The Art School: Opportunity or Adversity?

How is identity affected by studying at a mainstream art school in Scotland?

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Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

The primary objective of this dissertation is to highlight the damaging impact that an art school education can have on student mental welfare and creativity. Through an arts-based, autoethnographic methodology, the dissertation examines my personal experience of studying at the Glasgow School of Art between 2010-14 and is organised in six chapters which form an extended literature review interspersed with personal reflections and imagery. Discussing elitism, marketisation, industrialisation and nepotism, the dissertation demonstrates how art school is not an equal opportunity, and that the wellbeing of students is often considered secondary to institutional expansion and monetary gain.

Introduction

The central question this dissertation asks is, "How is identity affected by studying at a mainstream art school in Scotland?". Additional questions raised include, "Is art school an equal opportunity?" and "How does formal art education impact student mental health?". My research questions derive from a process of reflection and introspection; an examination of the impact that formal art education has had on my sense of self and my artistic practice. I knew that I had suffered what felt like an irreparable fracturing of confidence and creativity, but couldn't specify what, exactly, had gone so badly wrong. Discussing the four years I spent at The Glasgow School of Art (2010-14) with friends I had made at the institution, it became abundantly clear that my experience was not unique to me. It seemed to be endemic; a widespread malaise and dissatisfaction that radiated through the graduate community. I wanted to uncover the social and structural inequalities that contribute to this response and examine the impact that these systemic issues have on student experience and prospects. However, the scope of the paper is restricted to my positionality as a Scottish, cisgender, white, woman and, therefore, cannot fully examine the experiences of the Glasgow School of Art's entire student population, nor those of other institutions.

Chapter one, Art School is not an equal opportunity, provides a thorough contextual base for the remainder of the dissertation by examining the structural inequalities that are sustained through marketisation, prejudice, and elitism. The chapter introduces the problematic process of application and acceptance within higher education institutions and, specifically, the Glasgow School of Art, examining its largely elitist and restricted student intake. I scrutinise the need for quantifiable success within art institutions; something that is difficult to achieve in creative areas that are largely subjective and open to interpretation. The academic coding that is consistent with neoliberal educational standards clashes with the Glasgow School of Art's egalitarian ideals of creative expression and prevents admission to those who have not earned the right (Verwoert, 2006), enforcing the meritocratic segregation within the student body.

Chapter two, Identity Crises, delves deeper into institutional structure. First, it discusses the industrialisation of the studio and the value of product over process. With increasingly oversubscribed studio spaces and overworked staff, the process of actively producing artwork becomes secondary to concept. Students are (mis)sold the dream of exceptional facilities and an inspiring studio environment, only to be confronted with the reality of unsuitable environments and limited access to essential facilities. The chapter then examines the effects of these restrictions by dissecting the mounting

responsibility on students to provide their own tuition in a paragogical environment that relies upon peer-engagement and self-criticism. With many students attending art school at the young age of eighteen or nineteen, I argue that the student body is too young to have the secure self-awareness that is necessary for a successful, collaborative, artistic learning experience. Additionally, with the contemporary art market generating a culture of individualism, the resulting environment is confusing, placing pressure on the student to be quantifiably successful in a field that is subjective and reliant upon personal experience. With reference to my own experiences, I argue that these factors contribute to a significant decline in the stability of student mental health and self-esteem.

The final chapter, Insiders and Outsiders, concludes my argument that the art school environment negatively impacts wellbeing and mental state. I discuss the prevalence and pertinence of networking and nepotism in securing employment in the arts upon graduation and, like many other aspects of art school, opportunity is granted to the privileged few, and not the many. Finally, with specific reference to my experiences of undertaking unpaid work after graduating from art school in 2014 and the struggles I faced in so doing, I reflect upon the voluntary position that changed my outlook; Glasgow-based disability arts charity, Project Ability. Following from previous arguments that formal arts education is elitist, I unpack the terminology of 'Insider' and 'Outsider' and evaluate the ways in becoming embedded into the contrasting environment of a community organisation has transformed both my outlook on the arts and the way that I see myself.

Reflecting upon my personal experiences in an arts-based, autoethnographic methodology, I assess the impact that my art school education has had on my sense of self and my artistic practice. Each chapter is opened with a quotation that succinctly exemplifies the chapter contents and interweaves accounts of significant events with theoretical analysis and responsive collages. This dissertation thus adopts an experimental structure; an assemblage of data from multiple sources that highlights the fragmented and unstable nature of identity and reflects the cumulative awareness and understanding that has occurred throughout the writing process. In the following methodology chapter, I dissect autoethnography, poststructuralism and assemblage and explain the ways in which these approaches both dictate and enhance the form of this dissertation.

Methodology

Poststructuralism and Assemblage

> Poststructuralism presents itself as an inevitable champion of the equity cause…If identity is not a simple, given, presumed essence that unfolds naturally, then it cannot be reducible in any comprehensive way to its various determinate modes of appearance (Walshaw, 2013, p. 1).

By infusing a theoretical literature review with personal and reflective narratives both embedded in the main text and interspersed between chapters as visual interludes, this paper confronts academic norms and is presented in an assemblage format; a form of qualitative research that enables the researcher to combine text or information from multiple sources, "a collection of items that fit together to provide a rich, multi-perspectival account of this time, this place, this moment" (Denshire & Lee, 2013). With a primarily collage-based artistic practice, this collation and assembling of data feels natural, comfortable and appropriate, mirroring the aesthetics of artistic assemblage. Communication and Anthropology professors, Marcus and Saka, describe this process within social science research as a tentative balancing of the "structural and the unstably heterogeneous" (2006, p.102), a process that questions the materiality of structure. The framework of assemblage was developed by philosopher Deleuze and political activist, Guattari, who attest that the theory provides an "antidote to the dominance of classic traditions of European social theory" (Marcus & Saka, 2006, p. 104). With assemblage artists, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, working in such a way to actively "challenge and disrupt the values of the commercialised gallery system" (Tate, n.d.), combining this anti-institutional approach with the poststructuralist ideals of philosophers, Foucalt and Barthes, the text appropriately embraces an experimental and unconventional form that is reflective of poststructuralist theory.

> [Poststructuralism] challenges to rethink our narratives as reflective of our fractured, fragmented human subjectivities and as rhetorical sites of discontinuity, contradiction, displacement, and even estrangement… These ideas call for us to deconstruct and examine our understandings of what we think, what we understand, and what we think we know about others and our society. They call for us to not assume we are what we are. Yet poststructuralist theory also justifies the incorporation of the personal into research. (Hughes & Pennington, 2018, p. 40)
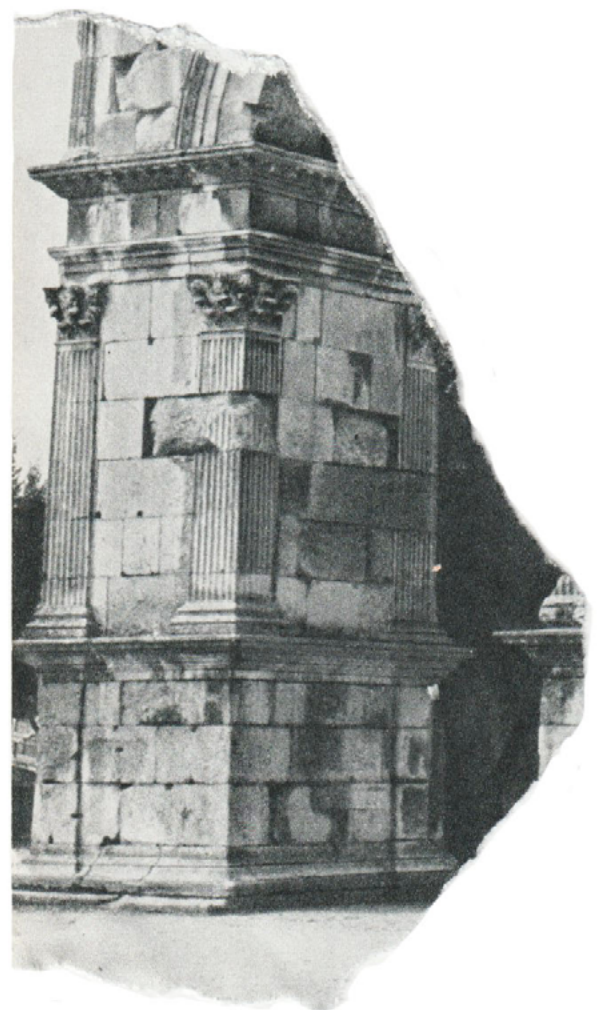
Fig.1

Autoethnography

> We might add the term "identity" to the list of constructs that are not what we thought but point to what life really is when things fall apart and we come into the present. Autoethnography illuminates this process. (Hoppes, 2014, p. 69)

Grounded in postmodern philosophy, autoethnography breaks down the structural binaries of academic convention and provides opportunity for alternative research methods inclusive of those typically found in arts-based inquiries (Hughes & Pennington, 2018). While typical quantitative approaches of academic research are scientific and detached in their statistical construction, autoethnography, as a qualitative approach, is effective due to its prominence of the emotive rather than the objective. Professor of Performance Studies and autoethnographically focused researcher with an interest in gender-based violence, mental health and race, Spry (2001), argues that successful autoethnography is not a "confessional tale of self-renewal; it is a provocative weave of story and theory" (p.713). The backbone of critical theory thus prevents 'stories' from leaning towards gratuitous self-gratification and, instead, supports the significance of personal experience. Explaining her choice to write using autoethnography, executive director of the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, Martinez, states in a 2017 journal article about gender norms and cultural hierarchies:

> Within the text I move between my personal and academic identities, narrating autobiographical episodes from my life. My personal voice describes where I was and what happened. However, the focus of the story is elsewhere. The events of my life serve only as a framework and materials for reflecting on the phenomenon of transgression (p. 468).

In contrast to traditional academic writing, autoethnography's impact often derives from its emotive use of language, emphasising the complexities of experience; the 'mess' that comes with living. Martinez (2017) asks: "What good do those pieces do, if they are not passionate and committed? If they do not speak from the soul and inspire real feelings and sensations? What are they good for, if they do not change people's lives?" (p. 470). The intimacy and vulnerability of autoethnography centres the author within the text and provides valuable, personal contributions to research that are otherwise inaccessible within the field (Hughes & Pennington, 2018). In *Autoethnography: Introduction and Overview*, mindfulness researcher Hoppes (2014) attests that "learning about oneself and one's interpersonal skills and challenges is intrinsic to professional development. Autoethnography, a blend of qualitative research methods and self-reflection, is a precise tool for those purposes" (2014, p. 64). The navigation of life's 'messiness' is interwoven with the formulation of both personal and professional identity; a complex process that I, starting art school as a young woman of eighteen, found difficult. Reflecting on my art school years, I saw a girl fall apart, make mistakes, spiral out of control.

I was ashamed. Pushing through this shame and analysing why it felt so visceral was challenging. Confronting myself, again and again, it felt like a therapy session that wouldn't end. I always knew that I had lost myself along the way, but I had never stopped to watch this loss unfold.

Through writing about the death of his father, communication scholar, Bochner, investigates the impact of loss on his own identity. In a 2014 publication reflecting on fifty years in academia and the shift to incorporating personal narrative into study, he writes: "the more I thought about my own experiences of loss, read other people's accounts of loss, and reviewed the theoretical and research literature, the more I began to understand that the academic world was not in touch with the everyday world of experience, the ordinary world" (pp.282-283). He claims that the 'academic self' is often severed from the 'experiential self' and that we are encouraged to seek wisdom from antecedent academics instead of pursuing lines of inquiry stemming from our own experiences. In so doing, the author can become disconnected and disengaged from the subject matter we are supposedly investigating. Autoethnography provides a platform where academia and introspective reflection can co-exist and conjoin to formulate a new and refreshing perspective on societal phenomena. Additionally, autoethnography enables researchers to "meet and accept their lives in all of their messiness, joy, and sorrow" (Hoppes, 2014, p. 70). Certainly, in my experience, adjoining the personal with the academic has been a process of breaking down the walls of mental compartmentalisation, allowing the experiential to stand alone yet in harmony with theoretical support.

In her 2020 publication, *Autoethnographies from the Neoliberal Academy*, Moriarty, a Creative Writing and English Literature lecturer with a research focus of autoethnography, wellbeing and pedagogy in writing practices, examines the difficulties academics face in neoliberal academies, utilising autoethnography as a form of resistance. She states:

> The voice inside my head at 2am was my neoliberal voice telling me to do more, be more. But for who? And for what?... How then, to turn that voice down in favour of quieter, kinder, more human voices? And what would those voices sound like? What would they say? (Moriarty, 2020, p. 3).

Like myself, Moriarty and Adamson (2020) reflect on their experiences of higher education and state that "looking back" has helped them to "develop a pedagogy that, if it doesn't eliminate the abyss, at least points out that it is there and possible ways to navigate over and around it" (p.209). This "abyss"; the overwhelm, anxiety and depression that so often sneaks up on students during periods of intense study in higher education, is indicative of the pressures experienced by students caused by increasing marketisation and commodification of education. Writing reflectively and dissecting

their own experiences as students and as educators, they emphasise the importance of offering students "ways of finding purpose in what they do and who they are" (p.208). The pervasive voice of neoliberalism running through Moriarty's text is resonant with both the focus of my research and my experiences of education. Autoethnographic writing is defiant and resistant, reinstating the value of the personal in an otherwise impersonal world. Personal reflections, descriptions and musings show more than they tell; they paint a broad picture of wider political, social and cultural concerns, and invite readers to correlate the words with their own experiences and empathies. As educational philosopher and social activist, Greene, attests in *Releasing the Imagination* (2000),

> we are appreciative now of storytelling as a mode of knowing, of the connection between narrative and the growth of identity, of the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness (p. 186).

In *The Death of the Author* (1968) - an essay that scrutinises the role and identity of the author in literary work - literary theorist, philosopher and semiotician, Roland Barthes states that "everything must be disentangled, nothing deciphered" (cited in Barry, 2002, p.79). The process of disentanglement in my autoethnographic writing has been challenging; an arduous exercise in reliving, rethinking and analysing that has forced me to confront memories and scrutinise them objectively. Hughes & Pennington (2018) discuss this complex process as a "burden of confronting the oft-hidden self and then struggling to decide what to share with others…writing an autoethnography means jumping into a problem knowing that you will get wet" (p.69). Deciding what to share and what not to share has been difficult. Initially writing experiences of art school chronologically in a second-person narrative, reliving moments as an observer and through the recollection of emotions, sights, smells, it quickly became a very immersive process that was difficult to separate from both my academic sensibilities and my everyday reality. However, through the process of writing in an unfiltered, automatic manner, I was able to dissect the content and draw out recurring themes that formed the bases of my theoretical research and enabled me to structure a coherent argument. This data analysis was helpful in separating myself from the research, but I questioned why I felt so uncomfortable with my experiential voice being read by others.

> In arts-based research, something of who we are is exposed, made visible and representational for others to touch, construct, negotiate, imbibe, or ignore. The dialogical performance moves us toward dispossession—a corporeal leakage—where our identity is an unstable part of the research process. We choose to risk that identity as part of undoing the systems of power which so neatly construct and produce who and what we are. In fact, we expect and depend upon the unsettling of identity as a felt barometer to make visible those webs of power in order to name and unravel them. (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018, pp. 22-23)

Communication scholar, Ellis (1999), argues that autoethnographies do not need to be confined to typical employments of language. They can, instead, manifest in poetry, photography, or fragmented pieces of writing which come together to form a "heartful" work that "not only [comes] straight from the heart of the author, but also targets and talks to the heart of the reader" (cited in Wright, 2017, p.82); a visual-textual approach to autoethnography that further rejects the restrictions and confinements of structuralist binaries that are so often found in academia, as discussed by Bochner (2014). In a dissertation presented entirely in a graphic novel format, art critic and cartoonist, Sousanis (2015), breaks down the boundaries of what is perceived to be acceptable within academia. His combination of imagery, language and carefully articulated design is "more than a philosophical exploration, [it] is an invitation for young people to think deeply about who they are and their role in the construction of self and the understanding of the world around them" (Morehouse, 2018, p. 62). This construction of self and an understanding of the world through artmaking is described by artist, critic and arts educator, Collins (2014), as an ontogenesis, wherein art practices can activate a conscious sense of individuation and an awareness of personal growth, thus "making sense" of the world and themselves within it (p.230). This process was integral to both my research and personal progression whilst writing this dissertation; an opportunity to delve into my history and dissect the trajectory of events that had shaped my personal and creative identities. It was a chance to transcribe the psychological awakening that was occurring throughout the process, visually tracking the discomfort I felt in writing frankly about personal experiences.

I realised that my discomfort was due to the words feeling too exposed and too exposing. I was concerned about obtaining the correct balance, allowing these experiences to speak without becoming dominant or self-serving. I felt that the most appropriate way to achieve a degree of separation between myself and my academic identity was to combine the most visceral or vivid of recollections with images and present them as visual vignettes. As Professor of Education, Siegel (1995) argues in a journal article examining the generative power of transmediation in learning, "making meaning through drawing is a very different undertaking than making meaning through language" (p. 458).

This method of utilising "moods and images" in combination with writing is useful in "directing emotion… published words are used more to explain the art, rather than enhance the emotional mood" (Scott-Hoy and Ellis, cited in Reading & Moriarty, 2020, p.51). For me, incorporating photographs and sketchbook pages from the years I spent at art school into collages encapsulates emotion in a way that words could never fully achieve, inviting the reader to immerse themselves into my state of mind at that moment in time. The cyclical and layered process of writing and rewriting, making and remaking, looking and relooking, has been imperative to uncovering the crux of my argument: what I want to say, and how I want to say it.

Education lecturer and arts-based researcher, Black (2002), notes that "drawings are a useful tool for eliciting reflection, self-analysis and change. Drawings offer a glimpse into human sense-making – a different, deeper glimpse; a glimpse of the whole at a glance" (p.78). Certainly, for me, making meaning through both image and language has been the only way to communicate the complexity of the transitory and layered concept of identity, adopting a fragmentary, divided layout that indicates the construction and deconstruction of the self over time. In presenting moments and thoughts within images through an abstracted, secondary narrative, they juxtapose the rigidity of traditionally academic writing, confronting the reader with both visual and textual information that presents an accurate and direct representation of experience and the turbulent construction (and deconstruction) of identity. The images can be read, both literally and figuratively, as a narrator to the dissertation who accompanies and confronts the reader. Disembodied and faceless, it invites the reader to question their own experience, and acts as a voice for many.

Chapter 1: Art School is not an equal opportunity

This chapter examines the ways in which art schools enforce and sustain inequality. By first interrogating the art school as a status symbol, it assesses the relationship between neoliberal educational standards and the meritocratic processes of entrance to arts education institutions. In so doing, the chapter discusses the importance of status and subjectification in both the application and graduation processes. Next, the chapter explores marketisation, prejudice and the façade of 'free' education in Scotland. Scotland provides free higher education for its population, at the cost of increased marketisation and inequality within its institutions. In order for institutions to remain sustainable, a large proportion of student intake is reserved for non-Scottish, fee-paying students from the remainder of the UK and overseas. Specifically reviewing the Glasgow School of Art, the chapter concludes by examining the identities of both the institution and its student population.

Given the fact that
the GSA has spent
over half a million
on expenses from
2016 to 2018 and
it has one of the
lowest student
attendances
from working
backgrounds
within the UK,
this seems to be
an elite place
for elite people.
(Carey, in
McArthur, 2019,
para.1)

Fig.2

1.1 The art school as a status symbol

Art Schools have been "dying" (@artschoolsaredying, 2020) for a long time. When I watched the Glasgow School of Art burn, for the first time, in 2014, it felt like a morbid but appropriate ending to my experience of the institution; like myself, it was giving up. I stood outside in shock, in tears, as the glass shattered, and flames erupted through the holes. I could see the wooden interior, freshly painted white for the approaching degree show, turning orange, then red, then black. The cost of rebuilding the fire damaged east wing far exceeded the initial estimate of £100m. When the second fire, in 2018, devastated the building beyond recognition, just months away from restoration completion, it felt like fate.

The treatment of surrounding residents following the fire in 2018 was considered to be "unacceptable" (STV News, 2018). Instead of helping those who had been abruptly evicted from their homes or business residences, priorities lay instead in protecting the institution. The dishonest allocation of money raised to contribute to the restoration of the 2014 fire, money that was diverted to ambitious campus expansion (Aitken, 2019), and demands for yet more funds just four years later, has been subject to substantial criticism. Labour councillor Paul Carey declared: "we cannot justify in this day and age that any public funding should go to this elite school when we still have food banks in this city" (in McArthur, 2019, para.5).

Now, in 2020, the art school is facing criticism once again for its lack of care in the face of another crisis: Covid-19. It is not alone. Across the country, art schools

Fig.3

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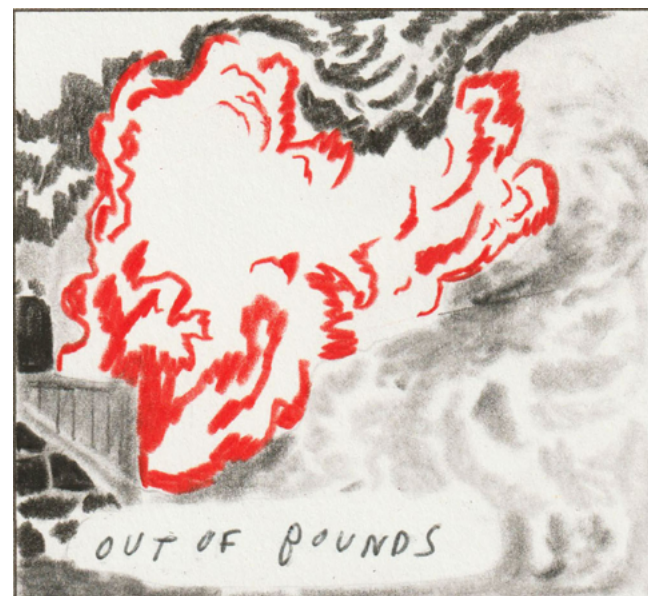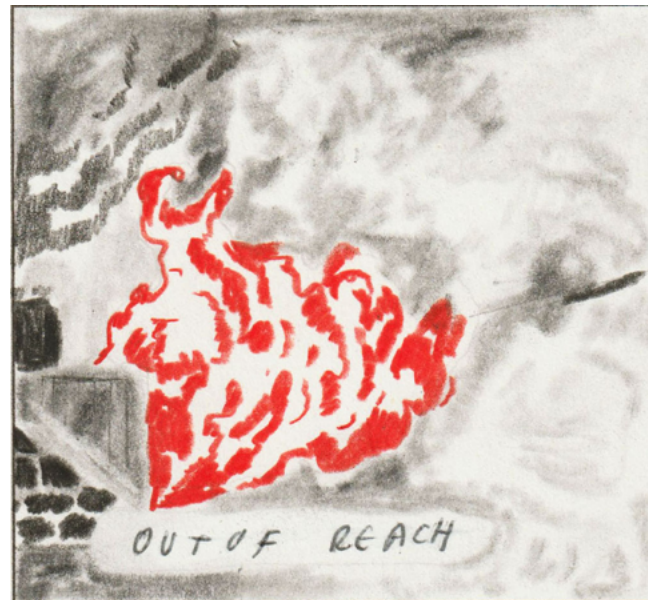
are facing backlash for their (mis)treatment of students; their lack of care and prioritisation of financial gain over student welfare and experience. The problems of marketisation, commodification and elitism that have been slowly rotting the roots of art schools are rapidly rising to the surface. Teaching and exhibitions have been digitised, studios are inaccessible, and resources are out of reach. Institutions, including the Glasgow School of Art, continue to collect fees at an unreduced rate, granting no refunds for the loss of space, materials and tuition. In response, students demand: "Pause or Pay" (Mansfield, 2020).

In 2018, professor of contemporary art history and curator of socially engaged artistic practices, Guida, stated:

> We are living in times of unprecedented change. The crisis of globalisation, the powerful commercial pressures directed particularly at young people, and new forms of "immaterial labour" are becoming hegemonic and subject to the norms of capitalist production all creating a cultural climate of immense complexity. Educational systems everywhere are also being "restructured" to take account of these changes (p. 35).

Two years later, the unprecedent economic changes Guida discussed seem almost obsolete in comparison to the intense global shift - a worldwide lockdown - we are currently experiencing. Yet, the sentiment remains the same. This period of intense change and enforced latency is, perhaps, the time to address the need for educational restructuring. What is important and valuable in life is becoming clear as the vestiges of capitalist lifestyles become increasingly redundant. Discriminatory practices are being acknowledged. Attitudes are changing. Perhaps, for education, and for the art school, it is time for priorities to change, too.

Fig.4

15

Professor of Public Education, Biesta (2015), attests that the function of education can be encompassed in three domains; qualification, socialisation and subjectification. He believes that "education is not just about knowledge, skills and dispositions" (p.77), and that often a disproportionate amount of attention is granted to qualification, neglecting to appreciate the importance of socialisation and subjectification in the process. These are crucial for civic responsibility, compassion and independence, in addition to maintaining emotional growth and mental welfare. "To put it bluntly," Biesta states, "excessive emphasis on academic achievement causes severe stress for young people, particularly in cultures where failure is not really an option" (p.78). Education needs to be flexible and tailorable to student needs as much as possible and needs to question whether the process is 'good' rather than merely 'effective.' Successful education does not necessarily mean that it is good as it relies heavily upon the enforcement of assessment prescribed by an exterior academic body, separate from the active experience of teaching and learning. Sustaining excellence or over-achievement is a requirement that is symptomatic of neoliberal individualism, endorsing competitive attitudes amongst students and encouraging an unhealthy, isolated approach to learning. It was something I experienced throughout secondary school and carried with me into the art school studio; an attitude of comparison and self-doubt that made me assess my work against that of my peers. Within the student body, each of us, with vastly different approaches to making artwork, would compare grades and discuss lecturers' feedback after each assessment or crit. It was a futile and damaging exercise rooted in engrained behaviours that derived from a capitalist upbringing: we all thought that we had to be the best. What the 'best' looked like, nobody knew.

Cultural critic and scholar Giroux (2019) writes extensively on the impact of capitalism and neoliberalism on society and education. Like Biesta, he attests that academic achievement and qualification within education has surpassed the need to cultivate socially responsible individuals. Instead of encouraging critical thought and self-development, higher education institutions are producing consumers; graduates trained for a capitalist world as opposed to a fair one. He states:

> academic knowledge and modes of interaction and communication have been disconnected over time from the vocabulary of community, compassion, equality, and justice and replaced by the antiseptic discourse of … commercialisation, privatisation, and a survival of the fittest ethos. Students are motivated to accept not

Fig.5   16

only profit accumulation as a model of human activity, but to view themselves as a species of human capital (p. 105).

The meritocratic environment of higher education "provides a principle of justice for the allocation of reward: Whoever performs best justly deserves the highest reward" (Mijs, 2016, p. 17). Maintaining outstanding academic performance may separate students statistically from those whose achievements are lesser, but these students are more likely to feel pressure to sustain this achievement with the unrealistic expectation of a fast pass to a successful career or recognition within their field. As such, their success does not eliminate anxiety or self-doubt, nor, typically, provide any tangible financial or occupational 'reward' (Siivonen & Brunila, 2014). As sociologist, Mijs, states, "meritocracy is not just an unfulfilled promise, it is an

Fig.6

unfulfillable promise" (2016, p.16). This unspoken expectation of achievement amounting to opportunity is a result of the transactional, consumerist structure of higher educational institutions. Students are customers (Biesta, 2015), investing in education not to learn but to elicit professional progress. As author and educational advisor, Sir Ken Robinson, states in his 2007 TedTalk, Do Schools Kill Creativity?: "Suddenly degrees aren't worth anything… you need an MA where the previous job required a BA, and a PhD for the other." This academic inflation is evident in the restructuring of priorities in institutions, and particularly evident in art schools, where students are increasingly forced into curricula centring around solipsism and a trajectory of success within the capitalist art market.

The meritocratic structure of higher education institutions is not limited to traditionally academic universities or colleges. It is particularly prevalent in art schools, where students are selected through a rigorous series of portfolio assessments and a set of strict academic entry requirements. Despite a vast number of art students having a diagnosis of dyslexia (Wolff & Lundberg, 2002), the Glasgow School of Art requires four Scottish Highers at AABB. These steep academic demands place immense pressure on prospective students to conform to typical academic standards and position those with a learning disability at a firm disadvantage. Additionally, these strict criterions highlight the increasing marketisation of art education, steering students into economies of knowledge as opposed to nourishing their creative talent. I was one of the few to be accepted into one of the most competitive

courses at the Glasgow School of Art in 2010 - Visual Communication - but did not fit the typical archetype. A newly turned eighteen-year-old from a small village in the North-East of Scotland, I was an underdog to the well-connected, prospective students who were applying from prestigious colleges from across the country, and around the world. I had the grades – the credentials – but no more. Once I was in, I slipped through the cracks. No matter how hard I tried, I never felt like I deserved to be there.

> Art schools and curatorial programs make clear that art-making involves training and a discussion among peers who are selected for their appropriateness and ability to partake in it; that only certain artists will be recognised as able to make a contribution to contemporary art; that the discussion of art is in fact pretty internal to a certain milieu and has a highly limited set of references, interests and authorities; and that in the realities of the art system, power as it is recognised through attention is quite tightly concentrated (Malik, 2011, p. 5).

Giroux (2005) attests, "we're not merely free-floating intellectuals. We're inscribed within institutions that have the historical weight of particular kinds of power" (p. 132). The longstanding reputations of renowned art schools like the Glasgow School of Art act as a bargaining tool between student and institution. Students attend prestigious institutions in the knowledge that they will always have an esteemed name attached to their transcripts when applying for jobs, residencies or funding opportunities. Art school is a status symbol that indicates a validity that those who have not attended do not have; a fast pass to recognition, a signifier of talent. Art school is all of these things, but is only accessible to a select few, and only a smaller selection of this select will go on to have successful and rewarding careers within the arts upon graduation (Malik, 2011).

Contemporary art critic and writer, Verwoert (2006), acknowledges the problematic stance of the art school as a virtual boundary that distinguishes "those who have received the legitimation to call themselves artists… [from] those who are barred from this right" but argues that they are:

> one of the few untouched barriers that, ideally at least, protects art production from the competitive logic of the art market, and gives students the right and freedom to develop their practice in experimental ways that are not yet constrained by the pressure to serve their work up to the public as a finished, recognisably branded product (p.1).

Ideally, this would be the reality of art school education; an

Fig.7

opportunity to explore and develop a practice that forms naturally over the course of an undergraduate programme, accruing knowledge and inspiration from peers and lecturers alike, and having an equal chance of success at the end of it. The problem is that art school is competitive. Students are aware of the almost impossible odds of success after graduation and are aware that some students have much greater odds than others. Art school is political. Graduates who do not fit the "limited set of references, interests and authorities" that co-director of the MFA Fine Art programme at Goldsmiths, Malik (2011), describes, face an uphill battle against the middle class, white elite who dominate both art schools and the art market.

1.2 Marketisation, prejudice and the facade of 'free' education in Scotland

While England is criticised for its market-oriented HE system and the highest average tuition fees globally outside of the United States (McCaig, 2018, p. 12), the Act of Union in 1707 enables Scotland to maintain regulation of its educational reform and thus resist marketised performance measures pursued by Westminster (Rummery, 2016). Scotland's HE system offers free tuition for undergraduate students; a legislation that aims to provide students from all socio-economic backgrounds the opportunity to undertake a university degree upon the completion of secondary school education; something that I, who would have been unable to undertake study out of Scotland, was fortunate to receive. During 2011's SNP Conference, then First Minister, Alex Salmond declared:

> This nation pioneered free education for all, which resulted in Scots inventing and explaining much of the modern world… the rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees to be imposed on Scottish students … This is part of the Scottish Settlement, our social contract with the people (in Rummery, 2016, pp.143-144).

Scotland's egalitarian stance is comparative to the educational policy of Sweden, where educational accessibility is considered to be effective not merely through the absence of tuition fees which, in a 2006 journal article entitled *Inclusive Educational Policies in the Nordic Welfare States*, Arnesan & Lundahl state is "more or less taken for granted and is not an issue of political debate," but also through the quality of experience; the "acquisition of knowledge of high quality and belonging to a social community" (p.291). Sweden's educational policy ensures that students from all socio-economic backgrounds can undertake study that would be otherwise unaffordable and aims to provide experiences that enrich the lives of individuals through

Fig.8

19

prioritising "värdegrund, meaning 'fundamental values'…concepts such as 'morals', 'values' and 'identities'" (Colla, 2018, p. 102). On the surface, Sweden's shift from authoritarian and classist modes of delivering education to one actively develops the identities of its population in a constructive and equal way is positive. However, a free education is not without its flaws:

> Since the recession in the early 1990s, the situation of young people in the labour market remains problematic. This is particularly the case for those with short or incomplete education, as many "entrance jobs" have disappeared, and the level of qualification requirements has risen in general…The number of young people who are more or less permanently left in a no-man's-land between education and work is high (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006, p. 291)

Likewise, Scotland's higher education system is not the liberal utopia that it may appear to be from an external perspective. While the eradication of student fees appears to provide an equal opportunity for all Scottish citizens, it benefits the few, and contributes to the solidification of wealth disparity across country. Moreover, high drop-out rates in Scottish universities could be attributed to the "slashing" of bursaries made available to students with a low income or a disadvantaged background (Grant, 2020), while those with substantial financial support can afford to remain in education. Although from a modest familial upbringing, I was fortunate to receive financial support from my parents that subsidised my meagre student loan, a privilege that is not available to all. As Professor Sheila Riddell, director of Edinburgh University's Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, maintains:

> It is still the case in Scotland that if you come from the rich parts you are three times as likely or even more to go to university than those from the poorer areas. And when you compare the four home nations, the better-off students from Scotland end up absolutely at the top, they're in pole position, because they don't pay anything for their higher education and, in addition, their parents often pay their living costs" (Davidson, 2019, para.6).

The Scottish government prides itself on its free education for the population and triumphantly compares itself to the neoliberal, market-driven policies of Westminster. However, despite free education being funded by the Scottish taxpayer, "increasingly, Scots are finding it harder to secure a university place in Scotland, because of the SNP's 'cap' on student numbers. The Nationalists' argument is that there has to be a cap – otherwise the policy of refusing to charge tuition fees would become unaffordable" (Grant, 2020, para.7). Once the quota of students is reached, universities recruit from the South or from abroad; a vital income stream that sustains the economy and crucial for the 2011 "Plan for Growth" – a strategy highlighting the role of education in economic recovery (Lomer, 2017, p. 52) – but results in a vast reduction in the number of places available to Scottish citizens: "International students have been buying their way in to Scottish universities for years – and now

English students are doing the same" (Grant, 2020, para.9).

Scottish students are fortunate to have access to a free art school education, but this access
is limited. Coveted spaces are restricted by the need for revenue from international and English
student intakes, resulting in students who would be unable to afford to pay the steep fees for an
undergraduate programme being obstructed. For the limited student intake at Glasgow School of Art,
the disproportionate number of non-Scottish student admissions makes the possibility of entrance for
Scottish applicants increasingly difficult. Amounting to 33% of the student body, international students
bring annual fees of £18,960 per year, equating to a total sum of £75,840 for a four-year BA Hons
programme, while those from England, Wales and Northern Ireland each pay a capped total of £27,750,
or £9,250 annually. When I graduated in 2014, my programme had a total of forty-two students. Of that
sum, only sixteen were Scottish. For an institution that places so much of its identity on its adoration
of the city of Glasgow, the student population says otherwise; Glasgow is not its identity, it is its brand.
As British artist, Bob and Roberta Smith, writes in a Guardian article examining funding cuts to
art schools, "what you'll get… is art made by the very wealthy for the very wealthy, becoming more
and more disconnected from real culture. The question is, do we want a culture comprised solely of
wealthy artists?" (in Barnett, 2011, para.16).

The influx of international students in Scottish institutions are "often crudely termed 'cash cows',
indicating the significance of their fee-paying status" (Waters & Brooks, 2010, p. 567) and are unfairly
berated for their claim on university places that could go to Scottish citizens. There is a palpable
sense of toxic nationalism in Scotland and, in particular, Glasgow, that was largely perpetrated by
Alex Salmond as First Minister and has continued throughout the Brexit and Scottish Independence
Referendum campaigns. Introducing alternative, international perspectives and cultures into Scotland
and its education helps to diffuse this prevalence of national tension and xenophobia whilst assisting
to secure the UK's position as a "leader in international education… opening the doors to greater
trade, investment and political influence'" (Waters & Brooks, 2010, p. 568). International students are
valuable; personally, culturally and economically. In spite of a large international student intake, there
still remains a distinct lack of minority representation.

The lack of representation begins in institutional structures; the directors, the board, the lecturers.
Every elected staff member, those who yield power and influence over the management of the
institution, indicates both its positionality and structural prejudices. As a white, cisgender female,
Scottish student of the Glasgow School of Art, I experienced misogyny, abuse, and a marked reduction

in opportunity upon graduation in comparison to my well-connected and wealthy counterparts. But, my experience, though difficult, was very different from those who were systematically excluded due to the colour of their skin or their culture. I did not have to face active discrimination on a daily basis, and, for that, I was fortunate. Institutions are complicit in the reinforcement of discrimination that permeates the arts, and art school is not an equal opportunity. In spite of Glasgow's multicultural makeup and the school's substantial international student intake, the Black and minority ethnic population is vastly underrepresented. This was not unique to my programme. In a 2011-12 equalities survey published on the school's website, the percentage of non-white students was only 6.1%, a figure that the school has since "identified an equalities outcome to address" (The Glasgow School of Art, 2011) but not updated. As a school that Chairwoman Muriel Gray – who, recently, was criticised for undermining the rights of non-binary students (Gray, 2020)- has described as a "family" (Gray, 2019), the question of who is welcome into its arms, and who is not, is pertinent.

> If British higher education is to move beyond its twentieth century bunker of anachronistic elitism and social hierarchies of privilege and modernise as 'fit for purpose', it must embrace a new era of democratisation and diversity that will ultimately define its success in the new global reach of the twenty first century (Mirza, 2018, p. 5)

This chapter has highlighted the structural inequalities that are sustained in the Glasgow School of Art. I argue that the admissions process to the institution enforces elitism and prejudice, and that the Scottish government's promise of providing free education for its citizens results in an increased intake of fee-paying students from the remainder of the United Kingdom and overseas. This marketisation reduces opportunity for Scottish students and makes entry to the institution extremely difficult, inflicting a meritocratic battle on those who are unable to meet the steep academic requirements and negating opportunity from prospective students who possess artistic talent, but do not adhere to the prescribed academic standard. In the following chapter, I will examine the identity crises that occur within both the institution and the student cohort.

above the rest.

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Fig. 9
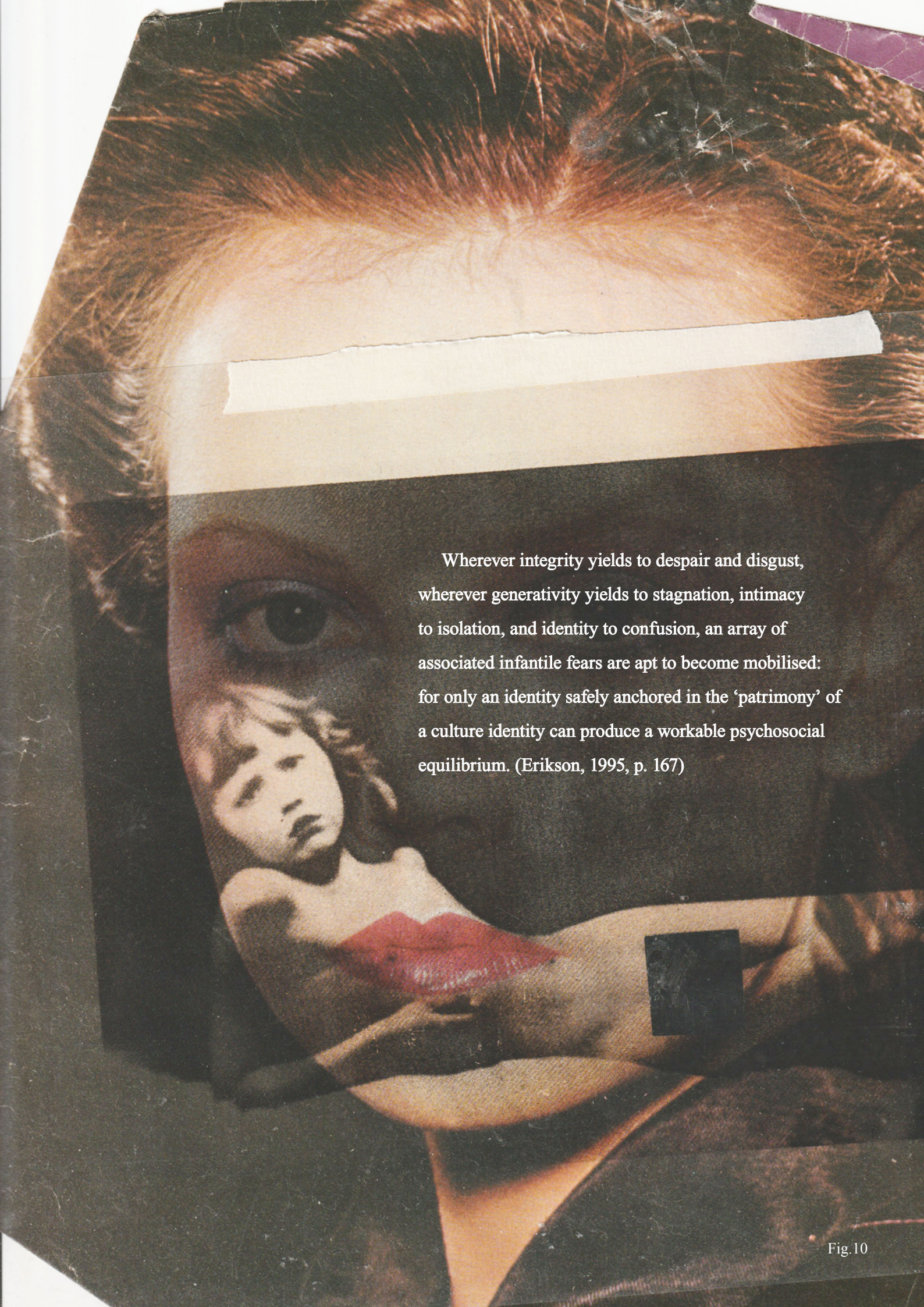
Chapter 2: Identity Crises

This chapter examines the identity crises of both art schools and art students. Specifically responsive to the industrialisation of the studio environment at the Glasgow School of Art, the chapter first analyses the depletion of skill-based learning through personal reflection of inadequate facilities, the lack of consideration given to student needs, and how these structural failings affect student experience and creative outputs. Secondly, this chapter argues against the studio as "an instrumental form of self-becoming" (Mulholland, 2019, p.30) and the increasing responsibility of students in the delivery of their own education. With many students attending art school at the young age of eighteen or nineteen, personal and creative identities are not fully formed. Expecting a pedagogical experience wherein they are the recipients of concrete knowledge and skills, students are faced with the reality of having to teach themselves, and each other. The 'crit' is an integral part of art school education for students; an opportunity to present their work, receive feedback and discuss concepts. However, with art often being inseparable from identity, criticisms can often feel personal, with devastating effects. The chapter then concludes by considering the implications of art school education complexities on student mental health and the entrepreneurial subjectivity that arises from the notion that nothing is ever good enough, someone is always better, and that you can always work harder.

Wherever integrity yields to despair and disgust, wherever generativity yields to stagnation, intimacy to isolation, and identity to confusion, an array of associated infantile fears are apt to become mobilised: for only an identity safely anchored in the 'patrimony' of a culture identity can produce a workable psychosocial equilibrium. (Erikson, 1995, p. 167)

Fig.10

2.1 The industrialisation of the studio and the value of product over process

The Glasgow School of Art has been criticised for its focus on campus expansion, leaving existing students frustrated at the desperate lack of resources and inadequate tuition on its primary campus. Courses are oversubscribed, staff are overworked and underpaid, yet the institution now has new campuses overseas in Singapore – a "thriving global financial hub" (BBC News, 2018, para.1)- and in the Scottish Highlands, developments it describes as "integral to helping us achieve our aspiration to be a global leader in studio-based learning and research" (BBC News, 2016, para.4).

> The Glasgow School of Art seems to value its brand more than the education of its students without whom there would be no art school…It is expanding year on year and increasing student tuition fees, yet the services, studio space and student/teacher ratio is not reflecting this expansion. We are fed up. What are we paying for? (Elbaor, 2016, para.3)

The ideal art school may be "a place where generations are given the space and tie to emerge and age at a pace that is not dictated by the speed of the market" (Verwoert, 2006, p. 1). Yet, without adequate tools, tuition and space, student work is often made in adherence to trends with little consideration of process, skill or craft. This value on aesthetic is propagated by institutions through the limitation of access to facilities that utilise tactile, physical, and time-consuming approaches to creative production. Students become accustomed to quickly producing material that mirrors work they have seen elsewhere, confining themselves to popular aesthetics and formulating a premature visual identity that reflects market demands as opposed to following creative instinct. To a significant degree, this is a necessary skill. The pace of the market and the rapid fluctuation in popular aesthetic is difficult to keep up with- the sooner this is learned, the better. Yet, while the conditions may be realistic and reflective of market brutality, art school should arguably be a safe place where artists can explore who they want to become as artists through taking risks and utilising facilities that may be otherwise inaccessible. With 'craft' considered a dirty word (Kino, 2005), the gradual eradication of tactile disciplines from art schools signifies a broader demise in contemporary art; a general deskilling (Roberts, 2010) that pervades national galleries and art fairs. British artist, Mulholland (2019), writes:

> The market scarcity of the kind of skills that medieval craft guilds once secured has long disappeared, taking with it any relative degree of certainty about the market value of their specialist knowledge. This has not happened simply because the skills themselves are no longer considered germane to the visual arts, rather it is because the transition from mercantile to Classical capitalism has dis-enthroned the once powerful craft guilds (p.23).

The immensely famous and divisive artist, Damien Hirst, is widely criticised for the manufacturing of his work being executed by assistants rather than his own hand. Hirst, like many artists, argues

that the work's value lies in the idea or the concept rather than its execution (Singh, 2012). Modern art schools emphasise the importance of intellect and innovation in the artistic process over the technique or production method; the traditionally accepted, neoclassical technique in painting has fallen to "the representation of new forms of artistic subjectivity demanded by a newly-industrialising,

capitalist culture" (Roberts, 2010, p. 80). The more realistic something looks, the longer it took to create, the less interesting it is. This development of the "professional naïve" cultivates a culture of insincerity, wherein "increasing numbers of academically trained artists [are] trying to pass themselves off as outsiders" (Garett, in Kjellman-Chapin, 2009, p.150). Within my programme, this was evident in a specific form of 'bad drawing' that was popular amongst my peers within the Illustration specialism; a rejection of accuracy and precision in favour of what appeared to be child-like, intuitive marks. It was an arduous process of aesthetic refining that actively undid any technical learning that they had received before attending art school; the subtle "deskilling" that Roberts (2010) articulates.

While some students deliberately deskilled themselves in adherence with popular aesthetic and market trends, others had no choice due to the significant accessibility issues regarding available facilities which, for the Communication Design programme, are currently listed on the Glasgow School of Art's website as:

Dedicated studio space, crit/group tutorial spaces, case room with a range of equipment including letterpress, Macs, digital cameras,

Fig.11

animation, linoprints, wood engravings and monoprinting, photographic studios with facilities for colour and black and white processing (The Glasgow School of Art, 2020).

To a prospective student, the range of listed facilities appears to be relatively substantial with scope to explore the tryptic of disciplines that exist within the programme (Illustration, Photography, and Graphic Design). Once enrolled, access to these facilities is limited, largely restricted to final year students and subject to specialism selection. Students apply to the programme, and many other programmes across the institution, because they are made to believe that they will receive unlimited access to facilities and reside in an innovative, studio environment where they can effectively explore their creative practice. The studio is emphasised as a key selling point, drawing attention away from the diminishing access to important facilities and towards the idea that it is the most significant part of the artistic process. When I was a student, the institution admitted more direct entry students into the second year than it was supposed to, a mammoth oversight that was dubiously dismissed as an 'admin error.' It was an unparalleled opportunity to become embedded into a large and diverse group of people, conversing and sharing multiple perspectives and ideas. However, twenty students make a significant difference to the quality of environment and tuition received. For nearly three years, while the now completed Reid building was being constructed, we were squeezed into the uninspiring, sterile environment of Skypark, a business park based in Finnieston. With low ceilings and laminate, office-desks segregated with exposed, untreated MDF dividers that we were told we, the student cohort, had to paint due to health and safety concerns, it was far from the idyllic studio set-up we had been promised.

The only year of the programme that I genuinely felt creative growth in was the first. The tutors had time to talk to the student body; get to know us, guide us and support us as both individuals and creatives as much as they could. The space was fit for purpose. We had freedom to utilise it in any way we thought suitable for the completion of a brief, so long as it was within health and safety guidelines. The briefs were frequent and challenging but broad and exciting. Academically and creatively, it was rewarding, and I have maintained respect for my tutors from that time. Regardless, I strongly believe that, at eighteen, I was too young for art school. Coming from a sheltered, rural upbringing, I wasn't ready for the brutality of the city or the complexity of interpersonal relationships, communal living and the overarching misogyny that infiltrates the art school culture. Away from the studio, in student accommodation, I grappled with becoming abruptly sexualised by the men I lived with; my appearance assessed against that of the other young women in our accommodation, my body ogled and groped

without consent. Being continually assessed against impossible standards both academically and personally was exhausting. Before long, I was losing all concept of who I was – who I knew myself to be – and was spiralling into an unsustainable mode of survival that normalised the toxic environments I was surrounded by.

Fig.12

2.2 If art is taught, no-one knows how

There is an assumption that art students already know who they are as both artists and individuals and are in possession of a "secure concept of self" (Mulholland, 2019, pp.27), requiring access to studios and studios and likeminded individuals as an exercise in networking as opposed to a practical learning experience. Mulholland (2019) states that "the nascent studio subjectifies the artist as an independent practitioner who answers to no one" (p. 14). He continues: "studio-based art education might be the exultant engine of neoliberalism, an instrumental form of self-becoming" (p.30). Self-directed and self-motivated and with little guidance from lecturers, art school graduates are thrust into a marketised, individualistic mode of being. Biesta (2015) attests that we "go to school, not to get what we already know that we want, but because we want to receive an education. Here, we would expect teachers… to move [students] beyond what they already know that they want" (p. 82). A defence that the art school might present in the face of criticism regarding the lack of clarity in its teaching could be that "If art is taught, no-one knows how, and in any case it cannot - should not - be reduced to a doctrine" (Malik, 2011), a concept that German curator, Waldvogel (2006), criticises as an excuse for professors to "age quietly doing unremarkable service whilst watching their salaries increase" (p.2). The complex relationship and expectation of teaching and learning; teacher and learner, is described by Biesta (2015) as a balance of accountability and achievement. He believes that the idea that teaching is the cause of learning is a misunderstanding, placing

> entire responsibility for the achievements of students on the shoulders of the teacher, suggesting that students are merely willing objects of intervention, rather than thinking and acting subjects who carry responsibility for their part of the educational process (p.231).

A 2011-12 equality report from the Glasgow School of Art, the period during which I attended the institution, shows that "student acceptances are concentrated in the 18-21 age groups." With most students applying to higher art education immediately after leaving the rigidity of the UK's schooling system, they are expectant of a pedagogical experience where they are taught practical knowledge and skills that are applicable to the professional field they hope to work in upon graduation. Students, as I did, expect their highly esteemed tutors and lecturers to impart wisdom that will help to develop their creative and professional practices. What they receive is, instead, a conflict of educational styles; a hybrid of pedagogy, andragogy and paragogy. This hybrid is, essentially, an identity crisis arising from its inconsistent motivations; the desire to produce quantifiably successful students, the desire to operate as a successful business, and the desire to deliver an innovative student experience.

Education and economics are joined together into one experience that aims at the professionalisation of the art student - and the faculty benefit of being able to deliver success stories as the immediate result of their educational efforts… What is reproduced is not so much intellectual information deposited into students (as it is the case with the banking method) or artistic styles (as it is the case of the master-apprentice model), but a scripted model of what artistic practice is (Ault & Beck, 2006, p. 5).

At eighteen, I had no concept of who I was as a person, or an artist, but was expected to act as if I was already of a professional standard. The Glasgow School of Art emphasises independent learning and student autonomy, considering this to be what separates their educational model from other higher education institutions. As with other formal art education institutions, once enrolled, students are told "'you are an artist', while the university and monotechnic quietly intone 'you may make a contribution to your discipline'" (Mulholland, 2019, p. 26). The reasons for why this is problematic are threefold. First, it gives students a false sense of security and enforces a sense of entitlement that results from inflated egotism. Before students have even begun their studies, they attach the reputation that accompanies prestigious art schools to their identities and believe themselves to be worthy of the exalted insignia of

Fig.13

'Artist.' Criticisms on their work are received as criticisms of themselves. Secondly, this diminishes the responsibility of the lecturer. With emphasis on student capability and independent learning, the lecturer's role is less about teaching and more about guiding or supporting. This andragogical approach is confusing for the young student who, coming directly from a school or college environment, expects a pedagogical experience of knowledge transference. Finally, this reduction in lecturer-led learning results in a paragogical studio environment that "supports distributed, nonlinear projects,

Fig.14

learning networks wherein participants pursue different things asynchronously" (Mulholland, 2019, p. 114).

The shared environment of the studio is emphatically proclaimed by the art school as an essential network; a cohort of individuals that will shape and define both prospective career paths and social circles. It is true that art schools generate lasting, valuable relationships; relationships formed and bonded through mutual but specific interests, experiences and values. The vast majority of my enduring friendships are those made at art school. Still, the studio and its accompanying culture can be problematic. In the art school studio environment, where students learn more through both peer-led and independent learning than via the instruction of a lecturer, the responsibility for their achievements and failures lies entirely on themselves. This unconventional approach is legitimised in art education through the conduction of regular assessment and grading; practices that are indicative of educational coding that directly contradicts the belief that "art is unteachable and unlearnable: it is a quality within artists themselves, and all you can do to enable them to make better art is expose them to other artists, be they more senior or in a peer group" (Malik, 2011). Student success is dependent on existing experience, understanding and maturity. This is most apparent in an integral but emotionally and creatively demanding component of art school education: the crit.

The crit… functions as a stage upon which artistic ID is socially improvised. In crits, artistic identity is therefore co-constructed rather than self-constructed. To its most seasoned players, the unscripted performative learning of the crit reveals and probes the extent to which artistic identity has been honed and matured through sustained practice. Unpractised players, it might be argued, rely on scripts; only mature artistic learning manifests a convincing improvised performance. (Mulholland, 2019, p. 32)

Contemporary art researcher, Mulholland (2019), discusses the crit as a site of transformative learning as defined by American sociologist and professor of Adult and Continuing Education, Mezirow (1997). Mezirow states that transformative learning occurs when an adult dissects and rethinks deep rooted and habitual "frames of reference" (p. 5), critically reflecting "the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based" (p.7). Whilst, as a paragogical method that emphasises the importance of dialogue and the social in the process of learning, thus deflating the sense of individualism that can surreptitiously infiltrate the art school studio, it also relies on the cognitive and directive abilities of its participants, a flaw that is characterised by the palpable silence that so often endures when members of a group are asked to contribute constructively regarding the work of a peer.

Visual Communication lecturer at Kingston University, Henrietta Beadle, describes the crit as a "chance to use 10 amazing heads rather than just one. Your studio should be a safe and valued community, where you feel you can test, take risks and get things wrong" (ItsNiceThat, 2017, para.2). She believes that focus should rarely be placed on the insight of tutors and, instead, be directed towards peers. It is an opportunity to strengthen independence, critical thought and interrelational dynamics; an opportunity that is largely omitted from traditional, "banking" (Freire, 2017) forms of educational practice. However, with a less than co-operative body of students, a leading lecturer can feel a need to intervene and steer the discussion- something that happened regularly in the crits I experienced throughout art school, where students were afraid to provide negative feedback for fear of offending, or too shy to make themselves heard. With an authority figure leading conversation, the critiques they provide, however harsh, can be viewed by the student body as the most valid, and the ones that are taken on board the most. It is difficult to accept the positive input of peers when a lecturer is providing negative feedback. Crits are stressful. They involve justifying your work and your process; a deeply personal, interrogating experience which can often be drawn out over the course of a day and after an intense build-up of anxiety and pressure. "Everyone involved is only human, so tempers can fray, minds can be distracted, and things can go awry" (ItsNiceThat, 2017, para.12). A bad crit, or a succession of several bad crits, can have devastating consequences. In a text outlining the benefits and risks of crits, artist Kurt Ralske states:

> While the crit is designed to be helpful to students, it can backfire... Negative comments from callous critics can cause enormous damage to a student's confidence, crippling the student's relation to her artmaking. The student's natural, comfortable creative play is destroyed, and the student is set on a path of unproductive self-doubt. (Ralske, 2011, para.13)

In the concluding crit of my third year of art school, just months away from entering my fourth and final year, my lecturer held my work in between two fingers, looked me in the eye and promptly dropped it to the floor, declaring, to the group: "This is shit." In terms of pedagogy, as a lecturer facilitating a student's progress, this feedback is useless. In terms of andragogy, as one adult talking to another, it directly infringes the principles

Fig.15

of teaching as outlined by adult educator, Knowles (1971):

> • The teacher helps the learners diagnose the gap between their aspirations and their present level of performance
> • The teacher accepts the learners as persons of worth and respects their feelings and ideas
> • The teacher seeks to build relationships of mutual trust and helpfulness among the learners by encouraging cooperative activities and refraining from inducing competitiveness and judgmentalness (p. 57).

It is well-reported that educational staff are overworked and expected to undertake responsibilities related to student wellbeing that are not within their job descriptions (McLeod, 2017). Regardless, a standard of respect and care is essential. Professor of Philosophy of Education, Yusef Waghid, discusses the enactment of justice and care in African educational reforms. He writes: "an ubuntu ethic of care prioritises the recognition that all are equal and that no person can or should ever undermine or disrespect someone else's right of belonging to humanity" (2019, p. 90). This ethic of care is something that we come to expect as standard in educational contexts but, perhaps, something we do not expect from men. The lecturer who denounced my work as "shit" was male, white and middle-aged; a demographic that is loaded with entitlement, and lacking in care. His criticisms were painful because he gave them so flippantly, without regard, and were not supported by constructive guidance that would enable me to progress and learn from the mistakes I had made. They weren't just harsh, they were personal.

Fig.16

2.3 The 'unforgiving ordeal' of art school and its consequences for mental wellbeing

In my first year of art school I barely ate or slept. Visibly unwell, I nosedived into depression and disordered eating as a result of the stress of being plucked from the countryside and plunged into the city, like a live lobster in a boiling pot. Yet, there was an expectation to hold it together; keep going, be an adult. In 2009, psychologist, Kitzrow stated that within the past ten years, there had been an upward shift in the number of students seeking help from counselling and welfare services. Students presented symptoms correlating with severe psychiatric disorders
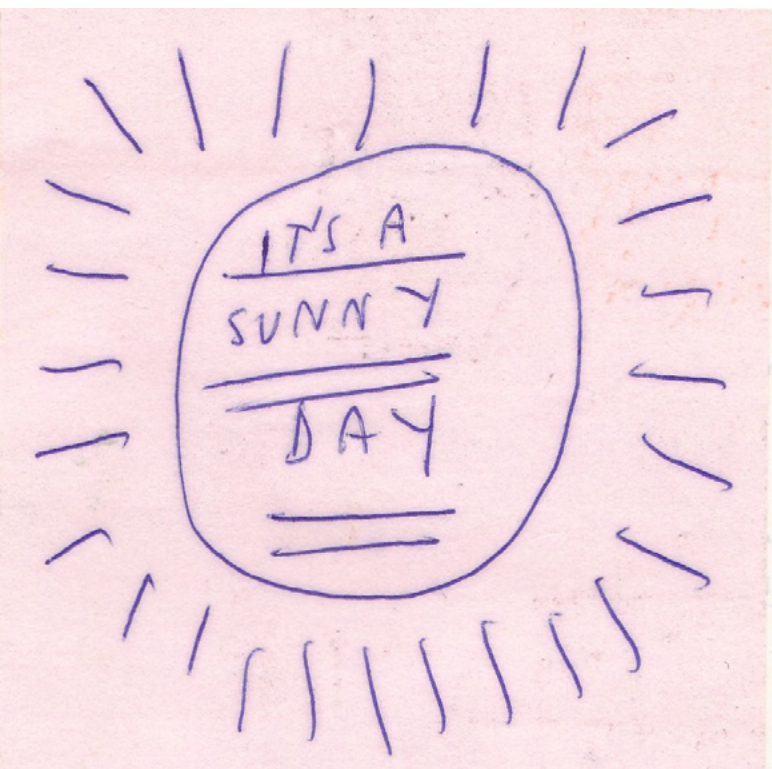
including suicidality, substance abuse, eating disorders and debilitating anxiety and depression (pp.647-648). At my worst, I attended the Glasgow School of Art's counselling service with little success. Handed a sheet of gridded A4 paper and told to "chart my feelings", it felt like I was, to the counsellor, just another number, another inconvenience. After just three sessions, I gave up. It is of no surprise to me that now, in 2020, the rise in student mental health crises is showing no sign of slowing. Journalist, Shackle (2019), wrote in an article for The Guardian:

> British universities are experiencing a surge in student anxiety, mental breakdowns and depression. There has been a sharp rise in students dropping out – of the 2015 intake, 26,000 left in their first year, an increase for the third year running – and an alarming number of suicides. In the 12 months ending July 2017, the rate of suicide for university students in England and Wales was 4.7 deaths per 100,000 students, which equates to 95 suicides or about one death every four days. (para.3)

Young people who fall into the Millennial bracket are frequently berated for their supposed narcissism and entitlement. Unkindly deemed the "Snowflake Generation" by the press, British students are criticised for complaining about workloads, the pressure of deadlines, and demanding an improvement in counselling services (Shackle, 2019). In Kids These Days: The Making of Millennials, journalist and critic, Malcolm Harris, defends young people, identifying the uncertainty of future prospects as a contributor to the lack of control that so many feel, working harder than their parents' generation yet being worse off, unable to find stable employment or own a property, forced into a perpetual cycle of short-term, poorly-paid jobs, and

every day you drift further from yourself

Fig.17

rented housing. Many students are faced with not only the pressures of studying, but also a necessity to sustain employment alongside their coursework. However, students of the art school face these same pressures and uncertainties compounded with a relentless interrogation of the self; a continual
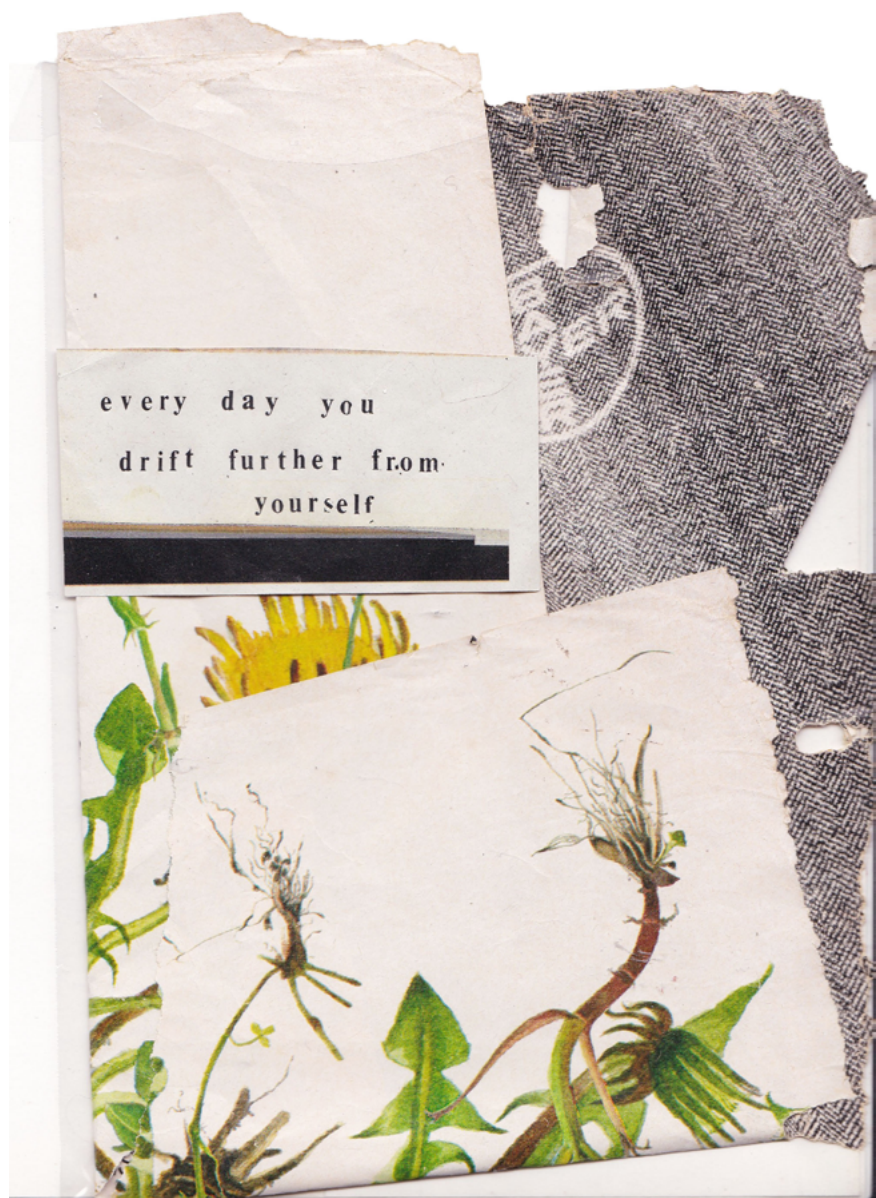
justification of their creative choices which are synonymous with their identity as both an individual and an artist.

In 2017, cultural critic, writer and professor based in the department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, Mark Fisher, committed suicide, declaring he felt "good for nothing" (Berardi, 2017). Fisher lived his entire life with depression, but openly acknowledged that in addition to an imbalance in his brain chemistry, his illness was exacerbated by a "social affliction," a collective depression fuelled by "capitalist realism... a widespread sense of resignation over the foregone conclusion that neoliberal capitalism is the only game in town" (Uetricht, 2019, para.3). He allegorised neoliberalism as a "shambling zombie" (Fisher, 2013), relentlessly infecting the population with its insidious toxicity. As philosopher, Berardi (2017), states, "We are hundreds of millions who, like him, are forced to feel good for nothing because we cannot comply with the competitive demands in exchange for which our identity is socially certified" (para.6). The neoliberal model of marketised education within the art school is undoubtedly a significant contributor to the mental-ill health of its students. It enforces the notion that nothing is ever quite good enough, that someone is always better, that you could always work harder; an entrepreneurial subjectivity that:

Fig.18

> elicits the self as a subject to be known and talked about, both by oneself and others involved... The entrepreneurial discourse does not simply describe the person but helps to create individuals, not only as objects but also as subjects, due to the way in which they can also influence the individual's sense of self (Siivonen & Brunila, 2014, p. 162).

When creative practice and identity become blurred as artistic outputs are assessed and graded as personal criticisms, it becomes difficult to separate studio work from everyday life, and easy to fall into negative cycles of self-doubt. Goldsmiths lecturer William Davies declares: "a growing proportion [of students] just seem terrified of failure and experience the whole process of learning and assessment as an unforgiving ordeal that offers no room for creativity or mistakes" (in Shackle, 2019, para.7). In *Playing and Reality* (1971/2005), paediatrician and psychoanalyst Winnicott emphasises the necessity

for creativity in life. He believes that "compliance" with societal and cultural norms, including the elimination of play and creative activity from adult life, can create a "sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters, and that life is not worth living" (p.87). Certainly, this was true of Fisher, and was true of myself throughout my art school education. I felt a deep and insatiable frustration; an unscratchable itch of suppressed creativity. What I was making never seemed to meet the impossible standard. I tried to bend my work to please one tutor, only to disappoint another. Whenever I tried to make work for the enjoyment of process or tactility, I was criticised for a lack of conceptual thinking. Everything had to be clever, and, as an eighteen-year-old with no life experience, maybe I wasn't clever enough.

This chapter has discussed the inconsistent environment of the art school studio and the subsequent, mounting responsibility on students to provide their own tuition in a paragogical space that relies upon peer-engagement and self-criticism. I highlight the problematic consequences of beginning an art school education at a young age and argue that the combination of environmental inconsistency and personal pressure significantly contributes to a decline in mental wellbeing. In the following chapter, I will discuss the toxic culture of nepotism and networking in the arts, and the inequalities that students face upon graduation.

Fig.19

Chapter 3: Insiders and Outsiders

This chapter examines the culture of networking and nepotism in the arts. Opening with recollections of the prevalence of alcohol abuse in art schools, I discuss the normalised consumption of alcohol at exhibition openings and the crossover between socialising and networking. In a near perpetual state of intoxication, the slippery concept of reality becomes distorted and hazy. The already blurred lines between studio and social life further disintegrates, becoming one and the same. Next, I address networking and nepotism. Without contacts, it is almost impossible to progress in the industry. Unfortunately, those within the inner circle frequently seek those who resemble themselves and reject those who don't, fortifying the invisible barrier that prevents an alternative perspective from entering and breaking the mould. In discussing how a non-Scottish student cohort (as discussed in chapter one) have increased access to internships and placements that are unaffordable and out of reach for working-class, Scottish students with few contacts in the industry, I reflect on my personal experiences of undertaking voluntary work and how, eventually, I began working with disability arts charity, Project Ability. I then explore the problematic concept of Insider and Outsider artists and consider the work of untrained artists as a form of truth telling that is lost in the marketised product of art institution graduates. Finally, as a tutor, I compare my relationship to the participants at Project Ability to my experience as a student in art school and analyse the transitional, transformative space between teacher and learner.

In my many conversations, alcohol emerged as the unspoken glue holding the art world together—an essential social bond for some, and a sticking point for others. Whatever your view, it became clear that drinking forms a tight-knit web that many struggle to disentangle themselves from. (Benson, 2019, para.2)

Fig.20

3.1 Networking, nepotism and neuroticism

Art school is incestuous; living, loving and learning are intertwined. Peers are flatmates, lovers, colleagues, networks. When your whole world centres around one institution, it becomes impossible to distinguish where your identity begins and art school ends. In my second year of art school, I entered into a relationship with a classmate. A decade my senior, he approached me as an equal, telling me age didn't matter, that I was special, that he'd never met anybody like me; a cliched routine of predatory one-liners that, to a nineteen-year-old, felt like the ultimate flattery. Being noticed wasn't something I was used to, and, with such a large age difference, the relationship quickly became manipulative and unbalanced. Living with mental health difficulties of his own and regularly self-medicating with alcohol, he told me I was the only thing that was keeping him alive; a pressure that manipulated my already fragile sense of self to appease his and sucked me into an untenable lifestyle. Spending a lot of his free time in local bars and pubs that were frequented by students and lecturers alike,

Fig.21

socialising and networking, to him, were indistinguishable as his drinking was justified by developing a client base. Deeply uncomfortable with the falsities that accompanied deliberate mingling, I avoided the situations that would, inevitably, either be acutely unhealthy or become about business. When we graduated, it wasn't long before he told me that I "no longer fitted into his lifestyle" and that he had moved on. He'd found someone who could further his career prospects; someone who was outgoing, someone who knew the right people. He was right- I didn't fit into his lifestyle, but I didn't want to, either.

The relationship between alcohol and depression are widely documented (Weitzman, 2004; Bernhardsdottir & Vilhjalmsson, 2013). Nevertheless, alcohol is considered to be an essential part of making it in the art world. At the Glasgow School of Art, it was a culture that was substantiated by exhibition openings. Exhibition openings were commonplace as a way to be seen, be heard, be noticed. Fuelled by the promise of free drinks- an opportunity to have a party at no (monetary) expense, student exhibitions were a regular occurrence. Commonly, the artwork was the least important component; an understudy to the main attraction: alcohol.

I found openings highly stressful; an obligation that necessitated two or three outfit changes, three or four glasses of wine, a false smile and a feigned confidence. I didn't fit in- I still don't. I avoid openings and networking events as much as possible; a tendency that has undoubtedly hindered my professional progress. As a 2018 Australian Vogue article entitled 'Street style inspiration for the art student in all of us' indicates, looking the part as an art student is just as important as talking the talk; you need to stand out, and the wrong outfit could cause you to be dismissed in an instant.

In my graduating year, the student body was divided. Each group had an archetype and a corresponding aesthetic; indicators of positionality that prevented cross-pollination and resulted in a pervasive hostility across the studio. There was a clear, but unspoken segregation between Scottish students, international students, and students who had transferred directly into second year from London colleges. The students from London each possessed an apparent confidence that was largely missing from the Scottish cohort. They were louder, more ambitious, and unafraid to speak their mind. It was a mindset that seemed to derive from the intensity of living and working in London; a learned state of survival and endurance that could be alienating to those who were accustomed to the slower pace of Glasgow and hadn't been submerged in the unsustainable lifestyle of the capital. I was intimidated by their self-assurance. They commanded the studio in a way that I, rightly or wrongly, construed as arrogance. I distanced myself from them, constructing a close and loyal friendship group that primarily comprised of people similar to me; Scottish, hard-working, but quiet and reticent. While, as a group, we struggled both throughout our degree and upon graduation to be recognised or taken seriously, almost all of the students from London secured first class degrees and went on to obtain highly sought-after internships, placements and residencies.

Confidence and self-assurance are, in the creative industries, necessary personality traits. A lack of confidence or modesty is rarely seen as endearing; the market is ruthless and unforgiving. In a 2018 study investigating "the role of personal values as motivational antecedents for understanding higher education", Fearon et al (2018) study the link between confidence and career-decisiveness in higher education students, finding that traits of neuroticism and emotional difficulties were more likely to lead to difficulties in making career decisions and pursuing a specific path. Additionally, they highlight the importance of social capital in "exploiting" available opportunities:

Fig.22

From a theoretical perspective, social capital often implies exploiting the 'value' of social structures, or network relationships that facilitate instrumental actions, thus enabling opportunity benefits for an individual or a collective of participants. Social capital can comprise actual and potential resources embedded within social network(s), or from individuals within, and across networks. (Fearon et al., 2018, pp. 272-273)

3.2 Outside in

The advice of art school's career service was to volunteer as much as possible; a rite of passage that seemed to be designed for the privileged to traverse with ease and exclude those who didn't fit the mould. When the creative world is "dominated" by well-connected, middle-and-upper-class people (Benson, 2020b),

it is perhaps no coincidence that many of the students in my graduating year who obtained London-based internships had family in the industry, and the city. Most had the opportunity to reside in the city without the stressors of high living expenses, securing (often unpaid) placements that furthered their careers without suffering a devastating financial blow. Although Scottish students receive higher education for free, the creative opportunities that exist upon graduation are largely situated in Southern parts of the United Kingdom. As discussed in Chapter 1, the legislation that enables Scottish students to undertake fee-free education is flawed and does not guarantee a path to success.

Nepotism is an important part of the creative world, as shit as that is. It's partially dominated by middle- and upper-class people because they're all so well connected with one another and it's all so centralised around the capital (Metcalfe, in Wallace, 2020).

Blindly unaware of the systemic prejudices that existed in the voluntary sector, I believed that enough unpaid work would eventually lead to a change in fortune. Lost and without focus, I was clutching at every chance of finding my direction just as I had been in art school, trying desperately to discover, or recover, my purpose. Glasgow-based, disability arts charity, Project Ability, was different from other voluntary 'opportunities' that were advertised. Open plan, with tall windows reaching up to the ceiling and groups of large tables surrounded by joyful, laughing participants, it was a refreshing contrast to the studio environment I had grown accustomed to in art school. I initially signed up to a volunteering period of eight weeks. I stayed for a further eight weeks, then another, and another. Although I was volunteering for organisations across the city, it was the only place that I really looked forward to visiting, and rarely missed a session. Fridays quickly became the highlight of my week and, after a year of volunteering, I was offered a paid position within the organisation as a tutor; a position in which I have remained for four years. Project Ability changed my life.

The longer I spent in the organisation, the more I got to know the participants. I got to know them personally, learning about their families, homes, bereavements, hopes, achievements. I learned more through sitting down and listening to their stories than I did throughout the entirety of my art school education. I learned about artistic process; technique, material, tactility. But I also learned the value of diversity, the importance of autonomy, and the need for alternatives to formal, hegemonic educational spaces. The people I worked with were, to the art world, Outsiders, producing 'Outsider Art'- a term coined by Roger Cardinal in 1972 as an English-language expression for 'Art Brut'- but they seemed to know more than anyone I had ever met at art school. Their work was generated from internal stimuli as a process of "making sense" (Collins, 2014) rather than a method of visually translating their "inner worlds" for a viewer (Muri, 1999), a crucial difference which indicates a deflection of the ego; a rejection of self-interest or self-appraisal that fuels the individualism of the arts.

Many of Project Ability's participants have attended workshops for upwards of twenty years, forming close bonds and a secondary family amongst peers and tutors. Tutors support and guide according to participants' individual aspirations, providing materials and advice when needed, as opposed to dictating subject matter, material or process. As such, the studio environment differs greatly from that of within an art school; a true paragogical space that enforces the key principle that "peers are equal but different" (Corneli and Dandoff, in Mulholland, 2019, p.103). The intra-action (Stark, 2016) between tutor and participant thus creates a transformative and transitional pedagogical experience wherein both parties learn and evolve simultaneously and deconstruct the binaries of the inside/outside, self/other.

> We might begin to consider pedagogy as an address to a self who is in the process of withdrawing from that self, someone who is in a dissolve out of what she or he is just ceasing to be and into what she or he will already have become by the time she or he registers something has happened. In transitional space, this someone is in a deeply interfused encounter with and at the same time in a "differential emergence" from the materiality of the world. (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 34)

This "withdrawing" from myself was necessary in order to dissolve the blockages in my creative practice that resulted from four years of art school education. Being immersed in an environment wherein there was no hierarchy showed me that art education doesn't have to be based on ability or success determined by an authoritarian, structural body; it can be a shared experience of making that activates "an understanding of our growth in and with time" (Collins, 2014, p.230). It changed my outlook on art practice and art education, but it also changed my view of myself and my aspirations for the future. It took being immersed in a genuinely creative, safe, and non-judgemental environment for me to realise that, in art school, I had been an outsider. I was never good enough, loud enough, talented enough. When I graduated, I had no desire to draw. I had no desire to paint, take photographs, make collages. It was five years before the desire came back; a desire that was completely, wholly, ignited by Project Ability, and the faith that it had restored. There, I am an insider, and a part of a genuine community.

This chapter concludes my argument that the art school culture negatively impacts wellbeing and mental state by discussing the prevalence of networking, nepotism and unpaid work. I argue that voluntary roles obtained upon graduation generally benefit graduates who are in the privileged position of being able to work for free, and that positions rarely lead on to paid work in the industry. Finally, I address the role that a successful voluntary experience in a disability arts charity had in restoring my faith in the arts sector and my artistic practice, arguing that art school is inherently structured around the elite and the 'Insider' but that I felt more isolated and 'Outside' than ever. I thus question the terminology of these labels and attest that alternative approaches to art education are both nascent and valuable; the studio does not have to be a site of suffering. In the following discussion, I consolidate the preceding three chapters and dissect the processes involved in writing the dissertation.

Fig.23

Discussion

I began this study with an unclear vision of what I would uncover. Identity is complex and transitory, impossible to pin down and define at any one moment, but I knew that my sense of self had been irrefutably altered throughout my art school experience. I became unrecognisable to myself; I had no notion of who I was, what I was, or where I was headed. This study, then, was an opportunity to analyse what went wrong, and why my story was indicative of greater, systemic flaws. I wondered why, in a field that students enter because of passion, so many of us left feeling empty, and flattened. Although specific to my experience at the Glasgow School of Art, it holds relevance in the wider educational sphere, highlighting problems across higher creative educational practices.

With such personal motivations, an autoethnography was the most appropriate methodology, enabling me to delve deep into my experiences and critically analyse them in relation to existing literature and data. Autoethnography, by its nature, is not a linear process. For me, it consisted of a laborious process of writing and re-writing accounts of the four years I spent in art school education in different voices, from different angles. The majority of this writing was filtered from the final text but was systematically dissected to generate thematic data that then formed the bases of chapters. Doing this work - emotional work - was exhausting. But, like in the latter stages of therapy, there came a moment of clarity and calm that provided a clear path for the writing of the text.

My topic and specific research question, "How is personal and creative identity affected by studying at the Glasgow School of Art?" arose from this process of writing and reflecting. I noted that references to my personal and creative wellbeing were recurring regularly and, as a result, I felt it was important to include arts-based methods within the research process. The process of writing and visually making in parallel was important; one couldn't occur without the other, and the images were able to both literally and figuratively illustrate complex or sensitive recollections that I felt uncomfortable integrating into the primary text. Additionally, these visual vignettes invite the reader to feel as I felt, see as I saw; an immersive element that illustrates the universality of creativity, wellbeing and identity. With the support of poststructuralist theory, the format of this text differs from typical academic papers. It interrogates whether art and academia can live harmoniously; a question that is raised in the discussion of academic coding within art education. With art being so subjective and personal, formulaic grading is, arguably, insufficient and unsuitable, creating an unreachable and unsustainable standard of achievement.

Throughout, this unreachable and unsustainable standard is discussed in the context of the Glasgow School of Art. First, I argue that the institution is a status symbol, reserved for the few, not the many. With demanding entrance requirements and a limited number of spaces available for each programme, the art school positions itself as something to aspire to. I discuss the lack of diversity within the student population and, in spite of Scotland's free higher education policy, the distinct lack of Scottish students. The Glasgow School of Art enrols a disproportionate number of non-Scottish students; a third of whom are international and paying the highest amount of fees. The institution is becoming increasingly marketised at the cost of sacrificing the quality of experience, prioritising financial gain over the welfare of students.

Next, I examined how this marketisation has a direct impact on the art school studio. Industrialised in true capitalist form, the studio is no longer a safe place to experiment. Value is placed on product as opposed to process as tactile facilities are replaced with technology, matching the fast-paced market and instant gratification of digital platforms that we have all become accustomed to. The programme I enrolled in falsely advertises an array of facilities that, in reality, are largely inaccessible. For me, this inaccessibility was frustrating and disheartening, with a profoundly negative impact on my artistic process. Additionally, I critiqued the art school's promotion of independent learning, and attest that we, as students, attend at too young an age to be able to sufficiently navigate the demands of what is essentially a peer-led degree. These pressures compound to have a detrimental effect on the mental health of students. Developing serious depression and anxiety within a year of attending art school, I believe that the combination of moving to a city from a rural upbringing at a young age and desperately trying to meet the unmeetable demands of art school education, was what caused this.

Finally, I discussed the "aftermath" of art school; the insidious alcoholism that pervades art school culture, how inequality is sustained through nepotism and networking, and, finally, how I navigated the 'compulsory' voluntary sector to eventually find an opportunity that completely transformed my personal and creative outlook. I examined the apparent necessity for undertaking unpaid work and how the voluntary sector benefits individuals who have financial stability and contacts within the industry, reducing opportunity for others. I then discussed my experiences of voluntary work and how I faced consistent repudiation within the industry, consolidating the notion that the art market is constructed from Insiders and Outsiders. I concluded by describing my experience with a voluntary opportunity at disability arts charity, Project Ability, and examined this concept further in analysing what constitutes an Outsider in the arts. Project Ability not only altered my perspective of creative practices and art education but also transformed my perception of myself, opening my eyes to a new way of looking at

the world.

Written from the perspective of a white, Scottish, cisgender woman, further research inquiring into the experiences of students who do not sit within my personal demographic may be necessary in order to provide a broader picture that examines alternative viewpoints. Additionally, the current social and political climate, in an unprecedented state of instability caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, necessitates the need for alternatives to current educational practices and artistic platforms. With many students protesting about the lack of care they received in the fallout of the virus, it is clear that many of the issues that have existed in art institutions for decades have become unsustainable and urgent, immediate change needs to occur. More research assessing these shifts may highlight ways in which institutions can modify the structure that has, to date, typically operated in the favour of select groups and disadvantaged others. This text has merely scratched the surface of the issues surrounding formal arts education. Within the restrictions of this dissertation, a comparative study consulting data from alternative institutions and individuals has not been possible. A more rounded and substantial text may, therefore, be possible within a future PhD submission. Although writing this dissertation has been illuminating and, to some extent, therapeutic, the experiences of students outside of that of a white, cisgender woman remain to be considered.

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