

In Defence of the Art Student Essay



Recently, a number of our peers, friends and colleagues have expressed the desire to abolish the dissertation or essay in Art in the context of Higher Education. In 'Art Student Essays: CRAP!', Roy Claire Potter writes: 'Eliminating essay writing on an undergraduate art programme seems like a crap answer to the on-going problem of crap art student essays', but that this is nonetheless the position they are advocating given the way writing can get in the way of learning in the art school.¹ We share much of their frustration: anyone who has taught Art in the higher education sector will have encountered some diabolical writing by students, who have as little interest in complying with the requirement to submit it as the staff want to read it. Where in the near past those most averse to the task might have paid someone to do it for them, we are now faced with the grim prospect of machines grading

essays written by machines to no discernible benefit (apparently some universities are already using AI to generate feedback). The environmental cost alone of this bureaucratic exercise should deter us from lending support to the institutional framework of contextual studies. This is not to mention reasonable concerns about equity for students with less access to English language skills and academic training, or learning difficulties that make essay writing especially challenging. We would nonetheless like to mount a passionate defence of critical and contextual studies within the UK HE framework for Art degrees.



The compulsory theory component in Fine Art and Design degrees has been contentious from the moment it was introduced, in 1961. The Coldstream report had recommended that all Diploma courses in these subjects, as they were then, should allot 15 percent of student time and 20 percent of their mark to art history and 'complementary' studies.² The implementation of this recommendation was fraught: staff felt patronised by the assumption that studio teaching was not intellectual, students questioned the relevance of art history to studio practice and there was concern around the possibility of marks being 'brought down' by an extraneous element that would privilege students whose prior education better prepared them for academic work. The impetus for the reform was not an academic urgency to engage with general or historical contexts. Rather, Coldstream sought to modernise the somewhat shambolic provision of the National Diploma in Design, which delivered a range of handicraft courses at local colleges and was centrally examined. In the face of growing mechanisation and against the backdrop of the Cold War, it was felt that Britain could not compete in the international market by means

of lace makers and specialists in marquetry. The report stated that 'in many fields of industrial production' there was a need for 'large numbers of workers who are not necessarily creative, but who are sufficiently responsive to the ideas of those who are, to be able to interpret their designs perceptively and sympathetically'.³ The new polytechnics, which agglomerated pre-existing colleges in the wake of the reform, would train modern product designers at the standardised academic level dictated by the Diploma in Art and Design. Admissions to the now reduced number of larger diploma providers were likewise streamlined, now requiring a GCE qualification (with a proviso that exceptionally 'talented' students thought to be of 'lesser academic ability' could also be accepted, through what came to be known as the 'loophole for the loopy').⁴ Ironically, it was precisely this articulate, critically minded cohort of GCE school leavers that mounted the strongest resistance to the changes culminating in the Hornsey sit-in of May 1968. As a contemporary document put it, 'that was the "time-bomb" built inadvertently into Coldstream's new system'.⁵

In their book *Art into Pop*, Simon Frith and Howard Horne write extensively of the role the exposure of working-class kids to art theory in the illustrious history of art bands in the UK that reached its apogee in punk. This account played no small part in our own decision to come and study art here. According to the mythology repeated in so much writing on punk, the uncomfortable accommodation of critical theory in the art school context allowed ideas derived from otherwise purely academic discourses to bleed outside the confines of the university into records, television and street style. The promise of ideas in books that could result in these things seemed incredibly seductive, and fully in line with artistic practice rather than opposed to it. In trying to convey this excitement to students, however, we have been consistently confronted with the suspicions of both colleagues and tutees that the writing submission is a foreign body to the art school, an imposition put in place in bad faith as mere means to secure accreditation. As Joseph Noonan-Ganley puts it in his essay, 'Abolish the Writing Strand in Art Departments', 'Writing is submission and a compromise of artistic logic'.⁶

Aside from the particular history of its adoption in this country, the assumption underlying much of this apprehension about the essay is to do with the idea that art should not have to be explained. Both staff and students can share a sense in which the experiential, affective encounter is somehow more democratic and accessible. As Lynda Fitzwater writes:

There is an inherent belief in the art and design education community that writing is a less 'visual' form of expression of ideas, thus less 'creative', and so will be less enthusiastically embraced by learners. Indeed, much curricular documentation and course structure are apriori set up in this vein, so recursively reinforcing these beliefs.⁷

Teaching tends to privilege the group crit and the one-to-one tutorial as methods. These are, of course, as discursive as the essay, but instead of evidencing arguments with citations, they allow for a looser conversation orbiting around ideas and reactions to the work presented by the student. But while it might seem more accessible, the supposedly more immediate, direct responses to artwork actually rely on internalised prior knowledge. This is true of many engagements with art beyond the classroom. Conceptual art group Art & Language once made a distinction between the onlooker who experiences the art with no explication and the one who goes straight to the wall text. We might think that the latter, onlooker B, is somehow more academic, less open to the affective dimension of the artwork. But as Dave Beech remarks, this is only because the ability to have this meaningful experience, unmediated by words, has already been produced elsewhere (at a childhood visit to the museum, say, or the time a parent or teacher pointed out some aesthetic feature as especially good):

[...] onlooker (A) is only able to appear autonomous in this way because the process of acquiring the wherewithal (cultural capital) to engage meaningfully with art has been concealed or denied as a necessary feature of the acquisition. Onlooker (B) has no cultural capital to speak of and so seeks a point of entry from whatever form of mediation is available.⁸

Back in Art school, without making the source of such knowledge, or cultural capital, explicit, the tutor's chairing of the discussion either reverts to the master laying down the law or else collapses into a subjectivism that permits no ground on which shared meaning can be constructed. The introduction of text into this matrix opens up the possibility of establishing a shared vocabulary, the text being external to both the tutor and the student's intentions and preconceptions. Access to this vocabulary is obviously also conditioned by prior knowledge, but the practice of writing and citation establish a transparently external source that can be validated by all. Noonan-Ganley claims that 'citation delimits property', and alludes to the insulting software, Turnitin, through which universities force staff to process essays for the purposes of plagiarism detection. It is of course shameful that

universities can't find the money for adequate staffing but instead pay for proprietary software that can't tell the difference between useful and fraudulent citation nor detect paid for essays (both of which a lecturer who has the time and a meaningful relationship with a small number of students can easily do). But even in a post-capitalist society with no private property, citation would work as a form of accountability: something isn't so because the professor says so, but is verifiably so in a text we can all look up.⁹

Despite their obvious interest in writing, Art & Language's Terry Atkinson himself was a vocal critic of the academic requirements of university art teaching. One of the most influential pedagogues in the UK, his Art Theory course sought to radically challenge the distinction between making art and engaging with theory. As Naomi Salaman describes it:

The project of the Art Theory course following the equation theory = practice, in 1969, was more than simply controversial, it destabilised the institution, and the management sought to remove it.¹⁰

Atkinson recognised that all teaching was based on conversation as a medium (perhaps with the exception of an experimental course like St. Martins' notorious A course, which locked students up in the studio and imposed silence as a method). But his conception of theory as the practice-based output of the course was premised on overcoming the myth of the inarticulate artist and obliterating the separation between the text and the art, almost as a mockery of the imposition of theory on art courses. Citing his final examiner's report from the university of Brighton, Salaman writes:

[...] most courses opt for the traditional division from the Coldstream Report in which 'theory' is taught within art history and has its own contracted professionals, seminar spaces, essay requirements, forms of assessment and so on. [Atkinson] calls this typical structure a 'supplement' and considers it problematic; he describes 'theory' distending practice if structured in this way. This results, he argues, in object-based making carrying on as usual, with students being given an up to date vocabulary with which to describe their work.¹¹

If the relationship between the written component of art studies and the studio practice has been contentious in undergraduate provision, it has been particularly fraught with the rise of the PhD in Art. Already more than a decade ago in Art Monthly, Peter Suchin complained that these degrees are insufficiently rigorous and serve as institutional validation for artists willing to

jump through bureaucratic hoops.¹² Practices that do not fit this framework are consequently stifled. There is some truth to Suchin's argument, in that the marketized university, operating under successive Tory governments, has certainly privileged research, the impact of which is quantifiable and commercially exploitable. That said, these conditions operate on artists outside the university too, and at least in the context of academic studies, the rules are transparent and possible to appeal. Suchin also cites Charles Harrison's assertion that practice-based doctoral theses are often 'weak imitations of scientific proposals'.¹³ The late introduction of a written component into previously technical art education has certainly led many to seek a model in the sciences for practice-based research.

Art is nevertheless clustered with the humanities in academia, and much of the teaching in critical and contextual studies modules draws on Art History and Philosophy. At the same time, university staff in charge of teaching and learning are frequently trained in Education, which is part of social sciences. The diffuse boundaries between these fields can produce fascinating interdisciplinary results, but it can also result in a methodological muddle, where students and researchers ill-equipped to tackle statistics and empirical experimentation awkwardly try to fit these methods into idiosyncratic studio practices, resulting in the aforementioned weak proposals. However, a significant part of the problem is the lack of support for arts and humanities more broadly in contemporary Britain (and elsewhere). As ever more funding is diverted away from non-instrumental critical thinking, researchers in art increasingly have to justify their work in terms such as advancing 'digital humanities'. And yet while science offers an excellent lens through which to understand the world, it is the humanities through which we can critically observe the lens. This is imperative if we are to be able to ask urgent questions about why we are using this lens rather than another and understand the history of its making.

A general distrust of academic language permeates the campaign against arts and humanities, but this is most acutely present in the field of art. Academic writing in art is often ridiculed on the grounds of the imposition of an artificial jargon on a naturalised self-expression. Frank Wasser, in 'Writing & Art Practice | Writing in Art School' recounts the struggle of students to grapple with the task of melding their studio research into the rigid framework mandated by university regulations for the writing component.¹⁴ But while the university does stipulate things like word count and line spacing, mainly for the purposes of equity and ease of reading, much of the difficulty comes from

the specific and often unfamiliar vocabulary students encounter when they embark on art research. Salaman recaps the recent debate around International Art English, a term coined in 2012 by Alix Rule and David Levine, who mock the distance between the language used in announcements published by *e-flux* online and standard English.¹⁵ She cites Hito Steyerl's response, which criticises the method of looking at marketing in ads rather than actual academic essays. Steyerl makes several fine points in her article, but one of the more interesting claims is that in a globalised artworld, non-standard English is often produced and reproduced by overworked and unpaid interns, who might yet shape the future of the language.¹⁶ There is no doubt that academic language is often specialist, and at times even meaningless. We have yet to meet a lecturer in art who would not welcome a student's effort to evade it or write more poetically. But teaching students to decode such 'difficult' writing is not merely about enforcing standards. The more radical potential of using an institutional language, one that is non-native by default, is that it has a universalising power. In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate the notion of a minor language. They describe the way Kafka does not write in his native Czech Yiddish to resist the dominant language of bureaucracy – German – but rather takes this arid language and makes it vibrate with intensity.¹⁷ This allows him to both unsettle the marginalisation of his own context and the identification of the German language with a German nation. Using the language of the university to speak of art holds a similar promise that the potency of this language cannot be contained by its vessel or owned by its functionaries.

This applies, too, to the labelling of students in terms of their perceived academic skills. The transformative potential of education is reduced as students are classified early on into types of learners. Fixed categories lock them into pre-existing capacities in relation to unquestioned taxonomies of ability. As Fitzwater writes, the high proportion of neurodiverse students in the sector is all too often addressed using a deficit model that pits writing against creative practice:

[...] art, design and 'creative' students are variously characterized as visual learners (West, 1997; Coffield et al, 2004), or less-academic; even in less focused pedagogic research there is a tendency to see a schism between academic and creative aptitudes (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). At a fundamental level, these discourses enforce a specious separation

between the creative and the written which is unrecognized in most other educational spheres.¹⁸

Fitzwater argues that a neurodiverse approach would focus on making learning possible for diverse learners by 'deconstructing inherited problematics and posing fundamental questions about the assumptions underlying the splits in art and design instruction'.¹⁹ But instead of fulfilling their statutory duty to make reasonable adjustments, including the provision of learning support assistants, as stated in the 2014 Equality Act, universities are all too happy to minimise or eliminate requirements such as dissertations.

The debate around the role of academic writing in art education also reflects a wider suspicion towards logical argumentation that has peaked in recent years. The disdain towards the empty supplement of an 'up-to-date vocabulary' can be traced back to a long modernist tradition, from Antonin Artaud's 'all writing is pigshit' to Carl Schmitt's disavowal of liberal democratic deliberation as a groundless façade that should be blown away by a real moment of political action.²⁰ This attack has been recently revived by certain strands of new materialism devoted to 'decentring the human subject, along with the characteristics that have long been identified with human exceptionalism, including language, rationality and higher consciousness'.²¹ With its human centred focus, logical argumentation is deemed undemocratic in its exclusion of other forms of non-human being, object or animal. This perspective is understandably seductive in the face of the ecological catastrophe we are facing. But as Kate Soper points out, it is only on the basis of a human exceptionalism that a moral demand to act against our own annihilation can be expressed: 'The irony of any posthumanist invitation to collapse these distinctions is that if we were wholly able to do so, we would no longer recognize the force of the moral issues we are being called upon to address'.²²

Efforts to decolonise academia have likewise tended to cast logical argumentation as the preserve of western colonial domination where other forms of thinking and being were subjugated. And yet logic, even in its most 'refined' European Enlightenment form, is simply a reverberation of ideas collated over millennia from Persian, Arabic, Egyptian, Indian and even native American thought. To designate logic 'western' is to deny it its long non-European roots and its truly universal potential.²³ Instead of calling out the extractivist logic of turning students into customers, it is cheaper for

universities to colonise decolonisation and turn it into a battle over terminology. As Achille Mbembe argues, this is hardly enough:

We need to decolonize the systems of access and management insofar as they have turned higher education into a marketable product, rated, bought and sold by standard units, measured, counted and reduced to staple equivalence by impersonal, mechanical tests and therefore readily subject to statistical consistency, with numerical standards and units. We have to decolonize this because it is deterring students and teachers from a free pursuit of knowledge [...] The consequences of this governing rationality-cum-economic policy are to generate and legitimize extreme inequalities of access, of wealth and life conditions. It leads to increasingly precarious and disposable and superfluous populations. It produces an unprecedented intimacy between capital (especially finance capital) and states, and thus permits domination of political life by capital. It generates unethical commercialization of things rightly protected from markets and privatizes public goods and thus eliminates shared and egalitarian access to them.²⁴

In art terms, some of these broader political positions are articulated in a more localised way around a question of the knowability or sayability of the artistic process of studio decision making. Potter quotes Rebecca Fortnum's 2014 essay, 'Creative Accounting: Not Knowing in Talking and Making'. In her piece, Fortnum asks to protect a zone of intuition or indeterminacy that sits, often unacknowledged by official discourse, at the heart of art making. According to Fortnum, this zone of 'not knowing' informs the 'knowing' aspects of art making, but she sees the latter as being often overemphasised in increasingly bureaucratized art that appears in schools as practices measured by 'learning outcomes' and in professional life as projects qualified by ACE grant applications. There is no doubt that from the national school curriculum all the way up to university research, art is increasingly written about within rigid frameworks that suck the life dry from any creative endeavour, and we agree that this needs to be challenged. However, we are sceptical of the retreat into indeterminacy. We would ask, following Soper, whether the discussion of 'unknowns' does not construct them as knowable: to what extent does a process of thinking or making remain 'unknown' when essays like Fortnum's are written about it?

In a way, the economy of knowing and not knowing presented by Fortnum is more of a question of temporality and delegation. It's not whether the artwork will be ensnared by language, but at what point and by whom. Discourse

surrounds artistic practice today as it does all productive spheres – talking determines meaning through the complex operations of attention, institutional validation and the accumulation of cultural capital. The artist might indeed not know what they hope to achieve in the studio, and aspects of the artwork often do emerge as happy accidents from the process of making. But this only shifts the discursive validation of the art work to the later stage of its encounter with an audience. The work will be completed ‘in conversation’ by an audience who will share, like, edit and reference it online or IRL. The press release, the curator’s talk, the interview with the artist, social media posts and podcast reviews will give shape to the intuitive, kneading it into neat parcels of communicable meaning. Defending the zone of ‘not knowing’ might come from a desire to hold on to the exceptionality of artistic practice. It could represent wanting to stand outside other zones of economic production, so that not *all* nuggets of potentiality are at the mercy of flows of informational economies of attention. However, we don’t wish to dismiss this as simply a romantic or nostalgic position. On the contrary, the conversion of the unknown into the known (and talked about) is a vital part in making any artist successful, a key mechanism through which art is made profitable.

This is the cruel logic of the age of human capital, where workers (with artists at the forefront of the post-Fordist production line) are paradoxically asked to accumulate their unique human capital, and at the same time to exchange it through the universal currency of money. In other words, artists (and not only artists) are asked to find their own voice, to have clear distinctive qualities, a personal story that belongs only to them and a coherent identity. But this personal and unique portfolio of bio-assets must then be converted into a myriad of opinions, comments and ‘stories’ (in the Instagram sense) as well as performative iterations, styles, creative writing fragments and hashtags. Bits of their unique voice will be deposited away in the vaults of the unknown, while other bits will be crumbled into the torrents of semio-capital flows. Writing in your own voice and from your lived experience is therefore not only an attack on the universal assumptions of logical argumentation, but a demand of the post-Fordist economy: you are asked to be undefinably different and at the same time to be marketed like any other ‘product on the shelf’.

Students often struggle with this contradiction, and they are right. How can lecturers or peers question their own experience, nestled in the protective layers of their unique existence on earth, and how can anyone critically evaluate their voice when it is indistinguishable from the self from which it emanates. As such, the gentle probing of intentions in a seminar can feel like

a kind of interpersonal violence. But what the Art student essay offers, in its disinterested language, is a temporary refuge from the pressures of the production of the self. It can be a relief to speak through the institutional language of essay writing, structuring arguments in a way that plugs into a formal system of academic accountability and delimits a very specific performance of the self. In his diatribe against the Art PhD, Suchin mentions Jon Thomson's contention that PhDs in Art should be examined orally rather than by any written submission. It is not entirely clear why a spoken text would be preferable to one that has been written, but this idea, which has indeed been taken up in some cases, makes sense in the context of this reification of the self, which requires the artist to embody the work rather than present it as an external artefact that might have meaning outside of their professional career, or even lifespan. In her response to Suchin, Elizabeth Price, who has been influential in shaping several such degree courses at UK universities, writes that art needs to be recognised as a contribution to knowledge in and of itself, requiring no written supplement and evidenced through public facing exhibitions. But in the context of degrees that increasingly emphasise professional practice, writing is often the only non-public-facing output of the degree, the last private space for speculation and development. The dissertation is the one thing students aren't expected to showcase on their website or install in an exhibition.

There is no doubt that this separation between art and writing is artificial and does not reflect artistic practice 'in the wild'. But outside art education, students do not need to submit documentation of their process or evidence of their making either, nor are they formally assessed on their efforts. Noonan-Ganley writes that the form of writing is proscribed, while in Art students are permitted free expression, but of course the presentation of artwork in the art school seminar space is also specific.²⁵ After graduation, students may well do projects that take myriad formats without having to present them in a formal way for group discussion, albeit that artist talks, exhibition blurbs and grant applications may well require them to articulate their ideas clearly in written form. In an academic context there are certainly constraints, however much tutors encourage creative formats of both writing and making art, and it is certainly possible to be an artist without attending art school, as Susan Hiller (quoted in Suchin's piece) has suggested.²⁶ However, art school offers the possibility of intensely engaging with ideas in a way that is difficult to achieve elsewhere. As Salaman argues, the contradictory status of writing on an art degree is not a good grounds for abolition:

Pedagogically I now see this division as an important structure in art education, because writing, and forming an argument, is a craft and is a form of literacy; it is an important skill. It is precisely to counteract Atkinson's 'myth of the inarticulate artist', that I would not advocate his suggestion that theory is best taught in the studio. Today that would mean closing the art history resource and asking existing lecturers to do both. Like Atkinson, I also contest the division of labour between the studio and the seminar, and consider the history and ideology of this division as central to my practice. I also see it as representing an important, productive contradiction.²⁷

As a result of the introduction and exponential rise of tuition fees, many alternatives to university have sprung up that offer certain aspects of art education without the institutional strings attached. The one thing few of these have emulated, though, is the dissertation. Universities themselves, under increasing financial pressure due to the withdrawal of government subsidies, have reduced the provision of contextual studies modules and replaced much of the writing submitted by students with less structured 'research files' and 'journals' that can be accepted as evidence of academic engagement, often without being very rigorously examined on their argumentation by time-strapped lecturers with impossible workloads. Insisting on the essay as a separate component, alongside close reading seminars and other discursive modes of teaching, is by no means a solution in and of itself. But if we are not to be handmaidens to neoliberalism (as Salaman warns), rather than removing the obstacle, it would behove educational institutions to provide students with the training necessary to make fulfilling this requirement not only possible, but enjoyable and fruitful.

This can only fully be realised in the context of a tax funded education system that incorporates note-takers, language and disability support tutors and maintenance grants that mean students can really devote time away from work to develop. It is unlikely that rising automation will supplant much of the work it is currently prophesied to replace; more likely it will simply lower wages in the fields it is permitted to enter. But insofar as we might hope for a future with less drudgery, the one thing we should aspire to do with any time recovered from labour is undertake studies for their own sake. None of the above even begins to answer the question of what type of theory is useful in teaching and learning art practice, what alternative formats might better engage diverse learners or how best the critical theory component might be delivered to students, questions which would require a far longer essay. However, regardless of these specifics, we would argue that there is no

reason why people should not spend time expanding their thinking, regardless of any job later acquired, not as a filtering or validation mechanism, but as a public good. Instead of acquiescing to a capitalist realism that sees higher education as vocational training in an inevitable commercial environment, universities can and should become sites of resistance, not just to war abroad but to the devaluation of education at home.

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- 4 Frith, Simon and Horne, Howard, *Art into Pop*, London: Methuen, 1987, p. 42.
- 5 Tickner, Lisa, *Hornsey 1968*, p. 45.
- 6 Noonan-Ganley, Joseph, “Abolish the Writing Strand in Art Departments”, in: *Commissioned Critique*, Amsterdam: Sandberg Institute, 2021, p. 28, available at:

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- 9 Noonan-Ganley, Joseph, “Abolish the Writing Strand in Art Departments”, p. 31.
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- 11 Ibid., p. 168
- 12 Suchin, Peter, “Rebel without a Course”, in: *Art Monthly*, no. 345, April 2011, p. 13.
- 13 Ibid, p. 12.
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- 15 Salaman, Naomi, “Art theory – handmaiden of neoliberalism?”, pp. 170-1.
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- 17 Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [Dana Polan – tr.], Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 18-9.
- 18 Fitzwater, Lynda, “Art & Design Education and Dyslexia”, p. 132.
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- 21 Hayles, N. Katherine, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*, Chicago, Il: University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 65.
- 22 Soper, Kate, “The Humanism in Posthumanism”, in: *Comparative Critical Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, vol. 9, issue 3, Oct 2012, p. 375.
- 23 Cedric J. Robinson persuasively makes this claim in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of

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- 24 Mbembe, Achile, “Decolonising the University: New Directions” in: *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, Vol. 15(1) 29–45, 2016.
- 25 Noonan-Ganley, Joseph, “Abolish the Writing Strand in Art Departments”, p. 28.
- 26 Suchin, Peter, “Rebel without a Course”, p. 14.
- 27 Salaman, Naomi, “Art theory – handmaiden of neoliberalism?”, pp. 171-2.