

Paradox and Potential: Fine art employability and enterprise perspectives

The fine art curriculum is currently in flux in relation to the increasing focus on employability and enterprise within art and design institutions in the UK. The connection between the curriculum and enterprise and employability in the art school is under pressure from two fronts:

On the one hand the introduction of higher fees in the UK has focused the student (but also staff/the institution) on the need for students to be able to make a living after completing their studies, and preferably enter into a career. The 'creative industry', which in the UK is worth 71.4 billion (2014), has an ongoing need for well-qualified enterprising and employable graduates to feed this important and growing industry for the UK economy.

On the other hand there is within contemporary art practice an increased resistance towards current models of labour, in particular the idea of the ever-flexible portfolio worker, resilient and ideally adapted to an uncertain future, i.e. an artist. Artists are notoriously underpaid and undervalued for their work and artist practices that are dematerialized or socially engaged and do not produce carefully crafted objects, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Increasingly artists do not want to be 'part of the problem', as the financial precarity facing our graduates is reflected in increasing ecological and economic precarity where capitalism can be seen to be destroying our environment as well as upholding social injustice and global exploitation.

Fine Art education, like most Higher Education (HE) in art and design is a process where the curriculum builds on past traditions but provides for future practitioners. The context of this discussion around employability and enterprise is complex, as it moves across governmental, societal, historical and pedagogic domains, but most specifically it relates to both art practice and the teaching of art.

The presentation will include a historical context for the interrelationship between fine art curriculum models and conceptions of enterprise and employability. It will also explore the very words 'enterprise' and 'employability', as it may be useful to see these in relation to a few of the key words and concepts in the wider Higher education enterprise and employability literature.

The context for this presentation is thus multifarious and complex but it seems pertinent to query if art schools should both prepare Fine Art graduates for a successful career in the arts to make them entrepreneurial and employable, whilst also providing them with the critical tools to fundamentally question their place within a (neo capitalist) system (which some regard as a financially and environmentally unsustainable order). Perhaps by raising questions like these, we might begin to articulate some of the compounding factors facing Fine Art Education, particularly in terms of preparing students for the future. The presentation will thus address the responsibility of a fine art course towards preparing students for different models and understandings of being in the world, succeeding in the world and changing the world.