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Art History and the Art School - the Sensibilities of Labour

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There is no historiography of art history in the art school – the relationship of art history as subject and method, to the art school as institution, can only be pieced together from occasional commentary in journals and magazines, government reports, general texts on art school education, and some mythological fragments. Perhaps the most potent of these mythological fragments is the character of Robinson in Patrick Keiller's film *London* (1993). Robinson is an amalgam of Keiller's own teaching experience, a literary genealogy running from Rimbaud through Céline to Chris Petit, and the cultural theory lectures of Ray Durgnat at the Royal College of Art. Robinson 'lives on what he earns in one or two days a week teaching in the School of Fine Art and Architecture at 'The University of Barking':

Like many autodidacts, he is prone to misconceptions about his subjects; but as there is no-one at the university to oversee him, his position is relatively secure.

Keiller's film employs a sonorous voice-over by Paul Schofield that mingles art history, architectural history, 'visual culture', psychogeography, literary theory and some anti-government invective. It is the latter which manages to locate most precisely the contradictory relationships between art history, the art school and the university sector. Reflecting bitterly on the Tory victory of 1992,

Robinson predicts that government initiatives and interference will end his pathological, fractured and ecstatic relationship with the discourses and institutions of knowledge. Skip forward thirteen years to 2006, and, as predicted, an 'overseer' of Robinson's work has duly appeared, in the unprecedented form of a Labour Government which has charged the higher education sector with the re-alignment of knowledge labour with new arrangements of capital. On 8 December last year, Lord Sainsbury, the Minister for Science and Innovation, spoke of the 'collaboration between creative industries, universities, governments and citizens in a knowledge economy' as a pre-requisite for future economic growth¹. As Tony Benn recently observed², the model of government as representing general needs within a market economy, such as health and education, has been superseded by government as the general manager of populations in their relationship to new markets. In this situation, education changes register to become re-education, which is the purpose for which British Art Schools were first hybridised out of academies of art and mechanics institutes, to provide designers for manufacture and, to paraphrase Henry Cole, producers of straight lines³ who would elevate public taste and mesh the cogs of production and consumption. The current rhetoric of 'permanent education' 'lifelong-learning' and 're-skilling' may have a New Labour, or what Slavoj Zizek has called a 'liberal communist'⁴ tone, but, behind the shifts from industrial labour to an immaterial knowledge economy, the purpose is the same. The development of the Art School in Britain exemplifies the principle of direct intervention by the Government for

¹ Lord Sainsbury, keynote address at HERA Conference *Past into Present: Understanding Policy and Innovation in Europe*, 8 December 2005.

² Tony Benn, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, March 24 2006, p.16.

³ Henry Cole 16 Nov 1857, quoted in Stuart Macdonald *The History and Philosophy of Art Education*, University of London Press 1970, p.228: – 'accuracy in addition and straight lines are a national want and through the Department ['The Department of Practical Art' established in 1852] the public seek to obtain State help in the production of them.'

⁴ Slavoj Zizek, 'Nobody Has to be Vile' *London Review of Books* 6 April 2006, p.10.

the purposes of re-education - as Stuart MacDonald has noted, 'a grant for art training was proposed only two years after the very first government grant for any educational purpose.'⁵ Keiller's Robinson thus embodies a keen historical irony - the complementary studies lecturer, that homunculus of the university in the art school bloodstream, is now under threat because the university itself is currently experiencing its 'art school moment', as education is directed once more towards the re-education of labour for the urgent demands of capital growth and national advantage.

The final twist in Keiller's mythology is in the manner in which his art historian manqué at once embodies and escapes the traditional idea of the university as the provider of higher education. In Britain after the second world war, when the notion of representative government providing for general needs was at its zenith, the art historian in the art school was the herald of the earthly paradise of government funded university level education in art and design. The first Coldstream report of 1960⁶, which proposed the model of a three year Diploma in Art and Design which would ensure parity with the University sector, combined the devolution of curriculum development to individual institutions with an insistence that 'the history of art should be studied throughout the course and should be examined for the diploma.'⁷ The report recommended that each student should engage with the general history of the major arts, the history of their chosen subject, and complementary studies. In pedagogic terms, Coldstream aimed at the presentation of history itself as a study method, followed by the reinforcement of the chosen discipline as a

⁵ Macdonald, *op.cit.* p. 60

⁶ *First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education* HMSO London 1960.

⁷ 'First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education' HMSO London 1960, quoted in 'Art History in Art Schools' *The Burlington Magazine* no 716 Nov 1962, p. 451

thing to be studied, capped off by the study of a few cultural contexts. The model relationship between art history and the art school was provided, in this instance, by the Slade School under Coldstream's Professorship (The Slade School had begun to deliver regular history of art lectures in 1904, and its art history tutors and Professors included Roger Fry, Rudolf Wittkower and Ernst Gombrich). The Coldstream report did, however, acknowledge the difficulties of rolling out this model of university education to art schools on a national basis:

The teaching of the history of art will need teachers qualified in this subject. First-rate teachers are rare, but we believe that the supply will increase with the growth of the subject in universities. The introduction of courses in art schools on the principles here outlined will indeed create a new demand and thus promote supply.⁸

An editorial in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1962 expressed doubts as to whether Coldstream's virtuous circle, in which the demand for trained art historians in art schools would keep art history alive as an academic subject, was going to work out in practice. The editorial noted both the pragmatic problem of having to begin the art history courses before the intellectual, pedagogic and supply issues could be nailed down, and the lack of fit between the epistemological frameworks of Courtauld art history and the rough and ready environment of British art schools:

it is indeed hard to imagine from where these staffs are to be recruited . . . The courses at the Courtauld are not calculated . . . to turn out teachers with these particular qualities.⁹

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

It is this historical moment that engenders Keiller's Robinson – the publicly appointed 'overseer' of university education in art school culture who, paradoxically, has no university to oversee him, and whose self-engendered curriculum is legitimated neither by traditional academic models nor by professional mores. *The Burlington Magazine* offered a few hints on 'what to avoid' to would be tutors, including the banning of art historical niceties as chronology, form and style in favour of examples of personal struggle that would appeal, it was thought, to the art student personality. It also offered the thesis that the appropriationist habits of talented artists made them particularly unsuitable for art historical instruction:

every year there will be a handful of Francis Bacons among them [art students], to whom the contrast between early, and late, Poussin is always going to be a matter of total indifference . . . but who will snatch whatever they require – it may be a still from an early film, or a Piero –anywhere out of the past in order to fill some gap in their own fantasy world.¹⁰

The editorial concluded that the teaching of art history in art schools might be best seen as the inculcation of 'university-lite' transferable skills for those government-funded mediocrities who, unlike the handful of putative Francis Bacons, would end up as teachers and administrators. This suggested that rather than raising standards in art schools, Coldstream's reforms would make it easier to lower the bar. Nice years after the first Coldstream report, Raymond Durnat, cultural theory tutor at the RCA and a likely source for Keiller's 'Robinson', wrote a pair of articles for 'Art and Artists'¹¹ in which he addressed its failures. Durnat believed that the mission to render

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

¹¹ Raymond Durnat 'Art Schools: the Continuing Malaise' *Art and Artists* vol. 4 no. 7 October 1969, pp 6-8 and vol. 4 no. 8 Nov 1969 4-6.

art schools into universities through art history was likely to lead to the importation of habits of passive reading of canonical texts that 'attract minds as conditioned by, as docile to, the middle class ethos as those of literature students, most of whom expect merely to teach or to grace themselves for executive employment.'¹² But rather than opposing the educated bureaucrat or teacher to the self-enclosed, unteachable genius, as the *Burlington Magazine* had done, Durgnat argued that art students were in the position of living out at first hand social contradictions and disunities of which students at the traditional universities were still largely unaware. Where universities encouraged 'dreamlike unreality', he claimed, art schools offered 'continual, anguished, messy search'¹³. Durgnat admitted, however, that what art students lacked was a language or theoretical matrix in which the contradictions they lived out could be defined and debated. He argued that they were beginning to find elements of that language in ad hoc fashion in those 'troublesome' and 'unreconciled' discourses of social history, sociology, anthropology, psychology and philosophy that, by the late sixties, had emerged as a focus for radical thought within universities. Durgnat's challenge to art history/cultural studies departments within art schools was that they should 'facilitate students' apprehension of their own discontents.'¹⁴ Yet the only space in which this kind of facilitation could take place is that created by the failure of a university model of education, and its fantasy phalanx of qualified art historians, to elide the historical contradictions of the art school as an institution. These contradictions must then be assumed by the art history tutor as his own; Robinson is art historian manqué or he is nothing, and his relationship to knowledge is necessarily awry,

¹² Raymond Durgnat 'Art Schools: the Continuing Malaise' *Art and Artists* vol. 4 no. 7 October 1969, p.6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

since it is made up of the lived experience and historical genealogies of his own conflicted, paradoxical condition.

As the language of 'art history and complementary studies' is gradually superseded by the integration of theory and practice within vocabularies of research, investigation and knowledge transfer, the clash between the post-war legacy of education as the attempted representation of public needs, and new regimes of perpetual re-education in the service of new forms of knowledge labour, is where the fragile and contested status of the historian and theorist in the art school will be played out in future. As universities are now obliged to confront the kinds of government intervention in the management of labour that gave birth to the modern form of the art school in Britain, is there a lexicon of 'labour forged in contradiction' that art schools can contribute to current debates on the status and value of higher education? To choose one instance, the pursuit of 'practice-led research' in art and design can either be seen as complicit with the new, post-utilitarian form of the university, or it can offer a challenge to relations of thinking and making within these new arrangements of knowledge labour. In this situation, there can be no room for the complicity that has existed between the assumption that art schools exist to deal with exceptional practices, and its corollary, the assumption that 'art history and complementary studies', or its variant 'visual culture', exist to bestow a universal culture of thinking on the various divisions of practice in art schools. A better alternative, would be to focus attention on the lexicon of contradictions, antagonisms and creative solutions that might be developed out of the relationship of art history and the art school. Our first paper, 'The Encryption of Art History in Modernist Art Education' from Dr Anthony Auerbach, deals

with the submerged historical genealogies that were at work within the supposed break with older academic traditions in modernist pedagogy, with particular reference to the teaching of geometric drawing at the Bauhaus. Here, art history is the site of an antagonism between the rhetoric of independence from historical determinations and the employment of historical justifications for new pedagogic practices. The following paper, 'Building the Philistine Art School', from Dave Beech, proposes a challenge to the assumption that an integrated art school culture produces authorized and legitimated 'citizens of art', and in one sense echoes Raymond Durgnat's claim that the art school must be seen as a site of conflict, rather than cohesion. Beech, however, frames this conflict as one between art and non-art, with the history of the avant-garde providing instances where the forms and languages of non-art have been used to infiltrate art's institutions. Following lunch, Dr Anthony Escott will present a paper entitled 'The Artist Lecturer and the English Art School Change in the Early 1960s' that engages directly with the implications of the Coldstream/Summerson reforms of the early 1960s, using the work and pedagogy of Alan Cuthbert, vice-principal at my own institution from 1963-1979, as a case study of the issues of academic value that have arisen from the siting of art history in the art school and practice within art history. Our final paper, from Hayley Skipper, is entitled 'Cross Stich and Conceptualism: Topographies of the Creative Industries' and discusses the local and specific histories of creative practice collected by artists such as Alison Smith, Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, which run counter both to the recognised methodologies of art history and the commercialisation of knowledge in the creative industries. I will conclude by remarking that all our speakers see the relationship between art history and the art school as necessarily

inflected by issues of policy, cultural division, the rhetoric of progress, and the relationship between art and non-art. As well as this, all of our panel contribute to the 'lexicon of labour forged in contradiction' that is immanent to the art school as an institution.

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