

Social Engineering

ART SCHOOLS WEREN'T BROKEN. POLITICIANS BROKE THEM.

Years ago a man named Alan (not his real name) was appointed to a senior role running a once prestigious post graduate art school – now widely referred to as 'a Chinese finishing school'. Alan was not an artist neither had he been to art school. He had a large office with a couple of guitars conspicuously displayed. The guitars? A transparent ploy to appear cool.

His cover was well and truly blown, when at a meeting of senior academic staff, he calmly announced that he thought there was, "too much teaching going on". The consternation his remark caused was almost palpable. The collective reaction was a strangely stunned silence allowing Alan to remain happily oblivious to his monumental 'faux pas'.

What was overwhelmingly obvious (to everyone in the room) about this gaff was not only had he exposed his ignorance and unsuitability for the job but that he had also unwittingly revealed government policy. He was 'on message'. The public or declared message at that time being solely to cut costs and save the taxpayer money and help reduce the National Debt. But this would transpire to be a fig leaf for something much more sinister. An opportunity for some serious social engineering. The 'dumbing down' as it became known. The strategy gradually became clear; to replace costly (high quality) one to one contact teaching with distanced learning. The opportunity to deliver this fundamental downgrading of the established pedagogic model presented itself a few years later when Covid struck. It meant that part time and distanced learning methods involving Zoom and Teams apps could be rolled out across full time courses, saving a fortune. Not only had the opportunity to comprehensively defund higher education arrived but the possibility to make H. E. profitable – had finally arrived.

I've always thought that the method of teaching and learning that went on in art schools was of a unique kind. And it was this kind of pedagogy that attracted people to study at art school. It was this ethos that fostered a breeding ground for scepticism and independent thought; essential in the maintenance of a healthy democracy. Art education had once been the epitome of what was known as 'liberal education'. Not something the political elite nor the denizens of Whitehall ever appreciated or understood – but feared.

Fast forward twenty plus years and a senior manager (Alan's successor) at the aforementioned institution came out with a rather similar observation. Only this time it was framed slightly differently. He said, "We're becoming too student centred". I got to wondering what would possess anyone to think such a thing – let alone say it aloud? I realised that on both occasions the speaker had never been to art school, studied art or had any understanding of why art schools even existed. I reached the conclusion that what they meant was that they would prefer if the institution could claim to be a centre of 'research' rather than one of teaching and learning. But why? The answer lies in funding – or rather the threat of reduced funding. The government* would like to appear to be funding research because the word research used in a rhetorical sense implies vision, which rather ironically, is what's patently lacking.

This manufactured, if not bogus 'culture' has ushered in a new depths of academic irrelevance and inanity; stimulating the growth of esoteric and unduly opaque language in a misguided attempt to legitimise creativity – completely unwarranted. Group therapy by another name. Creativity is unfathomable and doesn't require justification nor legitimisation; evidence of its innumerable benefits are self-evident. My point? Research in fine art is not only questionable but specious. It's a misnomer. The painter and educational reformer Sir William Coldstream realised this over sixty years ago.

The erosion of standards in education in the humanities and the arts is an attack upon rigorous and sceptical thought, something that jeopardises collective culture – and ultimately democracy.

The Alans of this world are invariably personable. They're not apparently malicious and display no particular knowledge of, or passion for – anything. They avoid confrontation by ascribing their actions to a higher and unseen power**. They all seem to subscribe to the same quietly authoritarian groupthink; the source of which remains opaque to mid-ranking and junior academic staff, who by and large are doing their utmost to support a system that has been wilfully underfunded, perverted by politically motivated meddling and all but suffocated by management culture.

What's at stake here is the erosion of education as an agency of social change and working class empowerment by stealth – social engineering. This is an historical issue now facing most established democracies. The brake point for the ruling elite were the riots in Paris of 1968; enough was enough. The 'great experiment' and by that I mean the implementation of a liberal education for all – is now well and truly over.

Because of their general ignorance and overwhelming sense of entitlement, the Alans of this world are oblivious to the damage that they're doing. As they have no real understanding of their responsibilities or the impact of their actions. What has now replaced art school as a driver of social change is of course social media; the primary source of propaganda, malice, misinformation, intolerance and ignorance. Controlled by vested interests that are malign, if not downright criminal, unaccountable and devoid of moral purpose, driven by profit and a contempt for democracy.

A key factor in this tragic state of affairs has been the transfer of control from the academics to the administrative staff or managers. We're now in the absurd situation that anyone who studied at an art school is now deemed to be unsuitable to run an art school. Any scrap of knowledge has had to be expunged. Knowing nothing about and caring even less are now key qualifications for the job. As someone candidly once said to me, when asked if they went to art school, "Me? No. I didn't go to art school. I know nothing about art, that's probably why I run an art school." Management culture has triumphed, having simultaneously emasculated and monetized the art school. The former was always the intention, the later a bonus.

What's galling is the fact that art schools weren't broke – it was the politicians that broke them. This is social engineering – pure and simple. And what's even more galling is the fact that they couldn't have done it without the complicity of opportunists, some of whom even have the audacity to identify as 'artists'. Yet another reason why I refer to myself as a painter.

Graham Crowley 2024

*Enthusiastically aided and abetted by the DfES and the OfS; the 'public servants' who dream up nightmare 'social viruses' like Ofsted.

**Again, probably the DfES; accountable to no one, except the Chinese authorities.