

Proposal for Survival Strategies (approx. 6-8,000 words)

Dr Deborah Jackson

d.jackson@gsa.ac.uk

Class Matters: Culture Declassified

This chapter addresses how the challenges of the global COVID-19 pandemic within Art School Higher Education (HE) were refracted through structural inequalities and class differences. It considers pedagogic responses and consequences to those unprecedented events asking what should be retained, whilst warning against the instrumentalization of some of the strategies facilitated by the pandemic. By unpacking these issues, it considers the responsibility of HE art institutions in a 'post-pandemic' landscape to transform the institutional orthodoxies that exacerbate inequalities.

Keywords: social class, COVID-19 pandemic, Art School, Higher Education

Class remains resolutely with us in what is generally deemed to be 'class neurotic'¹ Britain. Two significant components in the production and maintenance of class inequality are education and culture. Education is often seen as a factor in driving social mobility and HE is marketed as a path to prosperity. However, social class largely determines what type of education to which one has access. Students from working class backgrounds can be disincentivised to consider HE in the Arts as a viable and accessible option. As a result, patterns of under-representation within art pedagogy persist, and consequently inequalities within the field of cultural labour remain intact. All of this to say, that lack of class diversity affects the type of art that gets made and the debates that are had. From private schools to private views, class matters.

Institutions have been charged with exploiting diversity and inclusion as an organisational commodity that has exchange value and so it is recognised that it is not transformative or even sufficient to merely include those who are excluded into the dominant structures.² This realisation is accompanied by a shift away from the performative disregard of class structure, as idealised by the myth of meritocracy that has long been espoused by those who argue that individual achievement is the most important principle determining access and success in HE.³ The fundamental problem with this is that a meritocratic system sees exclusion as deriving from within the student and ignores external structures of power and dominance. In doing so meritocracy discounts intersectional axes of race, gender, class and so on, which means in reality that the opportunity to succeed is not necessarily open to all according to ambition, determination, and resilience. To further complicate this is what Michael Lerner calls "surplus powerlessness" - an inculcated acceptance of a lack of personal agency to enact change that does not accurately reflect an individual's potential power to actually

¹ Fox, Dan. (2016) *Know Your Place: the complications of class in the art world*. Frieze Issue 183

² Ahmed, Sara. (2013) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press

³ For a discussion of how the artworld has traditionally been predicated on individualism see: Jones, Amelia G. (2023) *Who Is an Artist? Identity, Individualism, and the Neoliberalism of the Art Complex*. *New Articulations of Identity in Contemporary Aesthetics*

make an impact. This ethos predominates the capitalist marketplace which HE has become ensconced in with the introduction of student fees and the shift away from attracting students to actively recruiting them. This paper asks how can the art schools mitigate the attendant barriers for working class students that marketisation evokes? Furthermore, how do working class students reconcile the intangible value around art and the precarity of the art world with the expectation of economic stability with which their endeavours should reasonably be rewarded?

At stake is the attribution of responsibility to create and foster equitable conditions and how this can be built into the everyday operations of the Art School.

As I will discuss, power relations in the wider social and political field are mediated through institutional practices. This means that the dominant set of values and perceptions come to be institutionalised, so that they are reflected in the formal structures, social norms and organisation of art institutions. That is to say, historical and contemporary manifestations of identity, difference, and disadvantage continue to shape cultural production. Institutional responses to Covid-19 exemplify this.

Reports⁴ about the negative impacts of the global pandemic on first-generation students from working class backgrounds highlight, for example, economic hardships; safety, food insecurity, and housing insecurity; impact on mental health; digital poverty and the challenges of adapting to online instruction. Students from working class backgrounds were more likely to experience financial hardship during the pandemic, including reduced or lost income from family members and from their own part-time jobs that they depended upon to support themselves and their studies, alongside increased living cost and technological expenses and debt.⁵

As lockdowns were implemented to control the spread of the corona virus our educational intuitions enforced studying from home and later hybrid learning. This led to swathes of students forfeiting scarce, overpriced student accommodation and returning to family homes. This situation surfaced further inequalities with many working-class students less likely to have the physical space to study, with no 'spare' room or office to commandeer that more affluent students may have been afforded. Not all students were supported in safe environments; increased risk of contracting the corona virus, living with family members whose occupations were not covered by the furlough scheme - working-class workers were rebranded as 'essential workers'; some students returned to home environments fraught with physical, emotional, drug, or alcohol abuse with no means of escape or release.

Post-pandemic art education is set against a backdrop of wide spread socio-economic challenges under the conditions of post COVID-19, neoliberal capitalism and continued political austerity. Social class division within the arts has widened, art may well be for

⁴ Soria, Krista M. Horgos, Bonnie. Chirikov, Igor. ones-White, Daniel. (2020) *First-Generation Students' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/214934> Accessed: 14th Nov 2024.

⁵ Soria, Krista M. Horgos, Bonnie. Chirikov, Igor. ones-White, Daniel. (2020) *First-Generation Students' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/214934> Accessed: 14th Nov 2024.

all but as Dan Fox observes in his astutely titled article, *Know Your Place*,⁶ “participation in its professional systems is not”. This analysis will address the social class imbalance within the Arts that remains skewed towards the middle classes and consider how degree level art education can develop and implement strategies to curtail the existing class reproduction in the Arts.

⁶ Fox, Dan. (2016) *Know Your Place: the complications of class in the art world*. Frieze Issue 183