



RESPONSE TO A REQUEST

Art School 31

I first saw Paul Winstanley's *Art School* paintings at the Kerlin Gallery in December 2013, where the artist was exhibiting a selection from the already extensive (and still-expanding) set. Of the works on display, most were oil paintings (and photographs) of bare partition walls, the provisional spaces set up as art school studios during the academic year, left empty over the summer and at other fallow periods. These partition paintings have a standardised naming system: each one entitled, simply, *Art School*, and assigned a number, *1-45*.

There are two other standard series within the larger set, *Seminar* (paintings of empty seminar rooms with their clutter of functional chairs) and *Frame* (paintings of door, window, and canvas frames), and Winstanley has also exhibited watercolours and etchings based on the original photographs. Reduced almost to abstraction, but loaded at the same time with narrative force and socio-political resonance, these are striking, singular works. With some of the simple, reductive, banner-like qualities of truncated flags, they seem to enact a kind of abstract semaphore. They are also finely pitched, avoiding sentimentality, yet conveying – in a delicate feat – a great deal of pathos.

Art School 31, like most of the others in the set, depicts a bare studio space, depopulated and without clutter. The photographs from which this and the other paintings derive were taken at a number of art schools across England, Scotland, and Wales. The floors are laid with the familiar scuffed-grey wood, paint-spattered, unvarnished. The partition wall facing the viewer is divided into three coloured panels: blue, white, and a thin strip the colour of wet straw. To the right, another white partition wall creates a sense of enclosure. Above, further wood panels intersect in the corner of the room; further levels and divides are visible. There is a seashore lightness to this painting, with its layers of sand or sun-hat biscuit-brown, milk white, rich summer-sky cerulean. Something about it – perhaps this colour palette – puts me in mind of another almost-abstract work, Vanessa Bell's *Studland Beach* of 1910, one of the great works of English Post-Impressionism: a representation of a Dorset seaside scene in which women's bodies are reduced to two-dimensional planes, becoming monumental. *Art School 31* has something of the same sombre gravity to it, like a cold wind on an otherwise languid beach.

The *Art School* photographs, originally published in a book of the same name, were taken under strict, consistent formal conditions. The camera was held at the same height for each shot and the studio was photographed under natural lighting, as found. As a result, there is a rectilinearity, a kind of abstraction, to this photorealistic image. In others of the series, the images are dotted with chairs, desks, sinks, the utilitarian trappings of the artist's studio. But this one is bare. When I first encountered it, it was the flat colour surfaces of the stripped partition walls that struck me most. They suggest all the functionalism of the studio setting, lacking finish or pristine edges: an environment for learning itself, with its haphazard, unruly mechanics.

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When I came across these works again, earlier this year, they helped me out of a quandary.

I was, at this stage, trying to write a piece for a magazine about contemporary art education: a critical essay (so I imagined it) on education and value, in what has become something of an essayistic tradition, its most notable practitioners critics like Stefan Collini and Marina Warner, who have argued – from the perspective of the humanities – against the new educational orthodoxy, the official ascendancy of STEM subjects, the erosion of pure research, the grievous mismanagement of educational reform, and the intrusion of corporate interests upon educational prerogatives.

This turned out to be more difficult than I anticipated. Some of this difficulty was certainly personal, deriving from what was, for me, the relative abstraction of the topic. I did attend art college – IADT – but not to study art; instead I took a broad-based humanities degree in English literature, visual culture, film studies, and politics. Still, in my inattentive way, without thinking too hard about it, I had thought of these two – humanities in the broad sense and the practical business of a visual artist's training – as common pursuits, cultivating the critical faculties, teaching analytical reasoning and scepticism of received narratives, fostering a sense of values other than economic. What's more, both have been subject to similar processes of attrition in recent years, marginalised in the university sector, fighting to justify and retain what dwindling supports remain for third-level teaching and research.

Only in coming to write about art education did I begin to see the distinctions. In a speech given upon his retirement in 2004, after many decades as an art teacher, Jon Thompson made this distinction clear, arguing that art education is out of place in the university: [F]ine art is not a subject of study. It does not define itself by negotiating boundaries with other subjects. Nor is it a discipline. It has no 'root' or normative rules of procedure. Rather, it is a loose assemblage of first-order materially based activities taking place in a speculative existential territory that has no boundaries and is designed, as Guattari so aptly describes it, to 'extract complex forms from chaotic material' [1].

Thompson's is a somewhat defensive position, but this statement of the case seems to ring true; for although, like their corollaries in philosophy or literary studies or art history, art schools provide a broad-based education, engendering criticality with even more rigour than their counterparts in the humanities, and a more boldly cross-disciplinary freedom, there remains a fundamental difference in premise. This must have, as Thompson argues, something to do with the fact that art schools are at least nominally skill-based. (Joan Fowler argued a similar case in

her response to James Elkin's 'The State of Art Criticism in Ireland, Revisited' in 2006.) As a result an art school education can be more specific and practical on the one hand, and on the other hand broader and more diffuse and cross-pollinatory, than almost any other field of third-level study.

I went in search of some clear definition of what exactly is meant by art education, some clear philosophical imperative. Here too, unsurprisingly, I ran into difficulty. I looked into the history of the art school, its inconsistency, evolving from the early twentieth-century gender-segregated, authorial, atelier-style schools for instruction in draughtsmanship – through the pioneering examples of pivotal, innovative educational institutions like the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College – to the very different, cerebral, crit-based, and increasingly dematerialised schools of today. Does a single philosophical imperative span these different pedagogical models? And if so, might there be some value in attempting to articulate that imperative?

The course of reading I undertook was dense, theoretical, stimulating, but not in a language I felt confident to command. Much of it – provocative and rigorous though it might be – was marked by fervent theoretical over-determination. The idea of isolating some singular ethos – some definition of agreed value – came to seem increasingly difficult. By the end I found myself unable to articulate even a single positive statement, let alone an entire text, on the subject.

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It was at this point that I came across Winstanley's work again. His Art School paintings seemed to convey, without words, as much about the nature of art education as anything I had read. These environments, these partitioned rooms and makeshift studios, with their air of experiment and functionalism, speak with remarkable clarity about the 'philosophical imperative', as I've been calling it, of the art school.

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In an interview last year, Winstanley connected the Art School series' specific kind of abstraction with his own preoccupations as an art student in the 1970s, a decade when abstract painting was in particular ascendance within the British art establishment. Winstanley attended Lanchester College of Art in the 1970s, followed by periods at the Slade and Cardiff. This educational backdrop provides an autobiographical source for these otherwise inscrutably impersonal paintings. It's even tempting to interpret these images as tributes to the art schools of this 'heroic' era – schools that were absorbing the lessons of the Bauhaus and the shock of conceptualism, cheap places you didn't need high grades or rich parents to attend, sites of self-expression and experimentation, inquisition and anarchy – though, in the same interview, he was careful to caution against any such specificity. These paintings, he claimed, are not 'portraits' of art schools; they have no specific location. Instead, they 'express an idea about art school'. But what is that idea? I don't believe it's a retrogressive one. These don't feel like images of lament. Nevertheless, in their very emptiness – as if the art school has been hollowed out, depopulated – there is surely a cautionary note.

The contemporary art school is confronted with several challenges; amongst them the reduction of government grants to art colleges, the creeping effects of managerialism, and – in the UK – the enormous expansion of student fees across the board. This fee increase, and the concomitant rise of student debt, is a particularly worrying manifestation of a new political and economic settlement, one that, at least since the 1990s, has posited the student as a customer in a financial exchange with third-level institutions. This is dangerous for a number of reasons. For one thing, the prerogative of the 'customer' is to seek for themselves above all things value-for-money, leading to increased demand for disciplines whose pay-off (for the accredited professional) is immediate and quantifiable, at the expense of teaching and research in subjects both 'soft' and 'pure' – within the sciences as much as within the arts and humanities, marine biology as much as medieval history. More broadly, though, by placing the burden of payment on the student-consumer, policy-makers are fostering a system in which any value of education in a broader social or cultural sense – any value, that is, to those other than the professional – is disavowed. This is a capitulation to a new orthodoxy that atomises labour, generates and fosters insecurity (professional and social), and erodes any sense of civic cohabitation.

One response to this situation is for the art school to become a shamelessly professional environment. The curator and critic Bruce Ferguson – who has been dean or director of several art schools around the world – argues that '[i]n viewing art schools as professional environments aligned to a professionalized art world and obligated to prepare their students for financially and critically successful careers, the hippy vision of art school as a "safe" environment or monastery, where students are encouraged to fail, experiment, and explore, is outdated and dangerous. Schools should now be seen for what they are – professional entrées into a professional world' [2]. This may sound mercenary, but – so the logic goes – how else to justify to potential art students (those, at any rate, who do not have family support) the levels of debt they will take on just to enrol? What follows is a sampling of tuition prices at major art schools in the US and UK, published last year. These are familiar figures, but they are worth reproducing, and rereading, as a single table. The result speaks for itself.

\$53,484 – Columbia University School of the Arts
\$47,562 – University of Southern California
\$45,810 – School of the Art Institute of Chicago
\$45,530 – Rhode Island School of Design
\$44,680 – Parsons The New School for Design
\$43,400 – California Institute of the Arts
\$34,300 – Yale University School of Art
(8,755/22,350 GBP) \$13,024/\$33,250 – Slade School of Fine Art, University College London
(9,000/20,000 GBP) \$13,389/\$29,754 – Goldsmiths, University of London
(4,280/10,280 GBP) \$6,367/\$15,293 – Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London
\$23,465.00 – University of California, Los Angeles.

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Is it too much to see in Winstanely's work the suggestion that if art schools become expensive professional environments, then something of their provisional quality developed during the second half of the twentieth century – the sense of experimentation, of contingency, of planning for failure – might be lost, and this loss will be seismic?

In the end my text on art education was reduced to a string of quotations, first person accounts – from around the world, across the twentieth century – of clothes worn by students at art school. I could think of no other way to convey anything concrete about the subject, nothing to place against this table of figures.

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Looking at Art School 31 head-on, you are faced with an empty wall. There is a sense of stillness, abandonment, inactivity, a suggestion of entrapment and enclosure, in this geometry. These are works that rely upon the implicit – that imagine an absence. They could be, in this sense, ghostly images – images from which the human subject has been erased.

Nevertheless, this does not feel a terminal or hopeless work. Its enclosure, its tight geometric containment, is precisely what gives this painting its sense of compressed energy. The hum of term-time activity seems almost audible, imminent – as if it might be going on in the next partition, or just outside the door. This implied activity makes of the calm pictorial space a kind of mid-storm lull. Its strips of colour – viewed another way, like geological strata – suggest promise and possibility, the thin straw-coloured strip looking, in another light, like a seam of gold.

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Response to a Request, 16 October 2016

[1] Jon Thompson, 'Art Education: from Coldstream to QAA', *Critical Quarterly*, 47:1-2 (2005), 218.

[2] Bruce Ferguson, 'Art Education' [2009], in *Education*, ed. by Felicity Allen (London/Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery Press/MIT Press, 2011), 175.