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WE WANT
PEOPLE WHO
CAN DRAW.

INSTRUCTION AND DISSENT
IN THE BRITISH
ART SCHOOL

20th APRIL - 31st JULY 2015



Manchester
Metropolitan
University

Introduction

In November 2010, students from the Slade School of Fine Art, London, went into occupation. Cuts to higher education funding and the tripling of fees for undergraduate courses proposed by the coalition government were given as reasons for the action. “We vehemently oppose,” wrote the students in a manifesto, “the transformation of the university system into a market based model; education should be a public debate, not a private economy”. Concerned particularly with the disproportionate effects that these proposals would have on the Arts and Humanities, the occupation at the Slade was one of a number of protests organised in art schools across Britain in late 2010.

With these recent events in mind, *We Want People Who Can Draw* seeks to map an earlier moment of student unrest in British art schools. Displaying programmatic texts alongside other documents, this exhibition revisits a two-decade long period of struggle that occurred against the backdrop of significant formal changes to art education in the UK enacted from the late 1950s onward. These shifts are still resonant in the academy today and it is in this light that the exhibition focuses on oppositions between the art school as an institution and various moments of dissent, when alternative visions of art education and its social purpose were proposed. Approaching this history both in terms of specific instances and the broader questions they raise, *We Want People Who Can Draw* aims to bring this period into focus in the context of the present situation of the art school.

The exhibition displays a variety of materials: manifestos, pamphlets, magazines, working documents, posters, books, and films. Through these different artefacts, we aim to provide a sense of the ways that art students and others concerned with the politics of higher education attempted to re-imagine the organisation, experience, and role of the art school. Many of these documents involved efforts to think beyond existing conditions in ways characteristic of manifestos. These texts imagine different kinds of futures for art school education and for the social role of art and design against the sometimes restrictive structures of the university. Whilst manifestos have often laid claim to the new through their rejection of what has gone before, our aim is to map the ways in which manifestos and other documents have been reproduced and disseminated beyond their initial articulation. This exhibition offers ways of seeing how prior moments of dissent came to inform the visual and critical vocabulary for the demands of the present.

Dissent and the Avant-Garde

In 1964 the British graphic designer Ken Garland published the *First Things First* manifesto. The text was drafted during a meeting of the *Society for Industrial Artists* one year earlier and attempted to bring into question what Garland perceived to be the increasingly insidious relationship between design and commercial concerns, especially when it came to the dominance of graphic design by advertising. The manifesto argued for a return through design to humanist values and produced an ethical call for “a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication”. Utilising the form of the manifesto, Garland and the other signatories invoked the earlier avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Their text is representative of the way in which artists and designers began to respond to conditions of increased production and consumption emergent in the West in the wake of the Second World War. Bringing into focus the relationship between art production and the market, a tension in many ways embodied by the history of the art school tradition, *First Things First* invoked a broader set of questions figuring the relationship of the artist and designer to society. These questions were ones that would continue to be asked as more radical forms of dissent developed later in the 1960s.

These discussions, converging around the role of artists and designers in post-war Britain, were both paralleled and informed by debates in art schools focused on what exactly an art education should constitute. In 1956 Basic Design ideas began to revolutionise British art education as it sought to depart from an emphasis on self-expression to move instead toward more Constructivist and objective models for thinking and teaching. Spearheaded by artists working in Britain in the 1950s and 60s, including people like Wendy and Victor Pasmore, Richard Hamilton and Harry Thubron, the Basic Design model was loosely informed by the work of earlier European movements including Dada as well as Walter Gropius’s teaching methods at the Bauhaus. Hamilton, who had tried to adapt his teaching whilst he was at Central School of Art and Design in London, contributed significantly to the movement when he took over Victor Pasmore’s foundation course at Newcastle University in 1961. Although Hamilton’s model was conceived as a local one and not meant to be a diagnostic for all foundation education across Britain, many of his ideas were to be taken up nationally as a result of the ‘First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education’ (1960). It was against this backdrop that considerable student dissent would take place as the decade continued.

It was on the invitation of Hamilton that Ron Hunt took up the position of librarian for the Fine Art course at Newcastle University. Between 1966 and 1967, Hunt worked with students to establish a small collective and publish a journal given the randomly chosen title *Icteric* (a word that refers both to jaundice and its mythic cure). This group was generally opposed to the elitism they perceived to dominate within the Department of Fine Art. More closely

aligned to the radical history of the avant-garde than the Basic Design course, the journal focused on how the ideas of earlier avant-garde moments, such as Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism, could be mobilised to critique the contemporary conditions of art teaching and practice. This critique involved problematizing the relationship between art and the rest of social life and invoked the idea that radical art practice should seek to integrate itself with everyday life. As Hunt writes of the group, "*Icteric* can be seen as an avant-garde group who knew 'how to use' earlier avant-gardes, and then, in true avant-garde fashion, actively participate in its own dissolution"¹. Hunt also describes how this work increased in political fervour as the radical events of the late 1960s began to unfold internationally. Political developments during this period marked something of a watershed in post-war social relations, as students and workers united to call for increased representation within political democracy. Situated roughly within this moment, the *Icteric* group organised a number of exhibitions and actions, including the exhibition "Descent into the Street" held in the Physics Department of Newcastle University in 1966, a public rehearsal of Tristan Tzara's *Big Roar* in 1967, and political street theatre in support of local resident resistance to evictions in the Elswick area of Newcastle.

Through David and Stuart Wise, two brothers who worked as studio instructors on the Fine Art course in Newcastle, links were also made between *Icteric* and the English section of the Situationist International that was formed in 1966. This London-based group translated and adapted Situationist documents for an English context as well as developing their own writing on the history of avant-garde art and political radicalism. Texts translated from French into English included one published in 1967 under the title *Ten Days that Shook the University*. Originally published in Strasbourg as *On the Poverty of Student Life*, the polemic engaged in a scathing critique of the alienated nature of student existence within the higher education system. Other materials in translation called for the sublimation of art into life and developed a critique of the organisation of life under contemporary capitalism, described as the society of the spectacle. These were sent from London to Newcastle, where Ron Hunt would mimeograph and distribute them amongst the students. A similar relationship continued to exist between the Wise brothers and Hunt after the exclusion of the English section from the Situationist International in 1967 and the establishment of its successor organisation King Mob. This latter group produced the magazine *King Mob Echo* and engaged in a critique of student dissent in 1968, including the occupation of art schools in the UK.

¹ Ron Hunt, '*Icteric* and *Poetry must be made by all/Transform the World: A note on a lost and suppressed avant-garde exhibition*', *art & education*: <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/icteric-and-poetry-must-be-made-by-all-transform-the-world-a-note-on-a-lost-and-suppressed-avant-garde-and-exhibition> (accessed 07/04/2015)

Occupation and May '68

On 28 May 1968, art and design students occupied the main site of the Hornsey College of Art at Crouch End Hill, North London. The occupation began as a sit-in over the withdrawal of student union funds by the local Haringey Council who ran the college, but ended up being a six-week period during which the students took over the college and attempted to redesign their curriculum. The aspirations of the students were not necessarily revolutionary. They did not want to totally transform the relationship between art education and wider society. However, during the period of the occupation the students did challenge the hierarchical organisation of the college. They demanded a right to be able to make decisions about how they were taught and in this sense took on roles that were conventionally reserved for the staff. This desire on the part of art and design students to have a say in how they were taught, was also shared with the students who occupied Guildford College of Art around the same time. Banners hung from buildings at Guildford during the occupation declared "STUDENT VOICE" and "IT IS OUR RIGHT TO EXAMINE OUR EDUCATION".

The attempt to redesign the art school curriculum at Hornsey was undertaken against the backdrop of the changes implemented after the publication in 1960 of the 'First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education', known as the Coldstream report after William Coldstream, who was chair of the council. Coldstream recommended a new award to be named the Diploma in Art and Design (Dip.AD), which institutionalised a distinction between degree equivalent art and design courses, on the one hand, and vocational studies, on the other. Entry into the former was dependent on academic qualifications, which the students at Hornsey saw as exclusive. The students also opposed what they perceived to be the overly specialised and 'linear' nature of the Dip.AD, which denied them the possibility of working across disciplines. At Hornsey, during the occupation, they attempted to redefine this 'linear system' with what they called a 'network system' for art and design education. This new scheme was intended to respond to individual needs, allow students to work in interdisciplinary ways, and create equal working partnerships between students and staff. The Hornsey occupiers also visited other art colleges in an attempt to spread their ideas and create conditions for a general transformation of art and design education in the UK. Despite the idealistic optimism of the students, Hornsey was closed (only to re-open in November 1968), after students and supportive staff had been dismissed.

Dissent amongst art students continued in the 1970s, under the influence of Conceptual Art. Students continued to challenge the division between those who designed the curriculum and those who were simply meant to receive teaching. Yet this time, students engaged in a more thoroughgoing critique of modernist notions of the artist and creativity, as well as of the role of art within capitalist society. Much of this critique was articulated in opposition to attempts on the part of staff and art college authorities to defend boundaries between

“practice” and “theory”, and between “making” and “writing”. Student journals, such as *Ostrich*, produced by post-graduate students at the Royal College of Art, engaged in a critique that refused limitations placed upon student discussion and artistic practice. In this sense, such journals not only challenged divisions between practice and theory, but also the entire conceptual and organisational structure of the art college, with its disciplinary and hierarchical demarcations.

The Politics of Representation

Emerging in the late 1960s, feminist critique began to challenge, at a structural level, issues that pervaded the interconnected fields of politics, culture and society. Spurred on by the civil rights movement, the so-called “second wave” became visible internationally and yielded a blazing critique of the patriarchal basis on which society was perceived to exist and upon which basis its power continued to be exerted. Seeking increased participation for women in all areas of life, the movement simultaneously asserted its own revolutionary politics. This emergence of political thought that was both discursive frame and practice called for the invention of new political formations apart from the structurally sexist and normative forms of hegemonic power.

This theory extended, significantly, to deal at the level of representation with the operation of sexual difference. The feminist art movement importantly explored this symbolic function of sexual oppression and extended its critique to the realms of art education in both the UK and the US. Toward the end of the 1970s women’s groups began to come together in various art schools in Britain to campaign on issues that affected women’s participation, producing new thought and pushing the limitations of existing academic disciplines. As well as facilitating an outpouring of experimental feminist art practice, these groups attempted to increase representation for women within the art school. Through practice, discussions, manifestos and working papers, groups such as the Slade Women’s Group challenged the ways in which sexism was legible in the high numbers of male staff, especially those in management positions. The actions of these groups and others led to a conference at Battersea Arts Centre in November 1982, which was attended by hundreds of women and resulted in the Women in Art Education policy for affirmative action.

A video shot by Katharine Meynell documents the RCA Women’s Group on a retreat and indirectly remains testament to the feminist desire to reframe communication between women as itself a political act. The footage also allows reflection on the emphasis that these groups placed on forging spaces outside of traditional institutional settings. This would figure not only for the feminist movement but also for other marginalised groups who organised along lines of gender, race or/and sexuality through the 1980s to form a network of alternative institutional configurations adjacent to the often-prohibitive context of the art school.

Where do we go from here?

As with the example of the women's groups, the student activities addressed in *We Want People Who Can Draw*, whether they involved the production of a publication, avant-gardist performances or installations, acts of protest, sit-ins, or the initiation of alternative institutional forms, all proceeded with the demand for greater representation within the art school. Students wanted more say about things they were not ordinarily meant to have a say in, and the forms presented in this exhibition sought to give "voice" to these political aspirations.

Finally then, the subject of "student voice" allows us to see how these histories work upon the present as we begin to identify the way in which the rhetoric of earlier moments of dissent (voice, creativity, collaboration) has been co-opted into the rhetoric of an art education increasingly in the service of the private market. The institutional forms through which the "voice" of the student is supposedly legitimated limits criticism to specific times and places (for example the Staff-Student Consultative-Committee) in ways that direct that criticism toward teaching staff and resources rather than the broader structures of the university. Through these legitimated forms, certain tenets of the institution elude critique: student fees and institutional hierarchies, for example, are not subjects that students are generally asked to voice their opinions about.

This exhibition emerged out of a desire to confront, as students and academics, this present conjuncture as it is experienced in the context of the art school. As we pay attention to the demands of student struggles of the past, what are the demands of our present? Recent student protest has focused on fees and the way in which they orientate the student as consumer; the prohibitive conditions for collaboration within institutions despite an official emphasis upon interdisciplinarity; major cuts to public spending that have had exponential effect in the arts indicative of the current government's apparent disdain for the humanities; the increasing precariousness of academic positions; and crucially the divisive logic that separates students and staff. All of this requires alternative modes of critique and action.

As we prepare to install this exhibition, a new wave of occupations are occurring in British art schools, responding to various local and national issues as they are experienced within those institutions. In light of these actions, we remain hopeful that new ways of imagining art education will continue to swell from the ground up. Through the histories invoked in this exhibition it becomes apparent how forms of resistance not only question the definition of the art school at a particular moment, but also allow for us to reflect on the role that artists might take in relation to a broader set of political and social issues.

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