

Barcelona, Beijing, Birmingham

Jonathan Harris

There are now very few independent art schools in England, and even the ones that can still claim this appellation trade on the idea that they are, at best, ‘specialist’ institutions rather than part of larger higher education organizations. All art schools that award formal degrees and undertake research (or aspire to) are regulated, assessed and ranked by a range of government agencies. Some of these specialist art schools have their teaching activities managed and ‘validated’ by universities to whom they pay fees for the service. So the idea of their being ‘independent’ needs a dose of dour qualification: like all other universities, and those with art schools inside them, they are part of and subject to the determinations of the national socio-economic formation and the supra-national socio-economic formations (de facto and de jure) within which England, as a part of the United Kingdom, is presently located.

Sounds familiar? Whatever Brexit the United Kingdom gets, the ‘independence’ it will enjoy or suffer (depending on one’s perspective) will be similarly qualified, though the detail of the arrangements in England as opposed to those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will likely be different. The strong signs are, in England, that the current conservative Westminster government will try to re-secure back from the EU, or invent, more central control in legal and administrative terms over the polity as a whole, though this will presumably subsequently involve more privatizations, subcontracting of public services out to private companies, and further ‘financializations’ of other areas of social and personal life we didn’t know until now could actually be financialized. Any Westminster government, however, will have to do a deal with the Scottish Parliament over some areas of constitutionally-guaranteed relative autonomy there, including that to do with higher education and therefore with Scotland’s art schools where ever they are located.

‘Independence’ and ‘autonomy’

It’s worth pondering for a moment connections between the meanings of the term ‘independence,’ which has an emphatic political sense coupled to a stress on individual preference and agency, and the term ‘autonomy,’ which, of course, has strong meanings in art theory and art history. To a large extent the two are used as if they are synonymous. In theoretical accounts of modern art, particularly abstract painting and sculpture in the twentieth century, ‘autonomy’ designated the separation, or distance, or freedom from society that certain artworks were claimed by critics, such as Clive Bell, Clement Greenberg or Michael Fried, to have achieved, or, more ambiguously, to represent. (A related claim has resurfaced recently – this time made by art museums such as Tate – that art has ‘emancipatory’ effects, though there is an ambiguity here too over whether this result is achieved or is merely latent in certain artworks – and perhaps achieved or latent in art pedagogy, be it carried out in art museums or art schools. A wholly idealist, longstanding romantic claim, is that Art itself sets one free.) In some respects, ‘autonomy’ is close to the nineteenth century western European idea or slogan of ‘art for art’s sake’ – the belief or

doctrine that modern, and particularly avant-garde, artists, in escaping the restricting, old-fashioned conventions and limits of traditional academic art and its institutions, could and should assert a ‘freedom to create’ without reference to the wider society, often perceived as corrupt or decadent. (It is interesting that the term ‘art academies’ connotes a very different thing to that of ‘art schools,’ the latter particularly associated, rightly or wrongly, with 1960s social radicalism.) In logical terms, however, it is much more sensible to talk of actual artists – as human agents – having autonomy – free will to decide what to do – rather than inanimate objects such as paintings, or, for that matter, art schools. In political or philosophical theory, where the term originates, autonomy usually pertains to individuals, groups or people, or nation-states – here the Brexit context becomes clearly relevant – and sub-territories within nation-states. Consider, for example, the ‘semi-autonomous’ region of northwest Spain, home of the Basque people, or the current, fraught situation along the peninsula in Catalonia.

Paradoxically, the credibility of the notion of the autonomy, or radical separateness or independence, of abstract painting – seen finally as a source of inviolable aesthetic value set against a corrupt and limiting society – depended upon the persuasive authority of a critical claim conferred on particular artworks by interlocutors necessarily ‘speaking for the work.’ But, as the example of the Basque people or the situation in Catalonia suggests, autonomy is in fact always a relative, ostensible and perhaps precarious, state. Many recent interpretations of abstract, or ‘non-representational,’ paintings (some closely relating these artworks to their social relations of production and consumption) have since come to argue against the 1960s modernist emphasis on their apparent autonomy, or separateness, from the culture and society in which they were produced.¹ The Brexit debate – initially and continually couched in terms of disaster threat and counter-threat – did in no way constitute an intellectually cogent discussion that might have done some kind of justice to the level of inquiry into the idea of autonomy (aesthetic or political) which occurred in the 1930s carried out by equally vociferous opponents – Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, for instance – associated with the then German and French left.²

Another of ‘autonomy’s near-synonyms – ‘distance’ – clearly suggests the metaphoric quality always present in the former term when used about abstract art. ‘Distance’ has both spatial and temporal senses and both sometimes have an evaluative element: the quality, that is, of being distant or ‘far away’ (often with a whiff of aloofness) in place or time. By virtue of appearing not to refer to objects in the real world – objects and people represented naturalistically and through narrative conventions in most nineteenth century art, for instance – abstract paintings were claimed to have achieved this ‘distance’. Rejecting naturalism and narration, many artists in the twentieth century *did* seek radically to question the world, how it looked, how it might be represented, and what it might be said to mean. But in each and every case this was a decision made by artists located in specific social and historical circumstances, often acting according to an acute critical sense of how their societies were actually organized, and with a desire – sometimes utopian (echoes of pro-Brexit and pro-Lexit, here) – to see them changed for the better.

Perhaps this utopianism rubbed off the artworks but managed to attach itself to the art schools, seen as places of authentic creative difference and dissidence in the 1960s. Joseph

Beuys had warned of the dangers of art schools becoming vehicles of state institutional manipulation earlier in that decade, at once idealizing and ‘distancing’ the art school as a site and pointing to a real social-historical process at work inside West German state at the time. Generalizations, however, are not helpful – all art schools have developed in ‘embedded’ ways within particular micro- and macro-social orders in cities and nation-states and have histories that anchor them their differentially. My view from inside one of England’s oldest public art schools – set up in 1843 as a municipal college of art and design, and in its present neo-gothic premises since 1885 – is on to a whole world of opportunity, near and far, which nevertheless is reachable only within the terms of the partnering arrangements its parent university deems acceptable and worthwhile.

The independence or autonomy of Birmingham School of Art, that is, is circumscribed definitively by its parent institution’s strategic mission statement expressed through its operational priorities. This is merely a statement of fact, though it may already sound like a criticism. The University, however, is fond of declaring, especially in this 175th anniversary year, that its founding college is the art school and the values it represents. The ‘values’ issue, however, *is* a matter for sometimes acrimonious debate: universities habitually use art schools, if they have them, and arts departments generally, to propagate quotidian, and now effectively neoliberal business studies, clichés about ‘creativity,’ ‘individuality’ and ‘innovation.’ So much for independence and autonomy! Given the relative precariousness of students’ fees income for art schools in England, their staff don’t tend to complain and are often told not to, about finding their vocation used in this way. After all, the art school still has a purpose, this touting of values recognizes, and those who want to go on working in them shouldn’t knock it.

Birmingham School of Art has had a close relationship with European art schools over the last twenty five years or so, coordinated through its membership of and involvement in the work of ELIA (the European League of Institutes of Art), though this organization appears to have been dominated by north-west continental European art schools.³ This seems to be changing now with more involvement from the recently-joined Eastern European countries, such as Poland. (Art schools from southern Europe, however, seem to be mostly conspicuous by their absence.) ELIA has been in receipt of funding from the EU to develop its corporate profile and socio-cultural leadership role. Birmingham School of Art, when I joined it in 2015, however, had comparatively little in the way of extra-European involvement, especially in terms of Asian countries whose students now strongly dominate the international contingent present in all British universities, with numbers well over 100,000 annually and whose fees are a structural aspect of core funding for the sector.

In Birmingham, and at my University, Asian, and particularly Chinese students, are present in quite large numbers, by comparison, in the other ‘arts’ schools – in fashion, visual communication, architecture and music. Birmingham School of Art had not, it seems, systemically exploited this ‘market’ for Asian art students that opened up in the early 2000s and which has since had a very strong presence at the London schools and, for instance, at Winchester School of Art which pioneered a joint art school campus with Dalian Polytechnic University, where a shared curriculum was developed responding to both British and PRC

institutional and cultural requirements (definitely not much ‘autonomy’ there).⁴ Since 2016 Birmingham School of Art has begun to extend its range of international students and partnership organizations, working in Europe and across the world into Asia and, more recently, in South America, establishing partnerships, exchanges and the recruitment of Mexican and Brazilian students.

Research partnerships in Europe – for instance, at the University of Barcelona, where staff from both institutions are involved in a project funded by the Spanish government to explore lesser known facets of European modernism caught up in the Cold War and the transatlantic alliance linking and dividing European nation-states on either side of the Iron Curtain during and after the Franco era – represent an opportunity to pursue regions quite local to Birmingham as well as global scholarly initiatives which have developed apace in Asian centres related to both student recruitment and research initiatives. Birmingham School of Art hosts, for instance, the Centre for Chinese Visual Arts which organizes an annual conference and whose staff edit a prestigious international journal.⁵

One of the limiting factors Birmingham School of Art has faced in this challenge is to do with its relative lack of internal ‘diversity’ in terms of staff backgrounds that is reflected in the curriculum and cultural character of the School’s pedagogy. In a city with 500,000 people with Asian descent, the art school has one permanent Asian member of staff – Chinese – and so, not surprisingly, teaches little or nothing in the way of art related to Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi traditions and heritage. The city’s museum and art gallery next door – also opened in 1885 – boasts a collection of over 800,000 artefacts but again, until recently, has struggled to ‘represent’ this large proportion of the city’s population through it. It is addressing this issue now in some effective and innovative ways but it’s a very late development and has been a slow business.⁶ Improving the recruitment of local Asian-descent students to the art school partly requires other cultural institutions in the city to address this problem and for that leadership in museum exhibitions and learning activities to have an energizing impact on Birmingham schools where, as is the national trend, provision in art education and art classes has been cut or severely thinned out (with tacit central government approval) in favour of what are regarded as the pivotal instrumental areas of knowledge and skills development, where ‘creativity’, ‘innovation’ and ‘individualism’ are primarily linked to business studies, technology and design understood as a highly practical and vocational activity.

I don’t mean to minimize the importance of enabling art students to find and keep good jobs when they leave the art schools. Given that these places have usually attracted more young people from relatively disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds compared to most other arts courses (especially art history) it is not at all surprising that they and their parents are intensely interested in the long term financial and other benefits of going to university and forking out the sums involved. The independence of art schools cannot be a place guaranteed by the private wealth of their students’ family backgrounds or high achieving individuals from such backgrounds where support has always been strong both financially or morally. Art schools do, however, have an opportunity to attract and support a much wider range of people – young and older – and to offer them a world of really useful skills and insights that

includes both Barcelona and Beijing. The art school is not independent or autonomous – no more than Britain after Brexit will be – but it can work to foster genuine independent thinking and a release from narrowly conservative and defensive ideas of education, work and the world that may end up the real victors after the country withdraws from the EU.

Notes

1. Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried and Clark*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2006
2. Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates between Bloch, Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno*, Verso, London, 1980
3. www.ELIA-artschools.org
4. Jonathan Harris, 'Social Reproduction of Contemporary Art in the People's Republic of China,' in Harris, *The Global Contemporary Art World*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2017
5. The University of Barcelona-led MoDe(s) research project centres around two main axes of study. Firstly, the analysis of the discursive narratives of modernity as shaped by artistic practices and aesthetic and critical discourses. Such analysis is also taking into account the role of institutions and exhibitions in the formation of modernist practices in the different contexts across the transatlantic world during the Cold War. Secondly, the study of the influence and the role of these transatlantic configurations in the transition from modernity to post-modernity and their ongoing presence in today's global world. On the Centre for Chinese Visual Art, ccva.org.uk
6. See, e.g., exhibition, 'The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire' 28 October 2017-24 June 2018, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.