

## ESSAY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL

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### **Educational Investment: a context for CAMPUS**

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The pedagogical imperative in contemporary art has two functions. One is ideological and one is economic. The ideological function is manifest in artists', curators', and other related actors' participation in the utopian redistribution of centrally-organised education through critique, anti-correlation, and processes of disidentification. This is a warped ideological pursuit, one that is done in the name of radical alterity but in fact functions to weaken comprehensive education provision in states such as the UK, ushering in and/or making the spaces that are then filled by, for example, 'free schools'. This has occurred despite practitioners over many years committing to deep-rooted research and the development of sustained educational invention that is located in the understanding that everyone should have access to forms of education – content, however, not infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

The economic function is also contradictory but effective in the sense that providing education as part of arts-institutional and artist-run outreach activities often makes cultural initiatives fiscally viable, supports government agendas for the creative industries, and, at the same time, is highly acceptable aesthetically in the current artistic regime.<sup>2</sup> This can be evidenced by, firstly, the fact that artwork about education is currently very credit-worthy on the market and at the level of institutional circulation in first world contexts. Secondly, in order to survive, many arts organisations are seeking collaborations with educational establishments – and vice versa – as a mode of income diversification. Thirdly, the provision of free services, at a time of increased university and supplementary education fees, is enormously attractive to cash-strapped young people desperate for education beyond schooling. This in particular at the higher education level. Although in the UK cuts in primary and secondary school cultural budgets that have been mandated through governance

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<sup>1</sup> There is a wide range of literature that has engaged the question of the education system in the UK in its post-war incarnation, from work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1970s (including writing by notable cultural and education analysts such as Stuart Hall, Michael Green and Paul Willis) to contemporary long-form journalism by figures such as Diane Reay, David Kynaston and Melissa Benn. For a defense of comprehensive, as opposed to grammar, free, academy and private education in the UK see: <https://comprehensivefuture.org.uk/> [accessed 15 May 2019].

<sup>2</sup> A good contemporary example of this is the internationally touring *Bauhaus Imaginista* exhibition, curated by Grant Watson and Marion von Osten, a version of which will be manifest at Nottingham Contemporary in September 2019). See <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/> [accessed 15 May 2019].

have some purchase on museums and galleries as an alternative provision, albeit in very restricted capacities. This produces a contradiction, one that is played out in particular in arts institutions' 'learning', 'engagement', and 'education' departments. Action is made antithetical in various ways: artists and curators who are very well informed and committed to education ('the educational turn'<sup>3</sup>) find themselves much in demand in locales where no political commitment exists at the level of power or government. Educators chase partnerships with arts institutions in order to garner cultural, and sometimes financial, capital for their schools and universities. Arts institutional boards and senior management teams demand that their workers find increasingly unique modes of engagement via education to fill their galleries and satisfy their funders (both public and private). Liberalised instruments of capital diversification and divestment synchronically produce a perfect storm in which their subjects scramble to perfect their insuperable profits. If one were cynical one would understand Nottingham Contemporary's CAMPUS independent study programme as fitting neatly into the middle of such a picture – as could one understand BxNU, the institute I direct.<sup>4</sup> In theory, and I hope increasingly in practice, BxNU brings together the strengths of the collaboration between Northumbria University and the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (BALTIC) in Newcastle-Gateshead.

As with Nottingham Contemporary, BALTIC is an Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation and was consulted on the next ten years of ACE funding.<sup>5</sup> This recent ACE strategy consultation demonstrated an increased demand upon its National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) to team up with higher education institutions (HEIs) in sponsorship partnerships (my description). ACE wants and expects its funding to be used to '[b]roker partnerships between cultural organisations, universities and technology companies that focus on innovation and creative R&D' so that '[o]rganisations and practitioners will work with new partners, e.g. from higher education and the commercial creative industries, to research and develop new forms of creative practice'.<sup>6</sup>

This could be understood as a form of investment co-production, increasing the brand synergy between HEIs desperate for new ways to escalate esteem in international league

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<sup>3</sup> 'The educational turn' is a phrase that has come to signify a body of artistic and curatorial practice emanating mainly from European and North American artists and institutional commissions concerned with a). the aesthetics of the classroom, b). the processes and architectural constructions of schooling and c). the history of Left-wing alternative pedagogical theory and practice. For a useful collection of essays on the subject see (eds.) O'Neil and Wilson, *Curating and the Educational Turn* (Amsterdam: De Appel Editions, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/exchange/campus>  
<http://www.baltic.art/bxnu-institute>

<sup>5</sup> This consultation period is over and the results can be found here:  
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/consulting-next-ten-years-what-we-heard>  
[accessed 15 May 2019].

<sup>6</sup> Arts Council England, *Shaping the next 10 years: developing a new strategy for arts council England 2020-2030* (Manchester, ACE, 2018), p. 18.

tables – and thus grow subscription in the form of student applications – and NPOs in need of access to research income. NPOs’ remit is to earn at least 70% of their income from sources outside ACE funding by the start of the next funding period in 2023. This increased proximity is perhaps made inevitable through the long history of artists teaching in art schools and the development of art institution outreach, which has been made glamorous through the aforementioned ‘educational turn’. If, in management terms, universities – in particular art departments and faculties – galleries, museums, and even project spaces, need to feed off one another in order to maintain financial sustainability, what has happened to ideologies and practices of education *per se*? And what of those emanating from a broad base of social-democratic commitment to education for all, provided through government provision of the fiscal and spatial architecture that such a commitment necessitates, along with the legislative processes of implementation? As I will sketch out, whilst such an idea of ‘education for all’ may always have been a liberal-socialist fantasy in the UK, the worn-out infrastructure of primary, secondary, and tertiary education nevertheless exists in a state of struggle across the territory. What, in simple terms, does setting cultural institutional education apart from this old state structure do to the struggle to hold the state structure open and to account itself? At least such a process seems lacking in strategic forethought, at most divisive. What has happened to the affirmation of the state education system that has been so strong amongst artists and educators in the past? Where are the calls for solidarity within struggles for educational provision – including the demand that we eradicate fees from further education?

In November 2018, BxNU ran a symposium called ‘In Need of Education: Practices of Learning in Art and School’, which aimed to capture some of the contradictions that emerge when art institutions and formal education providers produce partnerships as well as the different – but connected – issues that emerge when artists and curators develop independent public educational programmes. (Since that time, the symposium has developed into a public reading group.) In these initiatives we try to articulate debates over the controversial aestheticisation of the classroom alongside the marginalisation of the ‘unglamorous work’ of school education in and through art and curating, alongside the fact that ‘education’ and ‘learning’ departments reliably play second fiddle to curatorial work in the vast majority of public and private art institutions. Carmen Mörsch, following feminist debates about labour, has called this the hierarchical arrangement between production, reproduction, and distribution.<sup>7</sup> For decades, artists, curators, and activists have worked both within and without museums and galleries to interrogate, disturb, and repurpose these divisions. But their work has also been open to criticism as utopian fallacy by teachers whose daily job is to maintain a sense of purpose in schools and colleges with diminishing resources and rapidly swelling numbers of challenged and challenging pupils.

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<sup>7</sup> See Carmen Mörsch, ‘Alliances for Unlearning: On Gallery Education and Institutions of Critique’, *Afterall* iss. 26 Spring 2011.

In the UK (as elsewhere), mainstream education at primary, secondary and higher level is in financial and political crisis. In particular, the arts and other forms of cultural education are being divested in favour of the ‘hard’ subjects of science, technology, engineering, and maths. The right to free, comprehensive education, a key aspiration of the post-war Welfare State endowment in the UK is a diminishing mainstream political demand. Given such a context, we asked what can and should education provision by museums and art galleries do and be? Some of the pithiest and most attuned responses came from newly-qualified art teachers from the northeast region, who rallied powerfully against the prevalent ‘those who can, do; those who can’t, teach’ myth so omniscient in the arts sector. Our aim was to identify models and practices of pedagogy that create and sustain solidarity between educational and arts institutions, as both struggle under the political attacks wrought upon them by social division, divestment, and privatisation.

\*\*\* The CAMPUS and BxNU models are, of course, different – we do not and could not claim alterity for BxNU. And under our umbrella sit programmes and processes that, at the moment, demonstrate a fairly conventional understanding (on the part of both partners) of what contemporary art is, research is, education is for, and what such partnerships should bring about. In the context of the increased dissolution of egalitarian access to education at primary and secondary levels, with its egregious domino effect on the likelihood of poor, working class, and BAME kids getting to university, now is the time for us to question our politics and those of the institutional structures that they support. This is aggravated by the widespread adherence from both the Left and Right sides of the British political divide to the upholding of meritocracy as a foundational myth of affective and economic progress. As Diane Reay writes, ‘[i]n 21<sup>st</sup> century England, social, political and economic inequalities have been transformed into educational inequalities that then become the responsibility of the individual.’<sup>8</sup>

So, the hard questions we must all face: what does our interest, investigation, and action in the field of alternative pedagogic provision, whether with or independent from galleries, do for the education system from which it seeks to disambiguate – alternate – itself? What is the best policy: to support education as it is currently being provided by the state? Or to set ourselves apart on the basis that we can be nimbler, more experimental, and more knowledgeable in our alterity? I paint a sharply divisive picture of course, but the politics of such questions are not easy to dismiss and the financial implications need unpacking.

The UK is descending into the impassioned production of further inequality through the assertion of forms of popular sovereignty in which ‘the people’ is rendered into what Ernesto Laclau – following Jacques Lacan – calls ‘partial objects’. As cultural workers we need to pay attention to the ways in which our individual acts and institutions connect to a web of refraction of state education that enables such objectification and thus partialisation, which erodes the solidarity that is necessitated to secure a just educational offer. In the UK, current

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<sup>8</sup> Diane Reay, *Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working class* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), p.114.

psychopathologisations that have emerged from BREXIT debates – queers, Muslims, women – are also forms of rendering us partial objects. Laclau continues:

[We must] conceive of the ‘people’ as a *political category*, not as a *datum* of the social structure. The designates are not a *given* group, but an act of institution that create a new agency out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements. For this reason, I have insisted from the very beginning that my minimal unit of analysis would not be the *group*, as a referent, but the socio-political *demand*.<sup>9</sup>

The issue at stake, is that the critiques of collective and non-selective education, which have been a constant in the UK since the emergence of the welfare settlement, have settled around the assertion of a non-collective, meritocratic alternative that is supported, usually unconsciously, by those that set up education projects in the cultural sector (i.e., outside of state education provision). State comprehensive education provision may well have, and have had, many faults across its development, but its core infrastructural assertion is that anyone can be taught and all should have the right of access to education.

Instead of setting up alternatives we need to collaborate within an education system to produce embodied subjects who are taught their collective rights and not that collective rights are a historical mistranslation of subjecthood. We need to think about how we can embed infrastructural change and understanding into our collaborative actions. There are many examples of artists and curators who understand and are trying to do this, but individual acts are easily incorporated into the values of privatisation that destroy solidarity.

A complex recent example of the type of battle being fought within state education is the recent debate about education that has emerged from parents’ and community protests against a primary school in Birmingham that taught a programme called ‘No Outsiders’ to final year pupils (aged 11). As part of an effort to teach children about the groups and individuals protected by the Equality Act, the programme introduced children to different forms of family arrangements and relationships, including same-sex parenting.<sup>10</sup> The school has had to withdraw the programme due to widespread protest from Muslim parents who claim that the teaching goes against Islam. This is a critical conjunction that illustrates the difference between what Laclau calls a ‘group’ and a ‘political demand’. At BALTIC, most of the communications aimed at local communities is now translated into Arabic to make sure that children and their carers feel welcome and know what’s going on, for example, during the holidays. (Gateshead has a large Syrian community.) However, critics of integration policies might deem this an inadequate move. How can BALTIC – or Nottingham Contemporary – move from initiatives that are aimed at getting people through the threshold of the gallery to

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<sup>9</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 224. Emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup> For a summary see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-47738863/school-lgbt-teaching-row-what-is-in-the-no-outsiders-books-that-sparked-protests> [accessed 15 May 2019]

infrastructures that support the teaching of queer literature in primary schools? And how might funding structures be used to support this?

Last year, at the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, the artist Jason E. Bowman curated an exhibition called *Queer Times School* in which he ran a series of assemblies for LGBTQIA+ citizens in Glasgow and the region to discuss histories of queer collaboration, organisation, and education in these overlapping communities.<sup>11</sup> The constituency that formed around these assemblies then organised, with Bowman, the commission and acquisition by GoMA of ten artists' prints, which would thereafter be available for any school to use as a teaching aide in perpetuity. These events marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of Section 28 in England.<sup>12</sup> Each print had a lesson plan attached, written by one of Bowman's collaborators, a queer primary school teacher. By stipulating in his 'Letter of Agreement' that, in acquiring the work, GoMA must commit to providing resources for any school to use the material produced, the artist convinced the institution to confront its own exhibition, education, and distribution policies by providing an already existing educational infrastructure. More than institutional critique, the process embedded the delivery of equal rights education into the dissemination of the parts of the gallery's collection.

Another example, this time more anecdotal: I have recently been working with Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm to write a social-political history of the institution. Tensta Konsthall has a complex relationship with its locale, a ghettoized suburb of the city with a 90% migrant population. Over the last decade, the institution has done much to make itself available to people less familiar with contemporary art. One aspect of this has been a long-term collaboration with the local women's centre, initiated and run by Turkish women. The centre provides education for asylum seekers in the Swedish language and literacy skills so that they can process asylum and other claims. When I interviewed the director of the centre she was extremely positive about the Konsthall collaboration. When I asked her if there was anything more Tensta Konsthall could do to support what the women's centre was doing, she said, yes: raise money to pay for more workers at the women's centre rather than at the Konsthall, where local women are increasingly employed to run language cafés, sewing classes, etc. The Konsthall café has become an important place for women to meet given the patriarchal organisation of men's and women's social spaces in the neighbourhood. The director was not

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<sup>11</sup> The organisers defined the term LGBTQIA+ as follows: 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Polysexual, Queer, Intersex + Allies'  
<https://galleryofmodernart.wordpress.com/2018/06/15/queer-times-school-call-for-participants/>

<sup>12</sup> Scotland's anti-homosexual education legislation was put in place and repealed on a different time scale) See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/27/section-28-protesters-30-years-on-we-were-arrested-and-put-in-a-cell-up-by-big-ben> [accessed 15 May 2019]

dismissive of this employment; rather she saw the next step as a reversal of the systemic value she knew local women were endowing on the Konsthall.

These examples do not come from alternative pedagogical models despite being funded through institutional public programmes. Instead, they branch out and, in various ways, attempt to alter and challenge existing modes within the infrastructure of arts institutions as they are currently governed, funded, and directed. Propositions such as CAMPUS claim to move beyond this model in order to provide ‘a space of encounter between researchers, practitioners, activists, scholars, institutions, and organisations who wish to engage in conversations about contemporary debates and further explore interdisciplinary practice’.<sup>13</sup> This is very similar to the aims we have announced for BxNU, with its twin themes of education and organisation. A question I ask myself all the time: what are we doing in the name of emancipated knowledge production within rather than without the existing education system?

To tackle this, in the UK, we need to understand our inventions come at the tail-end of a long history of privatisation embedded in the ways in which education is delivered and economised and the way in which research is conducted, measured, and economised. The co-authors of *Unpopular Education: Schooling and Social Democracy in England since 1944*, published in 1981 by the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, whose research was firmly embedded in workers education and supplementary education debates and practices before and after the Second World War, read the divisions within British social and political life as both wrought through education and based on class and aspiration. They cite Tom Paine, William Morris, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin as inspiring and being inspired by late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘radical popular education’, wherein, ‘[m]en and women who gained some taste in really useful knowledge felt the blocks and disappointments of formal education even more keenly, on behalf of themselves, their children, their class or sex as a whole’. They continue:

This radical current in popular educational opinion has often spanned working-class, artisanal and lower middle-class groupings. It has always co-existed with other educational orientations: we certainly cannot identify it with popular working-class opinion as such. It has often been accompanied, for example, by the desire of relatively privileged or socially aspirant parents to secure individual educational advantages for their children. This has been a feasible individual strategy [...] only after the establishment of scholarship systems and free places at secondary schools in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/exchange/campus/>  
[accessed 27 03 19]

that it was possible to buy your children petty educational advantages but the opportunities for social mobility by this route were not large.<sup>14</sup>

*Unpopular Education* was published before the real effects of Thatcherism were understood, but with an eye to the anti-social, pro-individual politics (along with attacks on Leftist research) that the regime was in the process of entrenching. Other important texts are Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* and Stuart Hall's various accounts of working in a London secondary modern school in the early '60s.<sup>15</sup> These texts were written at a time when questions regarding working class education were much stronger than now but, as the quote illustrates, without the illusion of a utopian dimension emerging from state education in the immediate postwar period.<sup>16</sup> But such public intellectualism had, at its heart, something that I find is missing now: a commitment to community and equality supported by education and other cultural institutions, not vice versa. Many of the men who went on to become important post-war public intellectuals had fought in the Second World War and through this process learned about the lives of others. Many had been educated through and taught in the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Army Educational Corps. In an army, you also learn your place in the pecking order.

Political affiliations and their ambivalences have changed the provision of education and culture in the UK. Concepts of what is 'alternative' have, to a great extent, become lifestyle choices. A campus is a place where people gather to be taught – a field in which to speculate with the help of others. My concern with alternative education programmes, as I hope to have made clear, is that they ignore the programmes already in existence in an intellectual rush to 'make a difference', which can be capitalised upon through fiscal and attention economies that perfect the reputational value of the core. This core is not to be mistaken for Laclau's 'apparent form', which is mistaken for popular sovereignty, but the core of very real and very hierarchical institutional power. I would prefer if we worked together in a rather humble way to dedicate ourselves to the task of supporting and re-enfranchising the provision that exists in networked acts of solidarity with the queer primary school teacher and their 11-year-old pupils in Birmingham; the asylum-seeking women in Tensta; the secondary schools in Glasgow using the Queer Times School prints and lesson plans; and the people who can't afford to study in the gallery but do need help getting to school.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example, *Unpopular Education: Schooling and Social Democracy in England since 1944*, *ibid.*, Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981); Stuart Hall, 'Absolute Beginnings: Reflections on the Secondary Modern Generation', *Universities & Left Review*, no. 7 (Autumn 1959).

<sup>16</sup> (with its tripartite division between grammar, secondary modern and technical education that preceded comprehensive schooling)

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