

ART EDUCATION AND RADICAL IMAGINATION

Iain Biggs

Introduction

I want to address the issue of a radical conception of imagination, arguing that it should have a central place in fine art education. However, I see imagination as central not only to art, but to all educational, social and political concerns. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur has, for example, stated that: 'It is no extravagance to formulate the problem of the future of Europe in terms of imagination'.¹ Without imagination the qualities of conscience, empathy, responsibility, and accountability are not possible; and so a just and sustainable social democracy becomes unthinkable. To argue for imagination as central, I need to refer to issues which may not seem immediately relevant to the current specifics of fine art education. I have tried, however, to ground my argument as far as possible in concrete and particular concerns.

The educational debate

In 1993 Nick de Ville, Head of Visual Arts at Goldsmiths, and Stephen Foster, Director of the John Hansard Gallery, organised a conference called 'The Artist and the Academy: European Perspectives on Today's Fine Art Education'. Five speakers presented papers. These were Nick de Ville himself, the critic and educator Thierry de Duve, Colin Cina from the London Institute of Art and Design, Kasper König from the State Academy of Fine Art in Frankfurt, and myself. The underlying argument presented by these papers, very much simplified, can be seen as follows.

Thierry de Duve demonstrated that the models on which orthodox fine art education is currently based are now educationally sterile. These models include both the traditional model of the academy, based on talent, and a postmodern model, based on deconstructive suspicion. He concluded that we can only reform the current orthodoxy by patiently reconstituting a community of good artists who love art, who respect each other and their students, and who take their task as transmitters seriously. Colin Cina's paper then explained why it is so difficult to undertake this kind of reconstruction. He set out the very considerable operational, philosophical and ethical problems now facing fine art education, within a profoundly unsympathetic managerial culture, one which I shall refer to as that of 'the new establishment'. This culture has now been imposed on education as a whole, and is dedicated to a set of performative criteria that are particularly hostile to current forms of liberal fine art education.

Nick de Ville analysed some of the conceptual problems relating to interdisciplinary practice, demonstrating, among other things, how supposedly 'radical' attacks on traditional disciplines indirectly provide the arguments the current educational politics in Britain need. These attacks actually justify dismantling the infrastructure on which fine art education depends, rendering it increasingly vulnerable to attack on economic grounds. Kasper König's paper demonstrated how the constitution of the Academy at Frankfurt allows it to avoid some of the problems facing British fine art education, while making it very clear that these safeguards are not exportable.

My own paper set out to do three things. I argued for an ethical understanding of the creative tensions within art education, a position derived from writings on Critical Regionalism in architecture. I argued that we need to counter the growing emphasis on a market driven professionalism, using an educational approach that is explicit about art's transformative educational possibilities at both personal and social levels. I also argued that we need a new, expanded model of the Art Academy, one based on greater concern for a 'democracy of experience'. The conference diagnosed some very real problems, but appeared to offer no real way forward. Katy Macleod, a lecturer at Exeter School of Art deeply committed to contextualised art practice, quickly identified that its failure was written into the agenda. She pointed out that issues of identity, authorship and gender - all of which have profound educational implications - were hardly addressed. These issues can be seen as part of a politics of identity which is now, at best, grounded in a consideration of post-modern ethics. Such ethics reconfigure the relationship between both an individual self and community, and between tradition and utopia. In short, they provide a basis for the radical agenda which 'The Artist and the Academy' failed to identify as a practical programme.

In 1994 the conference papers appeared as a book.² In the introduction, the editors argue that fine art education is in tension between two extreme 'models'. At one extreme there is the model of the pure 'Transgressive Academy' - aiming to produce fully autonomous 'professional artists' who have a solipsistic relationship to social reality but make 'new' art products. At the other extreme there is the model of the pure 'Therapeutic Academy', which produces 'socially aware individuals' who are not

'professional' in their approach to art. The editors argue that professional practice in the transgressive model is 'collusive with the status quo, or else anarchistic or nihilistic', and is rooted in competition and extreme individualism. They argue that the therapeutic model, on the other hand, is potentially repressive, non-competitive, and produces an outdated form of socialist intervention. I see this tension - between either education for a professional individualism or for a non-professional social self - as a false polarisation. The real tension is, in my view, between different interpretations of educational values. Paulo Freire differentiates these as follows. One is 'the banking concept of education', where knowledge is seen as 'a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing'. The other is 'problem-posing education' - one which I understand to exist when teacher and student alike develop powers of critical solicitude towards the way they exist in the world in which, and with which, they find themselves.³ I believe imagination is central to an understanding of 'problem-posing' art education, and that we need to begin any reconsideration of imagination with a clear view of the political context of contemporary cultural practices.

A political context for art education

In Britain there is still a strong residual identification of conservative and radical culture with traditional political categories - for example, in terms of assumptions about the Conservative and Labour parties. This now makes less and less sense. Today, many people, including many artists and educators, have simply accepted the consumerist world of desires and pleasures managed by the 'paper entrepreneurs' of the new establishment. The activities of Charles Saatchi give some indication of the politics of this consumerist world.

Charles Saatchi has a dual role in British culture. He is an influential patron/dealer, but also the semi-official media guru to the official arm of popular consumer capitalism. Saatchi played a key role in the radical transformation of a paternalistic Tory party that still wanted to pretend that 'fair play' could restrain what Edward Heath called 'the unacceptable face of capitalism'. He was also central to the creation of Margaret Thatcher as a leader of the New Right, and of Britain's particular brand of deregulated, popular, consumer capitalism. Under New Labour, Saatchi now has the contract for advertising the Millennium Dome. No wonder the art critic Matthew Collings has written of Saatchi that he seems to be in charge of everything, not only politics and art - or anti-politics and anti-art - but the future as well. The new establishment, of which Saatchi is an influential member, knows that real power now extends way beyond national politics. Consequently, it engages in shaping and controlling 'metasystems' of information, systems on which international markets and multi-national business corporations depend. Its politics is based on consumption, not class. Consumption is not, of course, just a matter of the literal satisfaction of desires. It is about the production, distribution, desiring, obtaining and using, of symbolic goods - symbolic goods which become a means of constructing identity and defining relations. Consequently, issues of identity are now central to various struggles to control the social imagination. The new establishment understands that global advertising is now the dominant cultural form shaping social imagination. Through advertising, it aims to convince consumers that they are active agents because they make consumer choices - choices which are, in actuality, already largely predetermined by producers for their own gain.

The attitude of the new establishment is frankly frightening. The implicit response to the fact that the present deprivation of the earth's resources will result in the ending of human life in the not too distant future is clearly 'so what?'. It is our capacity for imaginative empathy with others, including others as yet unborn, that allows us to experience this statement as representing a profoundly unethical mentality. Our empathy, and the ethical judgement it makes possible, derives from what Richard Kearney calls the ethical imagination. There is a major difficulty in getting people in art education to accept that this form of imagination is genuinely radical. They tend to forget that genuine imagination involves both innovation and traditions - that traditions are the models against which we work, but also in terms of which we partially define ourselves. Any theory of imagination which claims to be emancipatory must, in consequence, unite our utopian expectations with our historical experience. The difficulty occurs because a genuinely emancipatory imagination requires that we reject consumerist notions of progress. Consumerist notions of progress divorce themselves from any critical solicitude towards the particular inherited narratives we call social memory or tradition. Consumerist notions of progress are, in consequence, ultimately pathologically devoid of meaning because, as Herbert Marcuse points out, all authentic utopias are grounded in recollection. Yet many people in the culture industry simply cannot grasp that cultural radicalism - understood as a responsive, emancipatory praxis - has nothing to do with 'progress' as the production of 'the New'. To be more specific, many artists believe that what is 'new', different, or presented through innovative technology, is, by definition, 'radical', and so for that reason 'important'. This is simply a way of falsely dignifying novelty, one which relieves the artist of the obligation to ask how, and in what contexts, his or her supposed 'radicalism' might actually be emancipatory.

Walter Benjamin believed that we need a radical interruption of the 'revolutionary' uses to which technology is put under capitalism. This interruption required a radical return to the past in order to ground utopia in recollection. Unless this was done, he argued, the future of mankind itself would be threatened. This view - that we need to oppose and redirect the 'progressive' revolution that Marx understood as central to capitalism - is now shared by a whole spectrum of thinking. This extends from Democratic Socialism and Environmentalism to ethically-oriented groups like The Real World Coalition. This spectrum of thinking understands that it is by reanimating alternative narratives, based on values inherent in alternative histories and memories to those validated by the new establishment, that we can resist that establishment. I find an example of this resistance in the films of the late Derrick Jarman. A friend observed of Jarman that: 'he was by his own admittance a conservative at heart whose work can be understood as a response to what he saw as cultural vandalism and amnesia.'⁴ Jarman's 'conservatism' must, of course, be understood in the sense of conservation - of acknowledging that, in order to become aware of ourselves, we always need to reappropriate the past. Radical reappropriation of this kind is what prevents those in power from using, for example, the heritage industry or 'Cool Britannia' as an uncritical vindication or glorification of their own authority.

Orthodox art education is now increasingly unable to resist the cultural vandalism and amnesia of the new establishment. For the most part it remains wedded to a concept of an assumedly 'progressive' art which has become increasingly meaningless, often pathologically so. Today much supposedly 'progressive' culture is, if anything, radical only in the sense of being openly subservient to the 'revolution' of consumerist culture - a culture which depends on the constant production of novelty for its very existence. As a result, the values which increasingly drive art education become those which sustain an international consumerist culture. However, good educational practice can still counter this through real concern for the student's self-understanding, because genuine self-understanding is always an understanding of our relatedness to others, and so finally to questions about the common good in a just society. Unfortunately, the highly idiosyncratic nature of much fine art work, and the privileging of professional or research status over reflexive educational practice (at least here in Britain), tends to marginalise good educational practice. This is perhaps inevitable in a liberal fine art education which still tends to see its students as empty depositories waiting to be filled by the deposits of the tutor.

The clear exception to this occurs where a teaching team works on the basis of an explicit commitment to a common striving towards a conscious awareness of both personal and social realities. Teaching art as a professional activity is then subject to this reflexive educational practice, one that critically examines rationales for good art practice. This educational reflexivity keeps the teaching team open to critical dialogues with both the students and other perspectives and bodies of knowledge. It also ensures that critical reflection on the context of practice becomes a central part of the curriculum. This has important implications. As Ricoeur reminds us, democracy is not a political system without conflicts, but a system in which conflicts are open and negotiable in accordance with recognised rules of arbitration. Educational experience in a genuine social democracy must, if it wishes to educate people who are both professional artists and responsible social actors, make the 'rules of arbitration' involved in evaluation transparent to all involved.

Put another way, a good teaching team sends clear signals to potential students. It declares: 'These are the values on which the award bases its teaching. This is how dialogue about these explicit values informs our assessment of art practice, ensuring that it relates to questions of self-knowledge, our relations with others, and to the social good. These are the particular imaginative and critical concerns and arguments which, as a result, we are engaged with as artists/educators. If you want to engage with these kinds of concerns, in this explicit context of understanding, please study with us'. I am convinced that such 'explicit' awards now offer the only serious future for fine art as a credible discipline within higher education.

My reasons are as follows. Awards based on liberal pluralism inevitably create a considerable tension about the values which underpin assessment, particularly as staff contact is reduced and genuine dialogue becomes almost impossible to sustain. This tension becomes chronic when trust in the underlying educational rationale is weakened through over-emphasis on staff's professional artistic, rather than educational, status. Both staff and students quickly pick up on this diminishing sense of commitment to educational values. Staff then find it necessary to define themselves as professional artists/researchers, rather than as artists/educators engaged in a shared process of transformation. Consequently, they tend to gravitate to the most visible or talked about art available, in order to find a sense of demonstrable authority - regardless of that work's relation to educational concerns. As the exhibition 'Sensation' amply demonstrated, such high-profile art (whatever its intrinsic qualities) is, inevitably, increasingly framed by the preoccupations of patrons like Charles Saatchi.

Saatchi's interest in art is guided by his desire to build up the creative reputation of his public relations agency. He has provided an extraordinary example of how to marry advanced art with a perception of business creativity. This perception of business

creativity is, in cultural terms, an exploitation of the poetic imagination and, translated into the forms of advertising media in their broadest sense, becomes the engine that drives consumerist mass culture.

The increasingly meaningless 'progressivism' of much fine art education, which is the outcome of this process, stems from a teaching model that closely resembles Nick de Ville's Academy of Transgression. As his own analysis implies, this model teaches students to collude with the values of the new establishment, or else encourages them to adopt anarchistic or nihilistic attitudes. Both alternatives ultimately use a particular form of professionalisation which alienates students from art as an imaginative act of both personal and social transformation.

Individual anarchic or nihilistic forms of radicalism might seem to offer an alternative to the new status quo but, in our culture, are highly unlikely to do so. Such attitudes are based on a libertarian belief in the artist's unquestionable right, indeed necessity, to transgress existing cultural norms. In a consumer culture, such libertarian activity becomes a socially adaptive form of 'heroic' individualism. This is then reabsorbed by consumerist mass culture to create celebrity role models for new specialist markets - markets designed to create and capitalise on recycled or newly manufactured, and supposedly transgressive, consumer lifestyles. Whatever the original intent, an anarchic or nihilistic cultural libertarianism ends up feeding the ruthless processing of desire on which a society of consumption depends. As an alternative to the Academy of Transgression, I am suggesting an education based on a radical imagination, one which informs genuine dialogue and the 'profound love for the world and for people' which Freire believes to be inseparable from it. I will now give a brief account of my reasons for seeing this as central to art education.

A radical imagination

Building on the work of Ricoeur, Richard Kearney argues that the cultivation of the 'ethical imagination' is fundamental to any just society. It makes possible our ability to allow 'the other' its own existence - not for my sake, nor because it conforms to my scheme of things, but for its own sake. This ethical form of imagination is 'post-secular' - going beyond the secularism within modernity which seeks an absolute separation between political, psychological, ethical, aesthetic and spiritual understandings. (It is thus opposed to any 'absolute' autonomy for art). In modernist conceptions of professionalism, each isolated understanding becomes the intellectual property of a self-regulating professional elite. As a result, our late-modernist society is now plagued by social psychosis derived from, for example, a faceless bureaucracy without ethics, a psychological orthodoxy devoid of aesthetic and political understanding, and an anti-social, fundamentalist spirituality. Any art education concerned with a post-secular imagination must, for these reasons, take its orientation from the ethics I have outlined. This post-secular imagination is radical both for the way in which its ethics underpin a genuinely emancipatory politics and because, as Eve Tavor Bannet suggests, it involves us in a continuous revolution, one 'that is never achieved once and for all', because 'it has to return again and again, at each moment, in each singular situation where singular people interact'.⁵ In terms of art education, a radical imagination asks both staff and students to constantly ground the poetic imagination - that is, our ability to discover the possible in the actual, the other in the same, and the new in the old - with a 'testimonial imagination'. This testimonial imagination links the free play of poetic imagination to an empathy with others which preserves their otherness, but is grounded by the actuality of our own experience. Testimonial imagination must balance poetic imagination, drawing on a capacity in each of us to bear witness to 'exemplary narratives' within specific cultural memories and histories.

Art as the enactment of an answerable understanding or testimonial imagination is one means of shattering the irreversibility of time by reconfiguring the past - not the past as a record of all that has previously happened, but as seen in terms of the meanings it has for us today. Without such a shattering of our history in Europe, saturated as it is with memories of terror, degradation and injustice, our society will remain haunted by images and narratives based on mutual hatred, denial, or the desire for revenge. Cultural images and narratives, from which groups build a sense of identity, cannot be reinterpreted until groups of people can begin to imagine the histories, values and sufferings of others before re-examining their own situation. This requires the deployment of imaginative empathy in order to enact what George Steiner calls an 'answerable understanding'.⁶ This understanding is then able to mediate imaginatively between testimonial and utopian elements within a particular culture, thus enabling its members to re-envision their histories in other terms, and on the basis of other values.

Without the ethical and testimonial elements in imagination as a whole, the poetic element tends towards either ungrounded personal fantasy or exploitation by instrumental concerns. In art education, we learn to exercise testimonial imagination by developing a 'critical solicitude' towards vital traditions in their historical context. Without this critical solicitude towards the past, poetic imagination has no basis for judgement in human experience. Similarly, we learn to exercise ethical imagination through reflection which requires us to think with and for others. These three elements together - the ethical, poetic and testimonial -

constitute what I have called the radical imagination.⁷

What currently prevents orthodox art education from working with radical imagination, other than the very serious institutional constraints imposed on it, are basic assumptions about the identity of the artist - assumptions unthinkingly derived from Western metaphysics. A recent analysis of 'postmodern' art practice has argued that the literalism and 'radical individualism' of many contemporary artists' work displays the deeply anachronistic nature of its underlying assumptions about self - traditional Judaeo-Christian metaphysics in the guise of avant-garde theory. Orthodox fine art education continues to insist on the priority of a self-contained, heroic, ultimately 'protestant' (in the sense of 'protesting'), individualism. By doing so it denies the fact that we can only properly define a self in terms which include, and respect, its multiple attachments, connections and relationships with others. This professionalised denial can ultimately deprive art education of validity as an educational practice appropriate to a social democracy.

To go beyond this anachronistic understanding of self we need a clear basis for educational work - one irreducible to categories that professionalise the separateness of one self from another. This basis has been described by various contemporary thinkers as solicitude, love, compassion, altruism or care. These are not, of course, terms we currently associate with fine art education. They are, however, names for a quality central to radical imagining.

To re-orient fine art education towards radical imagination requires, as the Community Arts Movement has long understood, a rethinking of self as inseparable from its attachments, relationships and connections to plural communities, actual or remembered. This rethinking is now very urgent indeed. The narratives and images which once informed the social imagination of the West - the symbolic discourses which served to guide and motivate its citizens, as beings mutually responsible for the vitality of community - have been steadily undermined by the revolutionary modernity of the last one hundred and forty years. The instrumental use of poetic imagination by a global consumer culture cannot modify or transform the decaying and deconstructed 'deep' narratives of our social imagination, it can only parody them. The health of such narratives is, however, vital. They constitute the means by which a society explains itself, to itself, as a lived community. A healthy society needs vigorous critique, but this in itself cannot nurture the social imagination. As both Thierry de Duve and Richard Kearney suggest, the misuse of strands within 'postmodern' thinking by art education - from Bataille and Foucault to Lyotard and Derrida - has frequently lead to a cultural aesthetic of either 'deliberate irresponsibility' or indecisive 'indifference'. Both positions are, at best, of strictly limited use. An education based on radical imagination, however, could engage in the task of constructing new, responsive, conceptions of both self and community.

Practical implications

Assuming that my argument is reasonable, what are its practical implications? One is that we have to critique the abuse of poetic imagination, particularly where it is made subservient to the cult of the new in consumer culture. Another is that we now need a form of historical and theoretical study based on critical solicitude, rather than the privileging of a purely deconstructive thinking. All fine art teaching, but particularly that of historical and theoretical material, needs to be firmly based in an understanding of the practical function of the testimonial imagination within art practice. Teaching should enable students to build on possibilities inherent in the particular memories and histories that inform their lives as social agents within communities - not simply as professionally competitive individuals within a specific cultural discourse. This means abandoning what remains of an essentially modernist attitude which sees students as slates to be wiped clean, prior to being reinscribed with the 'correct' attitudes of a staff body whose professional expertise is assumed to enable them to 'access' the future. This might also suggest that staff should not accept students until they are mature enough to make informed choices about the values embodied by an award.

Perhaps the central question for a genuinely radical art education should now be: 'How can we support ourselves by grounding our utopian poetic imagining in "memories with a new shape"?' Only critical solicitude towards recollected histories can provide these new memories. These would then become part of a self-understanding inseparable from an ethical relation to community, rather than one subordinate to a popular consumer culture supported by the State. This self-understanding would point us into a future other than that predicated by popular consumerism, by providing an ethical grounding for imagination. A second, closely related, question should be: 'How do we deal collectively with the profound psychological error of internalising the ideals of the hero, as narcissistic ego, in our culture?' This error now finds one of its most extreme cultural manifestations in the category of the celebrity artist. Ironically, art education should provide the opposite - that is, a culturally plural education for a self seen as inseparable from its shared attachments, relations and connections with a range of communities. A self, that is, instructed by cultural symbols in how to live ethically with and for others, in just institutions.

Fortunately, we do not have to go far to begin to answer these questions. The Community Arts Movement has worked on them for over thirty years, and that experience has been built on, and refined, by those teaching contextualised art practice. These people do not necessarily have all the answers. What they do have, however, is a tradition of educational praxis which is open to the demands of the radical imagination in ways which traditional fine art education, given the crisis of liberal education, is not.

Fine art education does not necessarily need to radically reform itself to begin to address its current crisis. It would be enough for those responsible for managing fine art staff to accept that they encourage a move towards reflexive, and ethically responsible, educational praxis. Having done so, they must ensure that the dialogue between professional and educational concerns becomes an explicit part of a doubly reflexive curriculum. A curriculum, that is, in which the evaluation of both good art and good educational practice is subject to transparent, coherent, and openly debated, 'rules of arbitration'. Obviously, my personal hope goes beyond this. I hope that what I have argued for here can contribute to a greater understanding of radical imagination, and that in time both 'fine art' and 'critical art practice' will wither away. In their place we might then have a variety of visual practices which, through their critical solicitude towards cultures in their full historical depth, create a social imagination that enables us in our attempts to live with and for others in just institutions.

Bristol, November 1998

Notes

1. Richard Kearney (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: The hermeneutics of action*. London: Sage Publications, 1996, p. 3.
2. Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (eds.), *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context*. Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 1994.
3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin, 1996, p. 53.
4. Michael O'Pray 'Derrick Jarman: 1942-1994', *Issues in Architecture Art and Design*, Art and Psychoanalysis. London: University of East London, Schools of Architecture, Art and Design, 1995, p. 94.
5. Eve Tavor Bannet, *Postcultural Theory: Critical Theory after the Marxist Paradigm*. London: Macmillan, 1993, p. 79.
6. George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 7.
7. In my discussion of the imagination in this article I have drawn on both Richard Kearney 'Narrative imagination: between ethics and poetics' in Paul Ricoeur: *The hermeneutics of action* (see note 1) and Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: from Husserl to Lyotard*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.