

Article

# The Journal *Block* and Its Art School Context

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Received: 17 September 2018; Accepted: 1 November 2018; Published: 5 November 2018



**Abstract:** This paper examines an important moment in the recent history of UK art education by examining the magazine *Block*, a radical and interdisciplinary publication produced from within the art history department of an art school in the late 1970s and 1980s. *Block* was created and edited by a small group of lecturers at Middlesex Polytechnic, most of whom were art school educated; it was formed by, and in turn influenced, the milieu of studio-based art education in the UK. Despite the small scale of its operation, the magazine had a wide distribution in art colleges and was avidly read by lecturers looking for ways to incorporate new theoretical, often Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, perspectives into their teaching.

**Keywords:** art; education; history

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The aim of this article is to give an account of *Block*, a journal that pioneered the development of critical and interdisciplinary approaches to art history. The journal ran between 1979 and 1989, a decade that began with the election of Margaret Thatcher and ended with the death of Raymond Williams; facts pointed out in the journal's final valedictory editorial. *Block* was edited by a group of like-minded, self-consciously radical, polytechnic lecturers, most of whom had trained at art school, and it was produced from within the art department of Middlesex Polytechnic.

That *Block's* innovative, experimental approach emerged from the context of a predominantly studio-based department and was shaped by a period of ambitious, progressive thinking about the structure of art education seems instructive for our present conjuncture. Ours is a moment in which art education is defensively hunkering down, weathering out an inclement policy environment, and when simultaneously, art history teaching has faded from art schools (Williamson 2015, p. 85).

In this article, I briefly sketch the educational milieu out of which *Block* emerged; the events and changes to the institutional landscape first of Hornsey College of Art, and then its successor Middlesex Polytechnic. Then, more fully, I provide a description of *Block*, its production, distribution, design, and content, and the shifts in the balance of aims, objects, and methods throughout the decade of the journal's production, drawing largely on my own conversations with former editors of the journal and archive material stored at Middlesex University.

This early assessment of *Block* appeared in the introduction to an edited collection of essays with the title *The New Art History*, published in 1986 while the journal was still running:

BLOCK was founded as forum for radical historians of art and design. Challenging the polite tones of conventional scholarly exchange, BLOCK's remorseless double-columns and hard-line language packed a political punch more often found in Nanterre than in the National Gallery. (Rees and Borzello 1986, p. 3)

More than a convenient comparison, the reference to Nanterre, the Sorbonne campus where the civil unrest of 1968 began, is a historical linkage. The wave of student militancy that spread across Europe and the United States at that time found its British manifestation in a series of extended sit-ins,

at the London School of Economics, at Guildford, at Hornsey College of Art and elsewhere. It was at Hornsey, 'in the aftermath' of the occupation, that the editors of *Block* all met (Bird et al. 1996, p. 11).

A full and authoritative, almost eye-witness, account of the Hornsey sit-in has been provided by Lisa Tickner, one of *Block's* editors (Tickner 2008). For our purposes, the relevant detail concerns the way in which the sit-in generated intense discussion about the aims and character of art education. A key aspect of the events at Hornsey in 1968 was the extent to which students grasped the initiative and attempted to set the terms of their own education. During the occupation, students, with the help of several staff members, debated the structure and aims of art education. Whilst some conducted negotiations with the college authorities, others formed a delegation which travelled up and down the country to advise and consult with students taking actions in other institutions (Hewison 1986, p. 151).

Among the demands made by the students were the abolition of academic entry requirements and formal assessments. An alternative course structure was proposed, envisaging study without boundaries or hierarchies. A key bone of contention had been the foisting of art history and complementary studies onto studio-based studies. Prior to the sit-in, the art history component of the Diploma in Art and Design had been taught by university-trained art historians. Although their approaches occasionally came out of an earlier radical tradition, for example, the Marxist art historian, Arnold Hauser, taught at Hornsey, this was not much recognised at the time (Curtis 1997). To the students, these art history lecturers seemed steadfastly traditional and, for those on design courses, too remote.

The sweeping reforms demanded by the militant students did not materialise. Less dramatically, a modular, unit-based programme was introduced at Hornsey which gave students some choice in what they studied and hence some leverage on the direction of the curriculum. In the aftermath of the sit-in, many of the staff, both full-time and part-time, who had been teaching in the art history department, were not re-engaged. Instead, a new intake of staff was brought in. College authorities brought in younger lecturers, partly out of necessity and partly to meet the demands of the student body.

Many of the new intake of staff felt a strong degree of sympathy with the aims of the militant students and shared their ambitions to fundamentally change the structure of education. In the wake of the occupation, it was by no means clear how this might be achieved. Attempts to develop critical approaches to the study of art and design, to show its involvement in broader social and political contexts, was seen by these lecturers as a form of radical intervention in the field of education.

Among the new intake were Barry Curtis and Lisa Tickner, future *Block* editors. Curtis states:

When I started teaching at Hornsey, everything was in ferment. We needed the support of the students, who still had the whip hand. The authorities were quite repressive, but they didn't want it (the sit-in) to happen again. This opened them up to the need for a more student-centred curriculum. (Curtis 1997)

Curtis had studied English and Art History at Cambridge, where the approach was resolutely connoisseurial. The early module suggestions he put forward at the reformed Hornsey College of Art, while remaining recognisably art historical, focused on 20th century topics, an unusual approach for the time. There was a module on design in the interwar years and another on pop art and its legacy. Other members of staff continued with more traditional approaches. In general, younger members of staff were more successful in getting their modules accepted by students.

In 1973, Hornsey College of Art was merged with Enfield and Hendon colleges of technology to form Middlesex Polytechnic. The move was strongly resisted by studio staff at Hornsey, who enlisted prominent figures such as William Coldstream in their fight to prevent the scheme going ahead (Ashwin 1982, p. 46). The group of art history lecturers who went on to form the editorial of *Block*, however, saw in the creation of the Polytechnic an opportunity to press forward their own agenda and expand their subject area. Despite the relatively dynamic, productive nature of the teaching of art history within the art college, the subject was still marginal, servicing studio areas, and its development constrained. Once the Polytechnic was established, moves were made towards setting up independent,

non-studio-based courses, first in Art History and then in the areas of Cultural Studies and Design History. This was carried out in a piecemeal way by developing sets of modules. There was no base of operations for these subject areas. The lectures were scattered across several sites (Curtis 1997).

The undergraduate course in Art History became a named award in 1973. The BA in Cultural Studies was started in 1976 and it drew heavily on the model provided by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies for both its course content and for some of its teaching staff, for example, Dick Hebdige, Claire Johnson, and Lon Fleming, who all taught on the course at Middlesex. Many of these individuals later contributed to *Block* and many of the basic ideas and material which formed the content of the journal were formulated through teaching.

From the mid to late 1970s, the future editorial team were beginning to write, though the polytechnics did not have a well-established framework for promoting research. Unlike the universities, they had a remit from the outset to emphasise teaching and the practical application of knowledge (Silver 1990; Ashwin 1982, p. 46). Nevertheless, conferences and workshops provided an arena for the exchange and development of ideas and the dissemination of research work. At the Second National Conference on Design History in 1976, Jon Bird contributed a paper titled 'Art and Design as a Sign System', and in 1978, Lisa Tickner presented her paper on contemporary women artists, 'The Body Politic', to the Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians (Tickner 1978). Barry Curtis recalls:

There was a strong sense of an emerging culture of people in their twenties and early thirties who were working across a broad range of art and media studies, who met frequently at conferences and for whom the crossing over of disciplines was a radical and liberatory project. (Curtis 1997)

One strong motivating example for launching a magazine was *Screen* (and *Screen Education*). Based in the emerging field of film studies, its strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity resonated with the legacy of the Hornsey sit-in debates. Other influences came from across the Atlantic. Barry Curtis has stated:

When we started *Block*, my recollection is that I went to America . . . saw a number of radical journals, that publishing was part of campus culture . . . and came back with a conviction that we should start a magazine, that this would be tremendously strategically useful in bringing us together. (Curtis 1997)

Although Curtis does not mention it by name, it is notable that the radical art journal *October* was launched in 1976. With its sober style and the title's nod in the direction of revolutionary Russia, it seems a likely inspiration for *Block*.

*Block's* status as an institutionally-based journal was uncertain throughout its decade of publication. The Polytechnic gave the project support in various forms, but production of the journal was carried on as an independent activity by a group who felt marginal within the institution and who had their own separate agenda. This group still saw itself as marginal within the academic establishment. They felt ambivalent about its values and saw themselves as working for change within its institutions. At least in the early days, the editorial team had a greater sense of their project as having a kinship with the 'alternative press' (Bird et al. 1996, p. 12). Bird has commented:

We were all beginning to write and there weren't obvious places to publish. That was a very strong incentive to start our own journal . . . The models we looked to were the underground press, Red Letters, Wedge and Artery . . . but *Block* was the first properly institutionally-based journal that was combining that look with rethinking notions of traditional discipline . . . exploring interdisciplinarity in the field of culture. (Bird 1997)

Despite various contributions of the Polytechnic, the journal was allowed to run without editorial interference from the Polytechnic management and with a surprising degree of autonomy.

The financing of the first issue relied on a loan from the Polytechnic of £3000, and the management agreed to the use of office and storage space, although this became a major source of friction as the education cuts of the 1980s took effect. The journal also relied at various points on the facilities of the in-house print unit and the finance department in processing accounts. From 1980 onwards, the Arts Council offered a guarantee against loss grant of £2000 in each year.

*Block* operated on a small budget, under £10,000 per annum. No fees were paid to contributors. Photographic material was often uncredited and no copyright fees were paid. The small amount of advertising that appeared in the journal was organised on an exchange basis with other magazines, often alternative magazines like *Wedge* and *Artery*. Production costs were kept to a minimum by making use of in-house expertise and printing facilities (later on by the editors' own self-taught desk top publishing skills). At various points, a number of options were considered to decrease the amount of administration falling on the editorial team, including handing production over to an external publisher. This option was never pursued, not least because the editors enjoyed, and believed in the value of, combining intellectual and practical work (Bird 1997).

*Block's* circulation was limited in purely numerical terms; it never exceeded 2000. The bulk of this was single issue sales through gallery bookshops in London, like the Institute of Contemporary Art, the Tate Gallery, and the Hayward Gallery. Bookshops such as *Compendium*, Ian Shipley, and smaller community or alternative bookshops also sold copies. Distribution to London outlets was handled by the editors themselves to avoid the unreliability of small distributors, such as Moore-Harness or Southern Distribution (Bird et al. 1996, p. 13). Outside London, the major contemporary art spaces, such as the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, and the Chapter Gallery in Cardiff, were all stockists. Many smaller alternative bookshops wanted to stock the journal but were not able to sell sufficient copies to make the cost of deliveries worthwhile.

In addition to casual sales, there was a small but loyal core of subscribers, numbering between four and five hundred. This was split equally between institutions and individuals. Almost all the institutional subscribers in the UK were outside the university sector. It tended to be art colleges, other polytechnics, and further education colleges up and down the country that signed up. They subscribed early on and maintained their subscriptions despite the irregular production of the journal. Indeed, concerned letters frequently arrived at *Block's* offices from college librarians anxious to keep their sets complete and up to date.

Early subscription requests also came from the libraries of major galleries both in Britain (Tate Gallery in 1979, the V&A in 1980, the Whitechapel Gallery in 1980) and abroad (the Pompidou in 1981, the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, both in New York). Early requests from universities abroad included Harvard (1980), the University of Uppsala (1981), and the Central Institute for Art History in Munich (1980). The reach of overseas subscriptions, if not the quantity, is impressive. There were subscribers in over 12 countries, including Japan, Australia, Israel, Sweden, and Canada.

Remarks about *Block's* readership can only be speculative. Data from administrative records in the archive do not equate to certainty about who read the journal or how it was received. However, the editors assumed from the outset that they were addressing a certain constituency. The editorial from the first issue states:

*Block* will, we hope, be of use to artists, art teachers and art students; indeed anyone interested in visual culture and its role within society. (Bird et al. 1979, p. 3)

To judge by the pattern of institutional subscription, it seems that the editors had judged their target accurately. This may also have been a function of the promotion of *Block* within a circumscribed professional world of conferences and related journals (Bird et al. 1996, p. 11). It could be speculated that lecturers in art colleges, art history specialists, or sympathetic studio staff, looked to *Block* for a way of introducing new theoretical perspectives into their teaching.

The early aims of *Block* centred on making a practical intervention in the field of art and design education. The journal aimed to make the question of how to teach history and theory one of its central concerns. In practice, this aim was never fully developed, with only a few articles making it into print (Walker 1979, pp. 2–4; Pollock 1985, pp. 8–18; Mort and Green 1987, pp. 15–19). Griselda Pollock's article, 'Art, Art School, Culture: Individualism after the death of the artist' (Pollock 1985), in particular, sheds a fascinating light on a moment when cultural theories about gender, power, and representation were starting to be introduced into the language of discourse in art schools. Pollock describes a generational battle being fought within art schools between a largely male teaching staff whose sense of art and culture was informed by the priorities of Clement Greenberg's art criticism, and a constituency of women students who were attempting to engage in photo-text work sustained by feminist and postmodernist cultural theories. Pollock describes how, in her role as a visiting lecturer or external examiner to art schools, she had frequently encountered a crisis over assessment wherein the staff, finding radical deconstructive art practices outside their critical paradigm, simply failed, or refused, to understand a different frame of reference. Pollock wrote:

What makes the current crisis so acute and significant is that art schools have become a particular terrain of feminist struggle and masculinist resistance at a period of intense social conflict. (Pollock 1985)

It is not difficult to imagine that Pollock's article would have been avidly read in precisely the art schools that she mentions by interested students who would find in it a pointed analysis of their predicament and robust support for their embattled position. But it is also probably true that increasing numbers of new art historians, also often women, were using their fraction of the art school curriculum to pioneer a critique of what Pollock calls 'reactionary ideas about art, teaching, self-expression and above all individualism' (Pollock 1985). It is interesting to note how this reverses the situation at Hornsey almost two decades earlier, where the history of art component had seemed an irrelevant and conservative imposition on studio practice.

*Block's* early intention to provide fairly accessible, practically-oriented material gave way to what the editors referred to as an 'expert discourse' (Bird et al. 1996, p. 12). The editorial in Issue no.1 gives a brief statement of intent:

'to address the problem of the social, economic and ideological dimensions of the arts in societies past and present ... Arts will be taken to include "mass industrial arts"'. (Bird et al. 1979, p. 1)

Presumably, this prospectus was intentionally broad to allow the precise direction of the journal to emerge over time. Certain themes can be traced throughout the journal's life. An early tendency was for articles to provide descriptive accounts of politically engaged art and artists of the 1930s (Rickaby 1979, pp. 5–14; Curtis 1979, pp. 53–56; Brett 1981, pp. 18–29). A related strand was the various attempts to reassess Marxist art historians whom the editors felt had been neglected, for example, Meyer Shapiro and Max Raphael (Iversen 1979, pp. 50–52; Tagg 1980, pp. 2–13). As *Block's* editors later noted:

The fact that we asked John Berger for a contribution demonstrates an intention of furthering the tradition of Marxist art history. (Bird et al. 1996, p. 12)

Articles on design history were published only sporadically and were less in evidence in later issues. These articles tended to focus on discussions of methodology rather than case studies. Many of the more straightforward art historical contributions took French art of the 19th century as a starting point for discussions of culture and politics (Hadjinicolaou 1981; Clark 1981, pp. 32–38). A notable feature of the middle period of the journal, between 1982 and 1986, were articles dealing with a broader range of cultural artifacts from cosmetics to film and television, using Marxist and Feminist

perspectives. A consistent feature throughout the journal's run was the articles that provided analyses of contemporary art, often by artists themselves. This reflected a certain tendency for artists of the period to reject rigid distinctions between theory and practice (e.g., [Rosler 1985](#), pp. 27–33).

The most notable shift in the content of *Block* over the decade of its publication was the move towards discussions of postmodernism. Some articles addressed the theme critically ([Tagg 1985](#), pp. 3–7). Attention was paid to key figures associated with postmodernism, particularly Jean Baudrillard ([Williamson 1989](#), pp. 3–10). Additionally, there was a particular kind of article that marked later issues, those in which conventional analysis gave way to a kind of written montage which exemplified the disintegration and multiplicity of the subject ([Hebdige 1986](#), pp. 4–26; [Chambers 1987](#), pp. 62–68).

The design of *Block* was initially influenced by David King, who had designed the catalogue for the 1979 Rodchenko exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, as well as some issues of *City Limits*. This Russian constructivist aesthetic was marked by a strident clarity of presentation, a stark, uncompromising look which suggested the urgency of street protests. The covers of early issues were economical in the extreme. In black and white, with sometimes one additional colour, the layout was functional looking, using a dense Times Bold font. Such visual austerity should be seen as a deliberate statement, but also a practical solution. Early issues made a virtue out of necessity by aligning their low-budget appearance with the examples of other alternative publications, such as *Red Letters* ([Bird et al. 1996](#), p. 12). From issue number seven onwards, the look of the journal evolved, embracing more photography and more expensive glossy paper. In these later issues, the photo-text work of Victor Burgin, Olivier Richon, Jessica Evans, and David A. Bailey was variously featured, often using the seductive chiaroscuro of *film noir* to comment on the artifice of representation. This change in aesthetic accompanied the shift towards denser postmodernist theorising.

The approach of this article has been descriptive, providing an account of *Block* and of material which seemed to throw light on its aims and development. The focus on *Block's* radicalism is only intelligible in the context of changes in art education in the UK. The generation of educators who entered the field in the late 1960s and early 1970s did so at a point when it was undergoing fundamental change. Those who were sympathetic to, or directly involved in, the student militancy of the late 1960s sought ways of continuing its radicalism through forms of intervention within various institutional frameworks. In the late 1970s, this seemed possible through a questioning of disciplinary boundaries. There developed a community of like-minded lecturers, mainly in polytechnics and art colleges, who saw themselves as acting within their institutions but with a distinctive agenda. With regard to our current situation, it is interesting to note the changing and often contentious place of art history in studio-based art education, but how this relationship has evolved since is beyond the scope of this paper.

By the end of the decade, the editors felt that *Block* had achieved many of its aims in bringing together cultural theory and aesthetics, politics, and the interdisciplinary study of visual representation, but also that its moment had, for various reasons, passed ([Bird et al. 1993](#), p. 13). One reason was that cuts in resources for higher education placed increased pressures both on the editorial team and contributors. Another reason was that the field of arts publishing had greatly expanded, with new titles and higher production values. Although latterly *Block* had taken some of these values on board, the DIY approach that provided so much of the energy at the outset seemed at the end of the 1980s out of step. In the light of the recent development of alternative, unofficial educational initiatives it seems timely to reconsider *Block's* ethos.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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