context of a) a populist surge towards ‘making’ exemplified by the book by Peter Korn “Why we make things and why it matters” 8 but also b) a recent exhibition ‘Digital Handmade’, consisting of many and varied sculptural objects created via various digital processes but ‘crafted’ in such a way that Cooke could remark upon the power and challenge of artisanship meeting digitisation and could bring to the reader’s attention, albeit superficially, the notion of the digital artisan.

Also there are some actual (in the USA) and burgeoning (albeit still minority) UK initiatives in Schools and Colleges of Engineering to reform the curriculum and its pedagogy to include creative subjects and arts based design pedagogy coinciding as it happens with the rallying cry from the Creative Industries Federation concerning the importance of adding to or keeping the “A” in STEM to make STEAM as the key for education’ given the importance of sustaining creativity in engineering.9

This ‘new’ appreciation of the place of art and design seems to chime with an earlier talk by Bruce Brown. His thesis in this little talk at the Art and Design HEA in 2011 10 was that the digital revolution potentially returns us to something akin to a pre-lapsed state before the Industrial Revolution deprived making of its integrity and stripped and parcelled it out into a mechanised series of discrete repetitive non-creative operations which required but a simple ‘transmission’ model of knowledge.

This ‘transmission model of knowledge’ was thus meted out by the owners of the means of production through the education system.

We are now ‘as if’ returned to a quasi-prior state because as of now with the digital revolution, the closed controlled system of selective tasks and knowledge transmission is dismantled in favour of a ‘new’ type of “integrated model of owning the means of production and its products and their distribution on the basis of the many to the many rather than the privileged few to the mass”11 and on the basis of a ‘new’ model of knowledge as created through doing.

7 Cooke, Rachel “If only I could find my inner Grayson Perry” Observer 28th June 2015
9 Creative Industries Federation How public investment in the arts contributes to growth ibn the creative industries Copyright © 2015, Creative Industries Federation
10 Bruce Brown Art and Design HEA Liverpool John Moores University 2011
11 Adapted from Bruce Brown op.cit.
Hence ‘new forms of craft’ now, here and now today emerge in which to quote Brown “the entire cycle of making from conception to consumption is placed back into the hands of a single individual- as an integrative process at their command. This in turn may herald a return to systems of integrative thinking and doing where knowledge construction took precedence over knowledge transmission.”

Hence the creative arts whose knowledge systems by crafting thought and the mind through the making of things embody this pre but now also a post- industrial new order of ‘classical’ principles whereby know-how is supplanted by the technology but “more vital are the powers of the imagination and innovation [because] to know why or whether the technology can be made do it differently-are central to future knowledge.”

I am not convinced however that art in universities can deliver to this alluring exalted position for ‘the powers of the imagination and innovation’. Why?

Because, as Stiegler cautiously proposes, the new digital networks’ constitutive purposes are actually, despite appearances to the contrary, fraught with the suppression of art practice and its impact.

Stiegler thinks of art practice in two facets.

One is to do with ‘the trans-formation or transfiguration of the ordinary into the extra-ordinary; put more theoretically obliquely as ‘transcendence within immanence’, which occurs in the act of making art.

Another is to do with art as ‘potential’, as Stiegler has it:

‘...when it is a matter of works of art [impact]-to feel and to experience [art], is to trigger or release a process such that the one who feels, who listens, who looks, is more or less put into motion, moved by what he or she feels...a work is a potential that can pass more or less into the act of a movement that it triggers within the one on whom it works...”

He elaborates upon this as art as a process of ‘seeing by showing’...to see by showing is to...” start a circuit-a circuit of what I have called trans individuation...we all more or less continuously individuate ourselves...by way of trans individuation) [by] the act of a potential.”... (A kind of ‘passing on’ to others...)

This ‘circuiting’ is suppressed because of the ongoing link of our post-industrial new order to the ‘short-circuiting’ process of consumerism. Consumerism constitutively cuts out the circuit of ‘potential-movement-‘passing on’ which is trans individuation.

12 Bruce Brown op.cit.

13 Bruce Brown op.cit.

14 Stiegler, B op.cit.

15 Adapted from Stiegler, B op.cit.

16 See Stiegler, B op.cit.
The problem for us in universities is that ‘marketization’ subjugates universities such that they can no longer be guardians of what Stiegler calls ‘the technologies of the spirit’,\textsuperscript{17} required for ‘trans individuation’ as Stiegler describes it.

This is a systemic and ideological difficulty notwithstanding all our personal commitments to such a transformative art practice.

\textit{Marketization and the creative economy are opposite processes to art practice and its effects} even though they are sharing the same ‘technological’ processes in their broadest sense. As Stiegler states, “Consumerism liquidates the desires of individuals; the development of consumerism depended upon short-circuiting the social systems that transform drives into desire, that is, into fidelity...\textsuperscript{18}

The supreme irony is that at the moment that the university becomes \textit{most consumerist}; when the quality, value and worth of its education is having to be measured pretty much solely by consumer satisfaction and market driven outcomes such as salaries attained by graduates as well as ‘awards’, under a regimen which represses both students and staff, there is not just a desire ( and here I mean a ‘nice to have’) but a need, a \textit{demand} even for a \textit{post-consumerist} understanding of the formation of knowledge and creativity, in line with the social articulations of learning and technology that are ‘literally’ \textit{arising}.

As Stiegler reminds us, “in our epoch... we are experiencing the \textit{de-professionalization} of instruments (I would use this word in its widest sense); their migration towards non-professionals, the re-instrumentalisation of the public and the re-arming of \textit{amateurs}-the ears of whom pass anew through the eyes, which pass anew through the hands...and [such that] the functioning of the global network depends upon the capacity of users to \textit{become practitioners}...\textsuperscript{19}

Herein lies his argument for his reference to “\textit{the de-proletarianisation}” of his title. The ‘users’ of that which is passed down to them from the line of mass-production from which their own participation and labour has been abstracted and reified (the proletariat) are becoming a thing of the past.

This is at the very moment when the economic ideology of higher education wants to hail their very being as the consumers (rather than practitioners) of the present and future.

Out from this enmeshment between a creative economy and higher education and a ‘call for’ de-proletarianisation the struggle emerges between ‘a reinforcement of the situation of symbolic misery or poverty or as Stiegler also suggests destruction; a struggle between that or a [potential] rupture that leads to a \textit{renaissance of the symbolic}... in a reconstruction of bi-directional social relations, that is dialogue, [a different kind of] interactivity...\textsuperscript{20}

Precisely because art practice is the element that the institution can never quite contain, or is the ‘irritant’ in the sclerotic eye of reason, it is of course prey to expulsion, or perhaps being tamed into,

\textsuperscript{17} Stiegler, B \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{18} Stiegler, B \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{19} Stiegler, B \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{20} Stiegler, B \textit{op.cit.}
on the surface, an ‘aping’ of destructive consumerism within the institution, as well as however being the most ‘available’ and ready to [offer] ‘alternative lines of flight’ other than those of a consumerist society that has reached exhaustion’.

It is also that which is able to ‘find its lines of flight in other places, despite institutional constraints. That to me is the propulsion behind the ‘free or open studios- based school’ the ‘Saturday warehouse crit’; the gallery workshop; the hidden in plain sight curriculum, down the street, a train ride away. It is complex of socio-cultural, ideological, technological factors, of far greater complexity than student fee regimes.

At the level of consciousness, as the students see art education, we might say (as quoted by the School of the Damned’ spokesperson) they see that they “need to be totally immersed in the fast changing art scene, and that they need to be connected directly to what is actually happening around them. It also needs to be dynamic and flexible and student-led; all these things hopefully bridging the gap between the safe confines of the art school and the reality of ‘life after art school’. 21

But I am suggesting, with Stiegler, that there is more than that going on there.

As an academic committed to understanding the potential of the ‘disruptive effects’ of alternative art education as a new business model...David Barret suggests ” these programmes are examples of the new business models – if, rather miserably, it is through business models that we must now analyze art education post-Browne Review – that provide many of the education services formerly offered by art schools but without the overheads [and thus the costs to the student] that validation and university status require... for better or worse it is likely to be through low-end disruption that new forms of art education will emerge rather than via a top-down tweaking of the existing validated university courses. While the ivory towers are developing corporate glass atria perfectly suited to nurturing post-doctoral hothouse flowers, it may yet be organic growth outside the walled garden of academia that will fuel future generations of artists in the UK. 22

In general, debates about the spontaneous arising of alternatives from the bottom up (some more spontaneous and ‘bottom-up’ than others admittedly) veer from a direct eschewing of their place or their dangerous allure, when the real struggle has to be sustained within the ‘walls’ of the universities, to a plea for their recognition as fellow travelling institutions of learning and practice which should be accorded institutional status.

Both positions tend to send a bit of a shiver...It is true (is it?) that “Institutions underwrite the internal good(s) of a practice” 23 i.e. institutions can bolster up a ‘good thing’. But Stiegler’s deeper thesis makes me cautious of enclosing the effect of the lines of flight in a mesh of institutional and thereby ‘business model’ discourse.

I still believe with Jean-Luc Nancy that “Art tends to take the empty place once occupied by the ideological and the relation it implies. It increasingly becomes what holds us together in the

21 Explorations into Alternative Art education Part 2: The School of the Damned posted on Art Map London website 30th April 2015


abeyance of all meaning that can be given to the producible”-24 for that read the institutional or the ‘business model’.

To paraphrase Elkins quote which is my subtitle for the abstract to this paper “I still think that art can’t be caught. But on the way to not catching [it], a lot of interesting things can happen.”25

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24 Nancy, J-L (1996) “Techno as an Artistic Laboratory of the Present from Representation to Participation and Presentation” in Gaillot, Michel, Multiple Meaning: Techno: An Artistic and Political Laboratory of the Present Paris, France, Editions Dis Voir

25 “I still think that art can’t be taught. But on the way to not teaching, a lot of interesting things can happen.” James Elkins 2014 (Artists with PhDs 2nd Edition New Academia Publishing Washington DC USA)